



# Postcapitalist Countrysides

From commoning to community wealth building

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Edited by

Nick Gallent, Menelaos Gkartzios,

Mark Scott & Andrew Purves

 **UCLPRESS**

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Mark Scott and Andrew Purves

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## Preface

*Postcapitalist Countrysides* comprises a collection of essays that is structured and sequenced to explore the tensions that arise from the established conventions of economic production, as they affect life, wealth and work in rural areas. Private accumulation has been the motivation and rationale behind that production for centuries, during the long epoch described by Adam Smith as the ‘age of commerce’. Classical political economy, notably that of David Ricardo, tells us that private accumulation to land and capital (as rent and profit) is a cause of celebration, as wealth flowing to the few will trickle down to the many. But this is not the experience of many places, where socio-economic inequalities have become entrenched and accentuated over recent decades. The private accumulation of wealth is a block to social accumulation, which might be achieved through a socialisation of rent, through the commoning of land or through tax systems that target private rents, and the de-commodification of capital, through the promotion and growth of social enterprise.

The premise of this book is that capitalism as we experience it today is incapable of solving key societal challenges – centred on social justice and sustainable livelihoods. Neither the conventional palette of state interventions (funded through public revenues derived mainly from taxes on work and productivity) nor a reliance on private accumulation (aided by freedom from taxation) are delivering the changes that people and the planet desperately need. This is because they are both focused on symptoms rather than causes – how the produce of extant systems is distributed rather than the logic and inner workings of those systems. A refocusing on the latter would mean disrupting underlying mechanics through a redesigned political economy. ‘Postcapitalism’ is concerned with understanding how this might be achieved, often through local experiments – or ‘prefigurative actions’ – that engage in the ‘commoning’ of land (and therefore the socialisation of rent), the ‘decommodification’ of capital (in support of community wealth building), and in a restoration



of meaningful labour. By rethinking basic land, capital and labour relationships, postcapitalism offers glimpses of alternative modes of socio-economic organisation. In this book, these glimpses come from contributions that focus on rural places, communities and economies.

## Acknowledgements

The editors are grateful for the support provided by Chris Penfold and colleagues at UCL Press, who steered the project from proposal to production. A book dealing with the exclusions that arise from enclosure, and that expounds the benefits of ‘commoning’, had to be published Open Access – and that opportunity was provided by UCL Press.

The process of editing this book was made far easier and more enjoyable by the fantastic support received from our contributors, all of whom produced chapter drafts and revisions quickly and ‘on spec’. Delays were minimal. Our aim in assembling a collection of essays on different postcapitalist dimensions and imaginaries was to achieve broad and inclusive coverage, and showcase the research of our colleagues, many of whom have been examining the reforms and pre-figurative actions that support different ways of living in the countryside for many years. A final round of editing was undertaken following comments made by an anonymous reviewer, whose valuable input is also acknowledged, but any remaining imperfections in the presentation, sequencing and editing of this book are of course the responsibility of the editors alone.

The image on the front cover was provided by Colin Robins and Oliver Udy. It is a product of their ongoing artistic practice in the countryside and part of their ‘Anthology of Rural Life’. More of their work can be viewed at: <https://anthologyofrurallife.co.uk/>.

These sorts of academic undertakings never happen in a vacuum. We are grateful, therefore, to the many colleagues and collaborators, within and beyond our respective universities, who’ve provided inspiration and insights over the years.

Finally, the personal thanks from the editors go, from Nick, to Manuela, Marta and Elena; from Menelaos, to Rory, Damir, Mark and his niece Ioanna; from Mark, to Karen, Lucas and Ada; and from Andrew, to Katie, William, Julia and Amelia.



# The postcapitalist countryside

Nick Gallent, Andrew Purves, Menelaos Gkartzios and Mark Scott

## The purpose

Advanced economies share the challenge of deep socio-economic inequality, alongside unsustainable consumption. The material progress that they have achieved over the course of decades or centuries has not delivered optimum welfare for all, or broadly shared prosperity. Divisions between the wealthiest – the so-called 1 per cent – and the poorest citizens are often stark, and they are measured not only in income and wealth differences but in contrasting opportunities and life-chances. The association of material progress with ‘piteous poverty’ is not coincidental but is rather rooted in the design and operation of these advanced economies, and also more peripheral economies that are now embracing super-charged versions of capitalism rooted in a neo-liberal and extractive logic. Politicians in the West regularly pose this question: why is it that citizens of the world’s [6th and so on] biggest economy suffer such poverty? The response, when those politicians are able to take the reins of power, is to take remedial action – adjust tax rates, raising additional public revenues and investing in different sectors: in housing, healthcare and welfare, and in education. But the poverty they seek to address is stubbornly hard to eliminate. Politicians on the other side of the ideological fence will point to the failure of *state intervention* and argue that only through a ‘strong economy’ (that advances private accumulation) will the disadvantaged feel the benefits of wider prosperity. Taxes are cut and those on the breadline are asked to wait for the ‘trickle down’. Poverty eradication (if we suspend disbelief and credit politicians of all stripes as being concerned with building ‘more equal societies’ or at least societies of roughly equivalent opportunity) is

therefore a cyclical undertaking, tracking political oscillations and the periodic switches, in Western democracies, from left to right and back again. Regular tax-and-spend interventions (on the left) *and* neo-liberal confidence in market freedoms (on the right) are united by their aversity to fundamental change. The basic structures of private property and taxation are left undisturbed, and therefore the essential mechanics of capitalist political economy remain unchallenged.

The premise of this book is that capitalism as we experience it today is incapable of solving key societal challenges – centred on social justice and sustainable livelihoods. Neither the conventional palette of state interventions (funded through public revenues derived mainly from taxes on work and productivity) nor a reliance on private accumulation (aided by freedom from taxation) are delivering the changes that people and the planet desperately need. This is because they are both focused on symptoms rather than causes – how the produce of extant systems is distributed rather than the logic and inner workings of those systems. A refocusing on the latter would mean disrupting underlying mechanics through a redesigned political economy. ‘Postcapitalism’ is concerned with understanding how this might be achieved, often through local experiments – or ‘prefigurative actions’ – that engage in the ‘commoning’ of land (and therefore the socialisation of rent), the ‘decommodification’ of capital (in support of community wealth building) and in a restoration of meaningful labour. By rethinking basic land, capital, and labour relationships, postcapitalism offers glimpses of alternative modes of socio-economic organisation. In this book, these glimpses come from contributions that focus on rural places, communities and economies.

A useful starting point from which to rethink political economy is the work of Henry George. George’s *Progress and Poverty* (1879) builds on many of the classical works of the previous century, notably Adam Smith’s and David Ricardo’s theses on the relationships of rent to land, profit to stock (that is, capital or wealth in the form of money, machinery and assets used to procure additional wealth) and wages to labour. He is particularly concerned with Ricardo’s Law of Rent, which holds that rent is a surplus *belonging* to the owners of more productive land. The least productive land yields no surplus. When it is worked, it will deliver subsistence wages (to labour) and the ordinary rate of profit (to capital). Assuming that wages are kept at a subsistence level and profits remain ‘ordinary’ (sufficient to motivate capital investment), the working of more productive land will deliver rent, received by a passive and benign owner, with the level of that rent fixed by the higher quality of land

(that is, its fertility and locational attributes) relative to the quality of 'free' land, yielding no surplus and therefore no rent. In Ricardo's Law, landowners are passive recipients of a surplus. Both the private extraction of rent (that follows the enclosure of land) and the level of that rent are natural outcomes. Unpicking Ricardo's Law, George was able to show that advanced economies, where land has been enclosed and where much of the value from production is captured by land monopolists (in the form of economic and speculative rents), are blighted by poverty as wages stagnate or fall. While Ricardo presented landowners as benign recipients of a modest surplus, George argued that landowners are frequently bad actors, engaged in speculative behaviours, including the withholding of land from production, that inflate rent and suppress wages and profit. Karl Marx's political economy famously pitted labour against capital, but George saw labour as being allied to capital (producing and sustaining it and occasionally accruing higher wages from increased productivity) but in opposition to land. Landowners' command over rent resulted in a squeezing of both wages to labour and the profit to capital, especially where the pursuit of speculative rent closes land to productive activity.

For George, land monopoly explained the partnering of material progress with piteous poverty, as the greater share of productive value was *actively* 'captured by' landowners in the form of rent. Land, labour and capital are factors in production: land provides the foundation of productive activity – the physical space and the material resources. Where it is freely available (see again, Ricardo's Law of Rent) or held 'in common', productive value – reflected in the price of commodities it yields – resolves entirely to labour and capital (that is, the price of goods is a composite of the wages paid to labour and the profit to capital). We might say that its rent, when not privatised, is *socialised* into wages (to labour, a return on its skill and exertion) and profit (to capital, recompensing for ingenuity and risk-taking). But where land is enclosed and monopolised, it actively captures rent and reduces the proportion of value resolving to labour and capital, and therefore to society at large.

The more 'advanced' the economy, the greater the degree of enclosure and monopoly. George observed this in the US. At the time when he was writing, wages were lowest in the eastern States but greater on the frontier. But as land on the frontier was enclosed, brought under monopoly control, wages fell and poverty followed. In the 1870s, he painted England as the country where this process had reached its zenith, driving gross income inequality between the landed and landless classes.

Capitalism, despite inferring the centrality of capital in production, is today dominated by landowners and by *rentierism*. It is a productive arrangement that advances the interests of land monopolists, sustaining the current advantages and disadvantages of different social classes (indeed, landownership underpins the structuration of class – see [Saunders, 1984](#)). When we talk about the ‘rent return to land’, we are distinguishing that portion of value from production that ‘resolves’ (to use Adam Smith’s terminology) back to landed interests, which is *frequently greater* than that which resolves to labour and capital. This imbalance is evidenced in rising land prices (that is, capitalised rents) and annual rents, often reflected in house prices, relative to the stagnation in wages and modest returns to capital (excluding capital fixed to land, in the form of houses or buildings, which draw a profit that may be difficult to separate from ground rent). Therefore, poverty (and the inability to keep up with housing costs) is underpinned by land monopoly and therefore the question of poverty reduction is a land question.

Allied to that question is the broader issue of how the problematic mechanics of this political economy might be reshaped. Land, labour and capital are constants, but rent and the private enclosure of land and capital are not necessarily a ‘natural’ or just state. Marx’s answer to the inequities of capitalism was communism: confiscation and subsequent state control over these factors of production. George did not wish to extinguish the private entrepreneurial spirit and saw no reason to do so. His proposed ‘single tax’ on land rent would remove the rent-seeking motive (and ‘bad actor’ behaviour in pursuit of speculative rent) while preserving the private ownership of land in the productive process. The single tax would re-channel the flow of productive value to labour and capital, and away from land. Rent would, in effect, be socialised back to labour and to capital via wages and interest and by a transfer of the tax burden away from work and productivity (later on, others proposed that capital might itself be collectivised, becoming a ‘community infrastructure’ and a source of social rather than private accumulation). The manner of production is not fundamentally disrupted while the benefits of that production are redirected, with personal advantage re-rooted in the productive and entrepreneurial capabilities of individuals rather than in the ownership of land.

Despite this upfront precis of the Georgist thesis, the purpose of this book is not to elaborate George’s political economy or test its application – although, as noted above, this is a very useful starting point for a book detailing and dissecting postcapitalist alternatives to the current operation of advanced economies. Postcapitalism is essentially a different



organisation of the factors of production: land or land rent socialised, labour deriving greater benefit from work, and capital transformed from a private into a social asset through community control over wealth-generating infrastructure, real and virtual. This chapter introduces the postcapitalist project and imagination as it pertains to rural areas. Once its significance to those areas is established, we begin our examination of the local and structural transformations needed to disrupt the processes underpinning many of the inequalities – from housing, through health to education – that blight advanced economies and those economies that would follow their lead.

## The rural challenge

The many challenges facing rural areas today provide a second starting point for this book. The ‘global countryside’ is afflicted by poverty or gross inequalities – rooted in the processes sketched out above. Rural resources, land and associated natural assets, are often externally owned and controlled, generating rents and profits that are extracted by an array of institutional and individual investors – often via financial channels, as those resources are brought into the service of global capitalism. In some countries, the rural challenge may be rooted in access to affordable housing and land: counter-urbanisation has brought middle-class populations to the countryside, in pursuit of amenity as well as the profit and status that can be derived from rural property ownership, thereby fixing rents to external sources of wealth and income, and crowding out beneficial community uses of land. Elsewhere, land has become a focus of extractive enterprise: land for industrial-scale farming, for green offsetting, or for energy crops. Land becomes an *asset class* with its rent, raised either through intensive production or lucrative set-aside schemes (for example, unitised into carbon credits that can be traded by polluting companies who are required to off-set their carbon emissions), transformed into dividends for those with the means to invest. A global scramble for land may see tenant farmers displaced and communities deprived of the wherewithal to meet their own needs, as the value of privately enclosed land is siphoned off to support investment returns and the inter-generational transfer of wealth within the landed class.

Although this book addresses a range of generic concerns, its primary focus is on communities and their relationship with rural resources in developed economies – with some insights from ‘majority world’ countries. As editors based in the UK and Ireland, our critical

understanding of the rural challenge is rooted in this 'home context', while further insights are drawn from research in Europe and elsewhere. Different parts of the UK and Ireland have contrasting rural experiences (Gkartzios and Shucksmith, 2015). Ideas of rurality are culturally contingent, rooted in different histories and in centuries of contrasting land relationships. Ireland, Wales and Scotland arguably have more in common with each other than with lowland England. They share a history of colonial displacement from the land and the transfer of wealth to a British elite in London, often through aristocratic landlordism and rent extraction. The Irish famine and forced migration, the Scottish clearances and the enclosure of the Welsh uplands each incubated a sense of injustice and their own specific land-based relationships (Satsangi et al., 2010). Today, each displays a political leaning towards community rights over land and rural resources (with some communities at the forefront of designing postcapitalist futures), while government in England continues, in our view, to prioritise private propertied interest over the broader well-being of rural communities under the guise of protecting the 'rural idyll'. Propertied wealth – a component of private accumulation – is good for everyone, or so the argument goes, as it sustains an ecosystem of spending that trickles down. Our own position is that England is not in a good place (let alone an idyllic place) vis-à-vis its UK and Irish neighbours – the prioritisation of community rights and social value does not sit comfortably with governments' neo-liberal tendencies that, in a context of unassailable private property rights, gift all advantages to a landed class. This is a view that we have reached in past research on this subject. But at the same time, rural areas across the UK and Ireland face similar counter-urbanisation and consumerist pressures. The countryside is replete with valued landscapes and with accessible amenities. It offers lifestyles that are attractive to wealthier and retiring households, who may wield considerable power over local planning policies and practices, and who may prioritise landscape and amenity protection over a broader distribution of resources in support of community well-being. Rural resources, from land to housing, are coveted – not for their productive capacity but for reasons of status and, in many instances, for private rent capture through holiday and short-term letting (Colomb and Gallent, 2022). There is significant pressure to consume those resources: to privatise and enclose them, to turn them to private purpose and, over the long term, to capture rent in its capitalised form.

This has been the essence of the rural challenge since the 1950s. Planning across the nations of the UK has sought to protect the countryside, for reasons of amenity and food security, although

in practice serving the interests of landed elites (Hall et al., 1973; Newby, 1985). It has rationed land and housing and, in doing so, it has engineered an exchange of population. Working populations have been displaced by footloose middle-class ‘newcomers’ who have ‘retreated’ to the countryside over the last 70 years (Gallent et al., 2022). This process is part of a broader social restructuring. Population change has gone hand-in-hand with economic change, with rural production gradually eclipsed by consumption – consumption of the tourist experience and of rural resources that allow visitors and retired households to dominate the countryside, seasonally or year-round.

But such *amenity-centred* rurality – expressed in the gentrification of villages – is not universal. Many of the contributors to this volume have very different lived and researched experiences of the countryside. In other rural places, enclosure and rent capture takes a broad variety of forms. There is an extensive literature on the displacement, or dispossession, of communities where national governments permit the sale of land to international investment funds. In those instances, land ceases to be a source of local livelihood (a key part of a community’s ‘wealth building infrastructure’) and is transformed into an intensively worked asset. As noted above, there are numerous examples of investment funds expropriating land for intensive farming, for highly profitable energy crops and more recently for the trading of carbon credits. Governments may be instrumental in moving tenant farmers from the land (by designing policies and tax frameworks that are attractive to ‘foreign direct investment’); in other instances, landowners are simply motivated to sell to opportunistic overseas investors; or, in the worst-case scenarios, communities may be harassed from their land by criminal gangs, in the pay of local elites, with foreign companies turning a blind eye to the means by which land is secured for investment (Gkartziou et al., 2022). Such ‘land grabs’ end with the enclosure of sometimes vast tracts of land, and with rent privatised and extracted. Communities are hence deprived of the means to earn their own wages and to meet their own needs. Land gave them that means, enabling them to build their capital and their homes, to farm and make a living. George (1879) tells us that they are on a well-trodden development path, with the removal of common rights over land, and rising land monopoly, depressing labour power and wages.

Capitalist extraction takes many forms. Land grabs happen all over the world and are not confined to ‘majority world’ economies, although it is often in emergent or developing economies, many located in the Global South, where the exploitable rent gap is biggest and where corruption and uncertainties around the legal title of land (and weak protections for poor

owners and tenants) may facilitate dispossession. The extractive process begins with elite colonisation and ends with enclosure and exclusion. The same process is at work in the UK: middle class colonisation that ends with gentrification and a housing crisis, marked by rising rents and by displacement. But at the same time, investment in farmland for offsetting and ‘green washing’ (that is, laundering the reputations of companies that continue to pollute elsewhere) is driving up land prices in areas of traditional hill farming, threatening the viability of farm businesses and substituting local economic activity with investment landscapes that employ very few people, disrupt local labour markets, and significantly reduce rural communities’ capacity to build capital and recycle money locally.

## Communities and commoning

The rural challenge in much of the UK – and other places affected by middle-class colonisation – could of course end with an exclusively propertied and privatised countryside, in which communities lose their social diversity, their vitality and their capacity to counter the negative impacts of these trends. Rural areas would become retirement retreats, or playgrounds for the wealthy, with displaced households no longer featuring in their unfolding story. But this is not the reality. The countryside has been selectively gentrified or subject to commercial enclosure *but* a class struggle continues in the form of resistance to wholesale marketisation of land, housing and community assets and enterprise. The long run of counter-urbanisation in parts of the UK means that some villages are today dominated by retirees and seasonal residents, but charities and community groups strive to provide homes that are affordable to those on ‘local wages’, alongside services suited to the needs of people living and working full time in the countryside.

Working families are sometimes displaced from amenity villages, with their constrained land and housing markets, to nearby towns ([Gallent et al., 2022](#)). Rural areas therefore become socially segregated: replete with middle class retirement or recreation communities whose needs are served by local workers returning to villages from whence they have been displaced ([Taylor, 2008](#)). The fundamental driver of this displacement is high land rent, bid up by greater connectivity to urban markets and by the demand for amenity. Village housing in parts of England is less affordable, relative to local wages, than urban homes in the same regions. It is the rise in land rent, relative to the stagnation of in-area wages, that reduces

the affordability of housing. Housing use is also the ‘best use’ for land and non-residential buildings (that is, commercially most profitable) in many places, driving a loss of services (barns, shops, pubs, open amenity land and so on) and economic activity (that would otherwise sustain local wages) to high-end housing (the use that now sets land price).

We might say that a critical challenge in parts of England is *investment colonisation* (predicated on assetisation) that bids up land values and crowds out community use. That same investment colonisation takes different forms around the world, similarly bidding up land value and driving social exclusions.

In response, some communities (including colonisers in some instances, who recognise the injustice of displacement) turn to *commoning* practices – attempts to socialise the use of land and critical assets. Standard texts on rural politics and planning, which begin by describing the population sparsity and low levels of settlement nucleation in many rural areas, go on to note the ‘thin market’ for private enterprise and the great expense of bringing public services to villages. In other rural places, *touristification* has led to an increasing number of visitor-oriented businesses and services, at the expense of businesses primarily oriented to locals. The gentrification of many rural areas has drastically altered their need profile: new wealth can mask gross inequality and elevate land costs to such an extent that it becomes unviable to provide affordable housing or offer community services (on privatised land or in rented spaces). For at least the last 30 years, many rural areas have fallen in a gap between weak private investment (in resources for the working population) and low levels of public intervention (council housing in the UK was developed in an era of far more limited counter-urbanisation pressures, especially in the inter-war period, when the sale of land to councils for housebuilding represented ‘best consideration’ for landowners (Gallent et al., 2022)). Communities have needed to plug this gap, through a range of self-help initiatives.

But the deeper underpinnings of this trend are again found in foundational political economy. ‘Self-help’ actually means challenging private monopoly over land and finding ways to bring land under collective control and thereby capturing its rent for wider societal benefit. The social enterprise that becomes possible on that land changes the nature of work, as that work ceases to service landlords who siphon value from rural economies. Wealth is generated and captured in a new way. And the self-help challenge extends to a transformation of local capital, in the form of de-commoditised wealth-generating assets, that can be brought under community control and put to the service of social enterprise.

The ‘community focus’ of rural planning and action has become very important and is regularly detailed in research looking at the housing challenge, at local service provision and at efforts to revitalise rural economies through new forms of enterprise that support community wealth building. Community action of course works in tandem with private interest: many of the participants adopting this collective focus are local homeowners, who nevertheless recognise that not all rural needs can be met through ‘the market’. Keeping some resources in community ownership shields them from private (rent) extraction and secures their social benefit in perpetuity. Community action of this sort is an alternative to property-based private extraction and part of a commoning philosophy: sharing the benefits of controlling land and resources and taking a collective view of their social value. In short, this community focus – which is central to the reorganisation of land, labour and capital relations – is a significant part of a postcapitalist alternative and is our entry-point to a broader discussion of the postcapitalist countryside.

## The postcapitalist countryside

What we have seen in rural areas over the last 70 years is an evolving pattern of capitalism at work. Land enclosure has been the norm for centuries and was manifest in Ireland and the UK and across Europe in feudal obligation – subservience to a propertied class. But in the second half of the twentieth century, the last remnant of feudalism – rural workers living in tied housing – was substituted at first by a mix of private housing consumption *and* (residual) public provision (because land costs made that public provision possible), and eventually by a largely privatised system of provision and consumption (as land values rose and neoliberal governments balked at rising development costs), with the value of private housing, with land rent at its core, accentuated by land rationing through planning systems (Gallent et al., 2022).

We noted at the beginning of this chapter that ‘capitalism’ is predicated on the *privatisation* of land and capital. Etymologically, ‘*privare*’ (Latin) – to deprive – is the common root of both privatisation and deprivation. Private land assignment through market process – the commoditisation of land – *deprives* communities of the means to meet their own needs. Historic land struggles, which are reviewed shortly, recognised this reality. The enclosure of common land in the UK depressed wages (not necessarily monetised wages, but wages in the more general

sense of being the product of labour: animals fattened on common land or foodstuffs foraged) and created a disadvantaged landless class dependent on landlords. Postcapitalism proposes an alternative to the privatisation of land and capital. Today, that privatisation extends to virtual spaces (rent-seeking platforms) and to new forms of capital, including energy infrastructure. The boundaries of capitalist enclosure, beyond land and conventional forms of capital, have widened, accentuating inequalities and creating new rentier classes.

As noted in the last section, there has been increasing interest in community control of assets over the last 30 years, achieved through a variety of commoning practices. Commoning is the antithesis of enclosure and offers a 'postcapitalist alternative' in which collective rights and needs are promoted above private wants. Later chapters of this book explore postcapitalist possibilities in rural areas, tracking the potential reorientation of land, labour and capital, and exploring whether comprehensive postcapitalist futures, targeting socio-economic justice, can arise from *local reorientations* (that is, the actions of communities and citizens) or whether radical *structural reforms* are needed to underpin the urgent transition from private rentierism and unsustainable consumption (in truth, the two are closely intertwined as the agency of communities will inevitably shape evolving structures). The book presents analyses from around the world, focused on the commoning of a variety of rural assets, which illustrate hopeful futures in the shadow of capitalism.

So far, we have sought to clarify some of the key ideas that are unpacked in this book. We have offered very general statements on the nature of capitalism and on forms of postcapitalism (practised and imagined), with the latter presented as either a local or structural challenge to extant political economy. In the remainder of this section, our focus switches first to the provenance of that local/structural challenge – in the form of *land struggle* – and second to the constellation of ideas that we ascribe to postcapitalism.

### Land struggle – the provenance of postcapitalism

It is perhaps useful to distinguish at the outset, the pre-modern experience of commoning (or simply common use of land) – whether by nomadic herders, or settled communities of arable farmers, or Monastic communities – from the early (and subsequent) responses to land enclosure. The former social arrangements existed prior to settled forms of private ownership of land. In terms of 'land struggle', we are more interested in the response to enclosure, in order to connect postcapitalist



experiments with earlier efforts to escape the effects or privation brought about by the rent-seeking behaviour of landowners (the bad acting noted by George). Far from being a natural condition for humanity, 'extreme poverty seems' instead 'to arise predominantly in periods of severe social and economic distress, like famines, wars and *institutionalised dispossession*, particularly under colonialism' (Sullivan and Hickel, 2023: 3). The rise of capitalism, and the dispossessions it triggered, resulted in a prolonged deterioration of the human condition in terms of nutrition and life expectancy (Sullivan and Hickel, 2023).

Many of the examples of land struggle that we might cite draw from the UK experience, given the transformation to an overtly capitalist mode of production manifest first on these shores. Perhaps the clearest early articulation of the effect of land enclosure comes in Thomas More's allegorical work *Utopia* (1516) when 'sheep that were wont to be so meek and tame' become so numerous that 'they eat up, and swallow down the very men themselves' (cited in Thomson, 2014: 40). The impact of enclosure varied across the country, but it is estimated 'that between 1485 and 1500 nearly 16,000 acres of land were enclosed' from Berkshire to Warwick (Myers, 1988: 230). Some of those affected, by the loss of common rights, found new employment in wool processing and weaving; others were forced to seek a livelihood elsewhere, often overseas.

Those who departed the UK, or other countries where dispossession and persecution was occurring, were often inspired by religious motives, although economic necessity played its part in their migrations, particularly for the Huguenots in France and the Pilgrim Fathers in England during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This pattern of displacement and migration was repeated over the next three hundred years. For example, the daughter of a blacksmith and mill-hand from Manchester, Ann Standerin (later Lee), arrived in New York in 1774 with a small group of followers and established the Shaker community near Albany, New York. While living independently, the community spirit was strong, and cooperatively owned businesses flourished. By 1850, the community of Shakers (or 'the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing') had grown to 230, with a further 6,000 nationwide.

These US Shaker communities could trace their origin to the Diggers, led by Gerard Winstanley in England. Faced with the enclosure of common land, they occupied unused land on which to grow food in 1649 – the year of Charles I's execution and start of the English Interregnum. Although the occupation was short-lived, Winstanley's writings continued to inspire the belief that the Earth, and land in particular, was 'a Common Treasury'. Winstanley's subsequent association with Edward Burroughs,

an early leader of the Quakers, meant that this belief became important to the Quaker movement and hence the Shaker way of life rooted in Quakerism. Parallel groups, holding very similar views, were making their own way to America from other parts of Europe. Very large numbers of Swiss Germans – the Amish – established communities on collectively held land, with their way of life made famous in Peter Weir’s 1985 film, *Witness*. Today, there are around 350,000 Amish and Mennonites living in the same way across the US.<sup>1</sup>

Later waves of land enclosure in England prompted further migrations, some organised on socialist principles, including Robert Owen’s short-lived New Harmony community, established in Indiana in 1824. Between 1760 and 1844, roughly 4 million acres of common land in England were enclosed (Hammond and Hammond, 1987: 42), driving the dispossessed poor into factory work, on capitalist terms, or forcing them to take up cheap passage to the colonies. Resistance to such displacement, from this point, took two distinct paths. First agitation for reform to working conditions and wages happened through trade unions and, later on, through political parties, and second, the push for greater self-help through community enterprise such as cooperative societies (the earliest of these, the Fenwick Weavers’ Society, formed in 1769) or mutual building and insurance societies. Some of the self-help initiatives became very large and continue to operate today as the UK’s Co-op supermarkets and the Nationwide Building Society, which trade on mutual principles.

Political initiatives, championed by traditional parties, sought a redistribution or commoning of resources – a different accommodation with the land enclosure and capitalist production that had now taken root. The Liberal Party attempted, unsuccessfully, to introduce Henry George’s single tax on land values in 1908–9. The Labour Party (founded 1900) and Co-operative Party (founded 1917) were partners in the successful launching of the welfare state after the Second World War, delivering housing and healthcare benefits supported by a post-war consensus around the state’s enlarged role in social welfare, balanced by the retention of the private right over landownership (development rights over land were nationalised in 1947, rather than the land itself).

Historically, land has been central to political debates in Ireland since at least the nineteenth century. The triad of colonialism, dispossession and absentee landlordism has left an imprint on collective memory that has shaped attitudes to property ownership, property rights and agricultural policy. As Dooley (2004: 2) argues: ‘landownership [in the nineteenth century] became indelibly related to the other great

national issues of identity and independence'. Thus, the development of nationality and nationalism in Ireland was bound up in a struggle for land in a largely agrarian society. Land reform was critical to the new Irish State: the Land Act and the establishment of the Land Commission, both in 1923, furthered land redistribution from traditional landlords and larger farmers to smallholders, with Dooley noting the arrival of 14,500 farmers onto lands totalling almost 400,000 acres in the years following the Act. The result has been a deconcentrated pattern of landownership in Ireland, which contrasts to the large rural estates which still dominate the British countryside. This often leads to very different development outcomes, such as a proliferation of private family housing in the Irish countryside.

Ireland's land reform was primarily focused on the transfer of land assets from large estates to private smallholders, with land remaining under private control with the protection of private property rights enshrined in the Irish constitution. Land reform did not extend to more diverse ownership patterns, such as community land trusts or cooperative ownership models.

Elsewhere, the twentieth century saw the emergence of what might now be viewed as postcapitalist communities, challenging the prevailing wind of land enclosure: the Kibbutz (1909) in Israel and the Bruderhof (1920) in Germany, with the latter inspiring counterculture outposts in the US (for example Colorado's Drop City) and elsewhere in Europe, including at Robertsbridge in England and in the form of the Findhorn Foundation (1962) in Scotland, manifest in different degrees of communal living, from full collective ownership of assets and social enterprise to more flexible and less formal arrangements. Beyond liberal democracies, national revolutionary movements took forward the wholesale nationalisation of land, most obviously in Russia (1917) and China (1949), although less confiscatory redistributions took place in Japan after the Second World War, where Government Bonds were issued to landowners whose property, broken up into 5 ha smallholdings, was reassigned to former agricultural workers. A parallel process in Taiwan was dubbed the 'land to the tiller' reform, initiated by the Nationalist Government in 1951, involving the sale of public land to tenant farmers, with much of that land having been recovered from Japanese landowners who fled in 1945.

The sources of inspiration, from land struggles, for postcapitalist futures are wide and varied. Major socio-economic upheavals, at the ends of wars or beginnings of revolutions, often provide the impetus for a wider distribution of land and national wealth. But the provenance of

postcapitalism can also be more incremental and subtle. Increased estate duties in England from the end of the nineteenth century precipitated the break-up of great estates, resulting in the occasional acquisition of municipal farms by local authorities and also in the growth of owner-occupied farms in place of aristocratic landownership (Offer, 1991; Tichelar, 2019: 54). Many countries saw a widening of landownership through the twentieth century, as landholdings were more broadly distributed as a result of war or taxation. Local authorities in England took the progressive step of reconnecting working class families to the land through the Allotments Act 1925.

Such moves were anchored in a changed political landscape in the first half of the twentieth century, in the agitation for reform that accompanied the rise of a labour movement in the UK and similar political sentiments elsewhere. During the second half of the twentieth century, post-war consensus held firm in many parts of Europe, with governments seeking to balance private aspiration with efforts to rebuild infrastructure and social cohesion as vital public goods. But the neo-liberal tendencies that have replaced the post-war consensus have resulted in a reversal of many of the redistributions that occurred in the first decades of the last century. The concentration of landownership in fewer hands has reached new heights in England (Shrubsole, 2020) and efforts to socialise rent, or reconnect people with land in support of broader prosperity, have been thrown into reverse (Christophers, 2018).

The cases presented in later chapters have their own particular provenance in local struggles. One of the key commonalities, however, in international experiences of land enclosure is the attempt to construct compensatory welfare arrangements, in lieu of lost land rights, funded from taxes on work. George (1879) observed that feudal landholding, across Europe, was associated with feudal obligation to the Crown. Landowners were expected to raise armies for local defence, or for foreign expeditions, should the King require it, with George estimating that at least half of a landowner's rent was regularly expended on such 'obligations' or taxes. Over the course of centuries, the public tax burden in many countries has been transferred from *land to labour* (that is, through payroll and consumption taxes) in support of expanding social welfare systems (compensating for the loss of land rights: it is workers, rather than landowners, who fund that compensation through payroll deductions!) and national infrastructures, and in order to address claimed inequalities through work-based *income* redistribution. Yet this transfer does not respond to deepening wealth inequality. Rather it frees land from significant tax burdens (on imputed rent, capital gains

and estate duties), supports the concentration of value in land through infrastructure investment and ensures that private landownership rather than work is the way to 'get ahead'. Once the cases have been presented, this issue is returned to in our examination of potential systemic resets – explored in [Chapters 20 and 21](#).

### Postcapitalism – a constellation of ideas

The postcapitalist 'manifesto' seeks to break the chain of (land) enclosure, (asset) commoditisation and (labour) alienation ([Chatterton and Pusey, 2020](#)). The alternative it offers is a 'commoning' of land, property, and capital, and therefore a socialisation of surplus – rather than a siphoning off to rentierism in its various modern forms: financial, resource, platform, intellectual, infrastructure and contract, as well as land ([Christophers, 2020](#)). It also seeks a shift to 'joyful' work and away from mundane occupations that serve capitalist production (marked by specialisation and measured in the suppression of wages, as previously noted). The latter can include total transitions away from work in the service of capitalism ([Srnicek, 2017](#)). In this short section, we pick out some of the key markers of postcapitalism, which are then expanded upon in later chapters.

If we accept the Marxist prediction that capitalism contains, within itself, the seed of its own destruction, the question arises, what comes next? Thirty years ago, Drucker ([1993](#)) predicted a 'transformation' of society at the turn of the twentieth century comparable to the shift from rural to urban living in the thirteenth century, the Renaissance in the fifteenth, or what Polanyi called 'The Great Transformation' ([1944](#)) to industrial production in the eighteenth. The new 'Post-Capitalist Society', the title of Drucker's book, would be an age of information, data or knowledge – the first era not associated with a particular country or region but a global age, with an increasing number of coalitions, trading blocs and supranational organisations of governance: an era when key workers would own the means of production (knowledge), opening the possibility for a shift in social (or power) relations between employer and employee. People without such relevant knowledge would be consigned to the service sector, which in turn poses the challenge of how to avoid extreme societal dislocation – a two-tier economy as described by Temin ([2017](#)). The potential for AI and robotics to displace this underclass and, potentially, some categories of knowledge worker (note the furore surrounding the release of Open AI's ChatGPT in 2022) has raised the imperative for a Universal Basic Income (UBI) in a 'post-work' economy

(Chatterton and Pusey, 2020). But more immediately, the pattern of work in a knowledge society is theorised to be more cooperative, shifting power to particular classes of labour, and away from the corporate owners of firms (the traditional capitalists) and landowners. Postcapitalism was, in Drucker's reckoning, an inevitable evolution towards a new relationship between land, labour and capital.

But while significant cooperative networks have clearly emerged over the last 30 years – the world wide web is a key example, ubiquitous and hidden in plain sight, alongside open source software such as Linux and Defi (Decentralisation Finance) applications – it is also the case that a small number of immensely powerful corporate giants have emerged to dominate the new era. They continue to prize location, and therefore landowners continue to extract rents from land. Indeed, it turns out that agglomeration advantages are even greater for knowledge workers, who want to live and work in the same places – while the vast server farms, processing and transmitting data, need to be as close as possible to those workers, and to centres of population. Furthermore, the value accruing from knowledge is increasingly privatised. The potential of (open source) *network effects* to harness the zero marginal cost of reproducing information technology, predicted by Drucker, has instead been captured and protected by *patents*. It has been enclosed and monopolised by its creators – and its value lost to wider society. Some of these challenges are explored by Mason (2015) who notes how Marx predicted the increasing importance of knowledge in his 'Fragment on Machines' (background notes for *Capital*), arguing that knowledge on how a machine works, and how to supervise its operation, is more important than the labour required to operate it. This knowledge is *embodied and mobile*: it can be taken to a new employer or used by an individual to 'start up' their own company. The free flow of knowledge presents a contradiction in 'modern capitalism ... between the possibility of free, abundant socially produced goods, and a system of monopolies, banks and government struggling to maintain control over power and information' (Mason, 2015: 144).

This contradiction (or challenge for conventional forms of monopoly) is the driver behind the observed transformation towards new varieties of enclosure (Christophers, 2020), consolidating existing challenges and posing new development questions for people and places, including people and places in the countryside. Drucker (1993: 12) foresaw 'the end of the belief in salvation by society [and] a return to individual responsibility' that is now said to require a re-imagining of the future for oneself (Gibson-Graham, 2006), and which ultimately means co-creating new ways of living *against*, but also within, a capitalist

economy. Hence, the postcapitalist transformation, co-existing with capitalism, is distinct from ideas of a future ‘after-capitalism’. It often involves finding new self-sufficiencies, with examples cited by Chatterton and Pickerill (2010) including commoning practices associated with low-impact development in Wales and the autonomous social centres located across the UK. Because capitalism is a means of extracting surplus value, arising from growth or George’s material progress, a number of postcapitalist imaginaries embrace de-growth (Jackson, 2021) or post-growth narratives (Blühdorn, 2017) that are concerned (broadly) with preserving our extant way of life without exceeding environmental limits. This same concern features in many of the cases presented in later chapters.

The literature on postcapitalism points to new ways of living and working within the shadow of new forms of capitalism. Living against and within capitalism means rethinking critical land, labour and capital relationships, and with them all systems of exploitation from heteropatriarchy to human–ecological relationships. This can happen locally, as many of the case studies reveal, or through systemic challenge – whenever the window of opportunity for such a challenge opens – including a new aesthetic concerning planetary commoning. The argument is often heard that the information technology revolution has itself transformed relationships with location and land, radically changed the nature of work and reshaped capital. But reality is some way off this theory: vast logistics warehouses and tech-parks are the all-too-conventional capital for this new economy, which is not as foot-loose or placeless as we might like to imagine. This contradiction is exemplified by the growth in so-called cloud computing and storage, implying a placeless-ness and mobile technology-fix, yet accommodated through large, physical energy-intensive data centres often located within rural places and dependent on additional roll-out of renewable energy infrastructure (again in rural locations). Rural peripheries continue to be side-lined by poor infrastructure, while the better-connected locations become hotspots of activity for economic nomads. An economy based on conventional monopoly perseveres, and it is this extant form of modern capitalism – consuming land for production and for greenwashing – that is challenged by those who would re-imagine the future and contest new varieties of enclosure.

## Revisiting political economy – the land question

The political economy that is challenged by postcapitalist alternatives was sketched at the beginning of this introduction. It was argued, in brief, that land is centre-stage in the processes that drive socio-economic inequality. But this book is not only concerned with land in material and symbolic expressions. The editors and also the contributors to this book have mixed views on the centrality of land questions in different national situations. However, land is a key factor in production and in the extraction of value, through rent, from productive processes.

The central idea structuring this book, apart from the desire to detail postcapitalist imaginations in the countryside, is that capitalism is characterised by its particular treatment of land, labour and capital. First, it asserts that the privatisation of land, and the private capture of rent in perpetuity, is a natural state. It forcefully rejects the idea of land as a common resource. For that reason, the book puts land front and centre of its analysis. Second, it views labour as subservient to land and capital. Because it is *in service* to these production factors – and therefore to landowners and those who control capital – its share of the value arising from production (delivered through wages) should reasonably be less. And third, capital actualises production and is created by entrepreneurial energy. In the capitalist worldview, there are a small number of innovators, ‘job-creators’ or ‘captains of industry’ who deserve the greater part of wealth arising from advances in production. All of this has been shown to be false. Land is privatised in accidental and incidental ways over decades or centuries, delivering benefit to successors, and landownership ultimately becomes the passive capture of wealth through rent, and the basis of social class (Saunders, 1984). Capital, as Henry George notes, is created by labour: labour is the critical force in production, building up capital over time, which is eventually held by individuals and employed or lent for profit. In fact, it was George who re-sequenced the three factors, putting labour ahead of capital and arguing that only through a ‘single tax’ (on land), would it be possible to break land monopoly and rebalance the distribution of value (resolving into rent, wages and profit) to land, labour and capital. This was essentially George’s prescription for narrowing the gap between the richest and poorest in society, whose earnings are fundamentally fixed by the enclosure and privatisation of ‘nature’s bounty’ in the form of land. Postcapitalism is characterised by a very different treatment of land, labour and capital, by mechanisms to socialise rent, reorganise labour, and de-commoditise capital. This can be achieved by *revolutionary* shifts at the scale of nation states, that transfer



the burden of tax away from labour, or by local actions – and community responses – that *evolve* new ways of thinking about land, social enterprise and community assets.

## Structure

This book is structured to challenge the capitalist conventions summarised earlier in this chapter. It draws on case studies from around the world, framing these in a detailed consideration of the land question and in commoning and postcapitalist debate. The first part of the book constructs a framing for the detailed cases. In [Chapter 2](#), the editors provide a broad account of land and rent in capitalist production, its propensity to exclude, deprive people of the wherewithal to meet their own needs, and seed gross inequality. [Chapter 3](#), the second of three framing chapters, takes a deeper look at the postcapitalist literature, detailing how ‘commoning’ provides an alternative to capitalist enclosure. [Chapter 4](#) then extends our introductory discussion of postcapitalism, noting a wider palette of postcapitalist imaginaries.

In the second part of the book, the focus is placed on land – as the first area of capitalist convention. A total of eight chapters (from [Chapter 5](#) to [Chapter 12](#)) dissect various aspects of the land question and the mechanisms available, where relevant, to bring land under community control or challenge enclosure through customary or alternative tenures. Contributions to this part of the book also extend to issues of primary production on land, the distribution of land rights, land art practices as resistance (to enclosure), and feminist perspectives on commoning. The third part of the book (from [Chapters 13](#) to [18](#)) then shifts to consider labour and capital: social enterprise and new work models, and the de-commoditisation of a range of community assets, from virtual platforms, through housing and energy, to heritage.

The fourth part of the book turns from local reorientations (projects and interventions that challenge convention) to the structural reforms that could provide foundational support to a different distribution of benefit from economies. [Chapter 19](#) explores the ways in which capitalism may claim its ‘re-invention’ or broader benefit through distributed asset ownership, and what this has entailed and produced in recent years, asking whether advancing homeownership in Britain (and ‘asset-based welfare’ centred on housing) has effectively challenged engrained inequalities. [Chapter 20](#) then offers broader reflection on the place of land, and claims to rent, under capitalism – and how such

claims might be challenged, including through the institution of common property – before [Chapter 21](#) revisits questions of just taxation in support of social accumulation – in contrast to the private accumulation targeted by the majority of tax systems. The final chapter then draws together a number of key observations, organised around the following questions: what happens when surplus value, that would normally be captured as rent, is directed to community projects, when resources are commoned, and deployed in support of collective prosperity and well-being? What particular benefits accrue to rural communities, against the backcloth of usual challenges and vulnerabilities? How does the challenge to convention from postcapitalism impact on economies and entrepreneurial appetite and energy? It is an essential Georgist proposition that land value tax, or a lack of private appropriation of economic rent through other means, does not detract from economic production. And what is the case for embracing a broader postcapitalist transition – one that is not confined to local reorientations but tracks an entirely different direction in land policy and governance?

## Note

- 1 Young Center for Anabaptist and Pietist Studies (2017) Amish Population change 1992–2017. Elizabethtown College. [https://groups.etown.edu/amishstudies/files/2017/08/Population\\_Change\\_1992-2017.pdf](https://groups.etown.edu/amishstudies/files/2017/08/Population_Change_1992-2017.pdf) (accessed 17 May 2024).

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Part I

# **Private land enclosure and public commoning**



## 2

# Land and rent in capitalist production

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### Introduction

It was argued in the last chapter that ‘postcapitalism is essentially a *different organisation of the factors of production*: land or land rent socialised, labour receiving greater benefit from work, and capital transformed from a private into a social asset through community control over wealth-generating infrastructure, real and virtual’ (pages 4–5). In order to conceive of a ‘different organisation’, it is first necessary to understand how the *capitalist organisation* came about, and how land value has been absorbed into the capitalist narrative of interest and profit on investment due to the ‘entrepreneur’ (capitalist), rather than the outcome of a community working together to co-create wealth for each other, whether on a small scale or across global supply chains and then exchanging this wealth through a market.

The chapter therefore outlines the history and origin of land rent theory: what creates land value in particular places – that is, the agglomeration effects of population growth and cooperative effort – and how this has, or can, be captured through the social relation of ownership. The outline begins with the Physiocrats in pre-revolutionary France before moving to examine the present Western economic paradigm. It will seek to answer basic questions: ‘why is there a land rent theory?’; ‘what is the concept of economic rent?’; and how have debates on rent evolved, and perhaps distorted, over time. It will more fully introduce the ideas of Cantillon, Quesnay, Smith, Ricardo, Marx and George (the ‘Classical Economists’); von Thünen (often identified as the first ‘land rent theorist’); and Marshall and Robinson (the ‘Neo-classicals’). It will then move to contemporary debates, centred

on the work of Harvey, which include rent-seeking, assetisation and financialisation, and recent attempts to keep land disaggregated from capital and finance.

As well as referencing a different organisation of the factors of production, the last chapter also invoked the concept of ‘wealth-generating infrastructure’ (real and virtual – see [Chapter 15](#) for consideration of the latter). Some of that infrastructure is detailed in [Part III](#), and much of it is founded on land. Land is implicated in all forms of wealth generation and associated inequalities, although it is perhaps more usual to view it as the source of materials and the location for infrastructure siting, rather than being, in itself, the wealth generator. Land provides a foundation for life. It is not produced, instead being characterised as the ‘free gift’ of nature. It includes not just land, that is, the earth’s surface, but the oceans and rivers, the minerals and materials in the earth, and the air and space to the edge of our biosphere. It provides the natural resources for industry: the ores processed to create steel, copper, aluminium and other metals; it is the source of fuel, created by the sun’s energy, to shape and finish complex components; to manufacture and power the machines we use every day, whether as capital employed to create more wealth, or as consumption goods such as private cars or smart phones.

Land provides the space, and the materials, for placemaking and for building the homes that families need, and also for offices or public buildings – places of commerce, entertainment and social interaction. And land is the source of nourishment needed to sustain life: a place to grow food and where essential ecosystems flourish. Humans use land to produce things by working on, and with, land, adding their labour to the basic natural resource, and thereby creating wealth. Wealth is therefore *made*: something to which a producer can justifiably lay claim. A claim on raw materials, drawn from land, is justified by the cost expended on extracting or processing those materials. A claim on land itself, however, is more tenuous, with ownership merely guaranteeing that extractions and transformations (for example, mining and manufacturing) can continue unhindered and that land can be kept in productive use – by virtue of its enclosure.

Land is real, often called ‘real estate’ or immovable property (non-produced) as opposed to movable property (which is produced) such as furniture, paintings and other commonly owned assets that, in medieval common law parlance, belonged to the person. Bracton (1236) drew the distinction between *personal property*, claims for which could be dealt with in Civil Courts, and *real estate*, which remained under the jurisdiction of the Royal Court. In England, legal ownership of real estate

continues to be vested in ‘the Crown’, although the right to hold and use it (to possess a beneficial interest) is granted through titles, such as freehold or leasehold. In most jurisdictions, the state is the ultimate owner of all land, as it is the sovereign or supreme law-making authority. Without law, ownership remains an informal arrangement between individuals within communities, sustained through custom (hence, *customary law* or *customary tenure*). Most jurisdictions also retain the means to take land from private ownership (and use) into public ownership in the public interest – a power of compulsory purchase or *eminent domain*.

Why is land so important to the creation of wealth? Early treatises on political economy present a *two-factor* model of production, which is said to implicate land and labour. For example, Hobbes: ‘for the matter of this nutriment ... God hath freely layd them before us ... so there needeth no more but the labour and industry of receiving them’ (Hobbes, 1651: 295). All wealth therefore derives from work on land, with capital (encompassing the machinery used to expedite the creation of more wealth) being a product of labour. Similarly, Cantillon (c.1680–1734) noted that ‘land is the source or matter from whence all wealth is produced. The labour of man is the form which produces it: and wealth in itself is nothing but the maintenance, conveniences, and superfluities of life’ (Cantillon, 1755: 1). Others have since reaffirmed the centrality of land, which, ‘as defined by economists, is a prime factor of production, not just in the third world, but in all advanced economies, alongside the natural forces of the universe and human labour’ (Hodgkinson, 2007: xi).

While this chapter is not concerned with the origin of landownership (a beneficial interest in the enclosure of land), it is important to note that Locke, a key figure in debates concerning the ownership of land, recognised the pre-existence of land without owners and hence its common nature and origin. Locke maintained that man can claim ownership of something when he mixes his labour with nature but only if ‘there is enough, and as good left *in common* for others’ (Locke, 1688: 130). Therefore, if someone takes more (land) than they can usefully employ, the surplus should be returned to the common pot.

But what of rent: why should anyone pay a rent for the use of land if there remains enough *in common*? Ricardo offers an answer:

... no one would pay for the use of land when there was an abundant quantity not yet appropriated, and therefore at the disposal of whosoever might choose to cultivate it ... If all land had the same properties, if it were unlimited in quantity, and uniform in quality,



no charge could be made for its use, unless where it possessed *peculiar advantages of situation*.

(Ricardo, 1817: 34–5, *emphasis added*)

Ownership, enclosure and the removal of land from the commons (whether its supply is limited or not) has reconditioned this particular factor in production, advantaging some and excluding others. Just as we accept the need to make a payment for produced goods in a market economy, is there a justification for payments to be made to the community for the exclusions that arise from private land enclosure? Paying rent to a private landowner is accepted by custom and affirmed by the rule of law. An area of interest that draws together Georgist and postcapitalist political economy is whether rent should, in fact, bypass the landowner and be ‘socialised’ to pay for goods used in common, such as roads, street lighting, and education and healthcare. There may be a legitimate payment to a landowner to rent a building on their land, especially if they have built or maintained the building (making it personal property), and thereafter provide essential services or vehicular access to the building from the public highway. But there is a difference between this payment and the *economic rent* that can be extracted by the owner for the use of non-produced goods – in this case land.

An economic rent is one that, when paid, will not disrupt the economic activity taking place in any given location. It is a natural surplus available to the owner, and will vary according to the economic advantages (created by the agglomeration of nearby or connecting activities) of any particular location. Where there is no advantage, there will be no economic rent, which defines the marginal site (see [Chapter 1](#)’s reference to ‘Ricardo’s Law’). It is our contention that a genuine postcapitalist transition demands a recognition that the owner of non-produced goods, essentially land, owes a payment to the community commensurate with its collectively created value. Postcapitalism means that this value should not be appropriated by the landowner: rather, it should be directed to fund collective services, the costs of which are currently met (in part) from taxes levied on produced goods.

This is especially true in the countryside, typically the location of the extensive margin, where there is no rent in the economic sense but *absolute rents* continue to be charged. The next section will unpack a little more the theory associated with the rental value of land and how it is created in a modern trading economy. This theory offers a different origin for surplus value, more often associated with labour time for *Marxists*,

or the special skill of the entrepreneur and willingness to take risks with money invested in the production of goods for the *Capitalists*.

## Land rent theory

For the Physiocrats, writing in France in the middle of the eighteenth century, all value was created from land, in the sense that only land had the capacity to produce anything new (of value). Land, and nature, was credited with the power to multiply a fixed quantity of seed at harvest; but humanity's role was secondary, capable of transforming nature's bounty into more useful items without adding to the stock of material things. Work by the Physiocrats comprised a series of essays by Mirabeau, Turgot and especially Quesnay (1694–1774), whose *Tableau Economique* was published in 1758. He proposed that an '*impôt unique*' be levied on the natural surplus (that is, the economic rent) produced from land to meet public expenses.

In Britain, Adam Smith (1723–90) was observing and documenting the industrialisation taking place around him, and he drew attention to the added value that could be generated by labour specialisation and division (Smith, 1776). He also acknowledged the contribution, to value creation, of fixed capital: equipment not consumed in the productive process that could therefore be engaged in the ongoing procurement of wealth. The organisation of labour into purpose-built factories, housing new forms of fixed capital, was gathering pace at this time and an urban environment supporting production was taking shape, under the control of a new class: the capitalist. Smith reflected on the reward that should resolve to the capitalist. His answer was profit: the surplus after all costs had been met, including any rent for the use of land, unless the capitalist was also the landowner.

Under conditions of full land enclosure, a position reached in most parts of England by the middle of the nineteenth century, the owners of land were in a privileged position relative to the capitalist, who would need to rent the land on which their factories were built, and the labourers, whose access to common land had been curtailed by enclosure. The 'most important outcome [of that enclosure] was to increase the share of income taken by the landed elite' (Daunton, 1995: 117).

The size of that share of income, or rent, was determined by location. Johann von Thünen (1783–1850) assumed that where labour and capital costs (to produce the same commodity) were equal, differences in transport costs arising from location would explain relative

rent. Differences in those costs meant that horticulture located closest to towns, corn and other grains came next, and pasture followed. Rents are highest closer to market and can only be sustained by higher-priced commodities; further away, rents are lower as the labour and capital costs of transportation are greater. There is less surplus left for the landowner. Therefore, rent payable is determined by commodity price, rather than commodity price being determined by rent. However, the landed elite, being monopoly owners, could command the surplus in each location.

Equally, within the towns, the rents commanded by landowners were set by the value of the products being made by the capitalist. With their economies of scale and use of machinery, vast quantities of product could be made in relatively small spaces very quickly. The value of this output, its surplus, exceeded agricultural production, therefore supporting ever-higher land rents. Indeed, the labourers themselves, requiring lodgings close to the new factories, became objects of rent to be collected by the landowners.

Karl Marx (1818–83) was writing at a time when industrial production was becoming the dominant form of wealth creation, and therefore developed an entire model of the economy and society based on the new (capitalist) ‘mode of production’, in which his theory of surplus value generated by labour power was the central element. In this model, all value was created by labour through the transformation of raw materials, across all sectors of the economy, into saleable commodities. The capitalist, in control of the capital needed to increase productivity, could ‘alienate’ the worker from the full value of the product. After deducting the costs of ‘reproducing labour’ (that is, paying subsistence wages), the value or ‘surplus’ could be taken by the capitalist, from which he met other costs, including rent. Any payment to the owner of land was considered, by Marx, an obligation created by the ‘social relationship’ between the owner and the capitalist. For Marx, all social relationships – between landowners, capitalists and labourer – are defined by exclusive proprietary rights. Value creation arises from labour value – with Marx rejecting the earlier theory of value from location – but labour is collectively and unjustly denied proprietary right.

The factory owner’s ability to extract value from the labourer in this way is rooted in labour’s inability to make a living through other means, not because of the ‘mode of production’ itself but because of the enclosure of the commons, and therefore of the common ‘wherewithal’ to make a living. The labourer’s lack of choice means that he is forced to accept whatever wage the capitalist is prepared to offer. Both the landowner and the capitalist now stand in the way of the labourer receiving the full

product or value from his labour. But at the same time, the landowner prevents the capitalist (in those instances where the landowner and the capitalist are not one and the same) from receiving the full value of his product. The dispossessed labourer, now also bereft of his capital (cattle or seed), is in the weakest position, left only with his labour power to sell. As Adam Smith put it: 'In that original state of things, which precedes both the appropriation of land and the accumulation of stock [that is, capital], the whole produce of labour belongs to the labourer. He has neither landlord nor master [that is, capitalist] to share with him' (Smith, 1776: 27).

This mode of production, characterised by the advantages of the capitalist and the dispossession of labour, has gradually eliminated precapitalist arrangements across different parts of the world. It follows that a postcapitalist future will be one where the rent of land is returned to the commonwealth and labour takes back its capital. At the level of the individual, higher wages (because of a transfer of tax burden onto rent) might result in a return of capital to labour: only if the labourer enjoys the full product of their labour (including the natural surplus) does he have time to invest in the production or acquisition of capital. At a societal level, that transfer of tax burden would amount to a socialisation of rent, generating new public revenues for capital investment in the form of key public infrastructures.

The size of the surplus share taken by landowners and capitalists has varied over time and between different places and industries. But because of their common status as 'owners', of either land or capital, returns to these factors of production (as well as the factors themselves) have often been conflated. Marx's concept of 'primitive accumulation' (the pre-history and early privatisation of capital) proposes that land becomes capital over time through the addition of embedded infrastructures: for example, drainage, enclosing walls or access roads. This conflation enabled Marx to remove any separate value in land from his analysis.

In Chapter 26 of Marx's *Capital*, Volume I, primitive accumulation through early privatisation performs 'the same role in political economy as original sin does in theology' (Marx et al., 1981: 873). Through *enclosure*, the new landowner is able to *separate* workers from the means of production. What was previously 'the social means of subsistence and production' (that is, land) is 'turned into capital, and the immediate producers are turned into wage-labourers', but now without any feudal tie to the soil. The capitalist mode of production is therefore predicated on the replacement of one form of exploitation (that is, feudal) with a new form (that is, capitalist). The free labourer is at once cut loose from feudal obligation *and* from the

means of production (that is, land where he was previously able to exercise common use rights), thereafter carrying 'his commodity [labour] wherever he can find a market for it' (Marx et al., 1981: 873–5). At the end of this process, accumulation by the capitalist is no longer 'primitive' but part of the circulation of capital. However, despite Marx's conflation of land with capital, rent is often still payable to a landowning elite.

Having detailed the new mode of production, Marx sought to categorise forms of rent. Some of these categories are dependent on there being no *free land* at the margin (see Chapter 1). Location plays a part in distinguishing all forms of rent:

1. *Absolute Rent* is a payment that can be extracted *at will* by a *landowner*, irrespective of the capacity of a site to generate a natural surplus (drawn from a total productive value that exceeds the combined cost of ordinary wages and ordinary profit to capital). Therefore, an absolute rent suppresses wage and/or profit and is extractable where all land is enclosed;
2. *Differential Rent 1* (DR1) refers to the higher rental payment extractable from land with natural advantage (for example, greater fertility) but producing the same commodity. Where labour and capital costs are equal, DR1 is the differential rent from the advantageous site.
3. *Differential Rent 2* (DR2) arises from a different use, and therefore a different labour and capital input leading to a different commodity output, on land of equivalent quality and advantage. DR1 is an *extensive* and natural differential that is not dependent on the actions of a landowner whereas DR2 is an *intensive* and worked differential that the landowner can influence.
4. *Monopoly Rent* accrues where the characteristics of a particular piece of land are so special that the owner can extract a payment that is disproportionate to potential productive surplus (that is, wealth creation) from the land.

This categorisation of rent has proven useful to many scholars, and yet Marx was significantly more interested in labour's role in creating surplus value, seeing land and location as secondary considerations. Marx's work on rent was also incomplete: he died before finishing *Capital*, Volume III. He saw rent as important but not as centrally positioned as other writers. Before Marx's birth, Ricardo had already rejected the idea that land creates no value: 'rent is a creation of value [as in a higher price], as I understand that word, but not a creation of wealth' (1817: 273).

Ricardo's intended meaning can be unpacked in the following way: there are two elements in the price of any commodity (whether food, a chair, or clothing); the first is the cost of production (materials, labour and energy) and the second is the surplus, which is paid to the owner of land on which the commodity is produced, in the form of rent. The *value of that rent* will vary according to the advantages of location for the production of any given product or service (falling to zero for marginal sites, except in cases where an absolute rent can be commanded). Rent is not, however, part of the direct commodity price; and therefore land, with attributes bestowed by nature, can be considered a creator of surplus value (the difference between production cost and market price). This logic, as Ricardo observed, means that rent is a creation of surplus value but not a creation of wealth (the product of work *on* land), ultimately embodied in commodities and in capital.

Taking the logic further, the rent of land is different in value terms from the product of work on land. To whom, therefore, do rents belong? For Marx, rents arise from problematic class relationships which should be disrupted through the nationalisation of land, resulting in rents accruing to the state. Inspired by that thinking, most revolutions of the twentieth century began with a programme of land confiscation. While such programmes address the injustice of land enclosure and private rent appropriation, they leave the state with the challenge of how best to allocate the use of land. Without market guides, this allocation is seldom optimal and replaces social injustices with economic inefficiencies. While rent is socialised under communism, so too is capital, with the capitalist losing ownership of the means of production: the factory and its machinery.

Henry George (1839–97), a contemporary of Marx, lamented the extinguishing of the 'entrepreneurial flame'. He developed a practical means of dealing with the 'land question' that avoided nationalisation but still built on rent theory and regarded land enclosure and ownership as foundational to all socio-economic injustice. George considered all rents to be monopolistic, given that every piece of land has a unique character which cannot be exactly replicated in any other location. Business owners, he argued, accept this fact and judge every location on its merits. Even factors such as the trajectory of the sun, bestowing light on one side of a street and shade on the other, will impact on rents. George's perspective on rent theory was shaped by the development of California in the mid-nineteenth century: he joined the gold rush and witnessed the subsequent growth of San Francisco. He presents, in his allegorical *A Savannah Story*, an account of the extensive margin (bringing additional less fertile and remoter vacant land into production) and the intensive margin (greater

investment of capital and more intense use in new communities) and the role of communal advantage and agglomeration in creating rent: 'it is population that gives value to land. Much of that value is captured by the rent of the landlord' (George, 1879: 13). On a trip to New York, he noted the paradox of rising wealth alongside growing poverty: 'as land prices rise, rent absorbs so much of the product that labour and capital are squeezed down to a level at which they cannot work' (1879: 14). Therefore, in George's opinion, land was the primary factor in the creation of value by virtue of the advantages it gains from community and agglomeration:

These advantages attach to the land; it is on *this land* and no other that they can be utilised, for here is the centre of population – the focus of exchanges, the market place and workshop of the highest forms of industry. The productive powers which density of population has attached to this land are equivalent to the multiplication of its original fertility by the hundred fold and the thousand fold. And rent, which measures the difference between this added productiveness and that of the least productive land in use, has increased accordingly.

(George, 1879: 228)

Given this centrality of land, and the manner in which it gains its value, George advocated strongly for the socialisation of rent – through his proposed 'single tax'. The capitalist and the labourer were allies: both intent on the business of wealth creation (the first through entrepreneurial endeavour and the latter through exertion) and both held back by the burden of rent. There are two consequences of rent not being taken by the state: first, the owners of land keep the rent and prosper while the costs of the state are imposed on labour and capital, through taxes on work and productivity; and second, labour and capital face a *double burden* – rent for the use of land and tax payments to defray public expenses. In recent times, those expenses have included welfare supports that help workers meet the escalating costs of rent – that is, public subsidy for private rent extraction.

The next generation of economists adopted a more quantitative approach to their analyses of the economy, attempting to remove the political or moral imperative. Perhaps the most influential was Alfred Marshall (1842–1924), whose book *Principles of Economics* introduced the tools of supply and demand, marginal utility and costs of production.

His definition of rent, while acknowledging the potential for a surplus (at all locations, determined by the output of the marginal site), sought to underscore the combined efforts of capital and labour on the generation of that surplus: '[Rent] is the excess of the value of the total returns which *capital and labour* applied to land do obtain; over those which they would have obtained under circumstances as unfavourable as those on the margin of cultivation' (Marshall, 1890: 355, *emphasis added*).

This combination of factors gradually stripped from land its unique qualities, particularly its *potential* value when unused or underused, presenting land (and rent) as a *cost* of production, like any other factor. Hence the Ricardian view is subverted, as the economist Mark Blaug (1927–2011) confirms: 'The easiest way of undermining Ricardian rent theory, rendering it totally irrelevant, is simply to deny the standard classical assumption that territory or pure space is a factor of production distinctly different from either capital or labour' (Blaug, 2000: 274).

The economist J. B. Clark (1847–1938) was perhaps most insistent on this point, while Joan Robinson (1903–83) argued that the cost impact of *any factor* – whether land, labour or capital – was immediately transferable through the price mechanism and therefore bereft of any special character. This notion of transferability is a defining feature of neo-classical market economics, obscuring the impact of land monopoly on production and welfare.

However, as the pace of urbanisation picked up in the twentieth century, the value of land began to play a more dominant role in the economic cycles of investment, speculation and recession. Economists and geographers therefore once again turned to the question of rent. David Harvey was the most prominent, offering a new Marxist perspective on the relative power of labour and capital in the productive process, and the monopoly power of landowners. Harvey argues that 'the labourer gives up rights to control over the process of production, to the product and to the value incorporated in the product in return for the value of labour power' (1982: 42), whereas:

... the monopoly power that accrues to landowners through the private ownership of land is the basis of rent as a form of surplus value. The power this privilege confers would come to naught, however, were it not the fact that land is an indispensable *condition* of production in general.

(Harvey, 1982: 73, original emphasis)



The capitalist is not, after all, in control of the landowner. 'Rent', Harvey acknowledges, 'troubled Marx deeply' (Harvey, 1982: 330). While it is clear that land has both use and exchange value, there remained, for Marx, a troubling distinction between that part of rent that constitutes 'pure payment to raw land' ('ground rent' for Marx but just 'rent' for Harvey) and that part compensating for improvements on land. Marx seemed to acknowledge that land has value, as evidenced by ground rent, but found it difficult to reconcile this fact with the claim that all value is generated by labour. Harvey attempts to equate any improvements in land over time with a free good:

Capital creates in one place conditions of production that are the free gifts of nature elsewhere. The boundary between interest on capital and rent on land appears somewhat blurred until the investment is amortised, when any permanent improvement becomes a free good and therefore in principle no different from free gifts of nature.

(Harvey, 1982: 337)

Hence, Harvey was able to resolve the Marxist rent dilemma and dismiss Ricardo's assertion that rent is a payment for the original and indestructible powers of the soil, or more importantly, the exact location of that soil. The return to capital simply disappears over time, when the original costs of production have been met. Harvey then turns to the question of location:

... rent ... provides a basis for various forms of social control over the spatial organisation and development of capitalism. This can be so because land serves not only as a means of production but also as a 'foundation, as a place and space providing a basis of operations' – 'space is required as an element of all production and human activity' (Capital, Vol 3 pp. 774 & 781) as Marx asserted.

(Harvey, 1982: 337)

Harvey therefore accepts the concept of advantage in location (in terms of distance from market, for example), implying that this advantage is permanent and therefore more crucial than any short-term technological advantage gained through innovation. 'It follows' therefore 'that those who own land in favoured locations can convert the excess profits into ground rent without affecting the average rate of profit' (1982: 339).

Moreover, land takes on its ‘true capitalistic form’ when its generation of value is not solely due to inherent qualities or location but rather results from its transformation into a financial asset through, for example, private homeownership (see [Chapter 19](#), this volume): ‘when trade in land is reduced to a *special branch* of the circulation of interest bearing capital, then, I shall argue, landownership has achieved its true capitalistic form’ (1982: 347, emphasis added).

Land becomes a commodity when, through its enclosure and because of the opportunity it affords for monopoly ownership, it becomes attractive to money-capital as a means of appropriating value. Over time, and because of intensified competition for this special commodity, land becomes a magnet for speculative capital and an agent for the instability inherent in the capitalist system: ‘what is bought and sold is not the land, but title to the ground rent yielded by it. The money laid out is equivalent to an interest-bearing investment. The buyer acquires a claim upon anticipated future revenues, a claim upon the future fruits of labour’ (1982: 367).

As Christophers (2023) notes, the investments of asset managers (targeting housing and infrastructure in recent decades), made at the behest of pension funds and other institutional investors, seek to capture these revenues. In Harvey’s terms, a secondary circuit of capital has been created (through finance instruments such as debt securities) that supports a new form of appropriation via financial channels.

This form of financialisation means that the capitalist is no longer the owner of the means of production. Capitalists have instead become the owners of instruments which are traded incessantly in the financial markets: equities, currencies, and government and corporate bonds, the value of which determine where production, or appropriation, now occurs (often in places of housing supply constraint, where monopoly rents are maximised). Ownership of these instruments comes with dividends. The value of these instruments – usually measured as a multiple of earnings – far exceeds the ordinary rate of profit from production alone. The most valuable equities are those able to capture a rent, usually monopolistic in form.

Late capitalism has entered a phase where rent seeking is the primary objective – evident in the outsized valuations of the tech companies such as Apple, Alphabet, Amazon, Alibaba and Uber, and their willingness to endure losses during the early years of investment required to create a monopolistic service, whether it be in design, internet search, home delivery, or the taxi ride app. This monopoly confers the entitlement to anticipated future revenue when all competition has been

absorbed or revenue captured through control of data (Zuboff, 2019) or user platforms (the new location, or virtual land, for business), loans and patents or licences, as noted by Christophers (2020).

Real property is unitised into tradeable products through Real Estate Investment Trusts (REITs), and property assets, such as Private Rental Sector (PRS) apartment blocks, are purchased and owned either directly by pension funds or indirectly by asset managers (Christophers, 2023). Real estate is reconditioned into an investment asset: its use value (affording the opportunity to create wealth through one's labour) is relegated behind its function as a repository for surplus value, in the form of rents – imputed or actual – that can be accumulated over time with the support of financiers and mortgage providers. In developed economies, the aspiration to own rent-bearing assets and privately accumulate wealth through rent has become normalised during recent decades. That aspiration extends beyond basic 'owner-occupation' of housing to multiple forms of investment buying. There has been a broad assetisation of land (Adkins, Cooper and Konings, 2021; Langley, 2021), underpinned by rent seeking from housing, direct and financialised.

For the modern worker, or the ordinary family dependent on wage earnings, access to the new middle class (distinguished by ownership of assets) is increasingly difficult, as evidenced in falling rates of homeownership, rising rents and greater reliance on parental contributions to cover housing costs. The prioritisation of private accumulation is a cause of growing social inequality in many advanced economies. Land and rent are central to this inequality, with enclosure and monopoly crowding out public benefit in many places, leaving communities without the homes or the livelihoods they need. The future treatment of land and rent seems to us to be key to successfully charting a postcapitalist future that prioritises social accumulation through a significant reset.

## The reset

In this chapter, we have sought to detail the place of land and rent in the capitalist mode of production. The central message, which was also the claim of Smith and Ricardo, is that private accumulation underpins growth, and growth is universally beneficial, bringing a wealth benefit to all classes through a trickle down. George was more than sceptical about that claim, arguing that private appropriation, predicated on land enclosure and monopoly rent, suppresses broader social welfare. He argued for a socialisation of rent and, given land's role in creating value, a shift to social accumulation – delivered through land tax.

Later chapters detail pragmatic steps towards such social accumulation. In rural areas, for example, determined individuals and communities find ways to escape or sidestep the constraints imposed by private appropriation of rent from the monopoly ownership of land, which include community land trusts for housing, and larger scale community land acquisitions, particularly in Scotland – which may provide opportunities to socialise rents from new energy infrastructures. More generally, locally operated social enterprises may secure food provision outside the existing capitalist structures of private landownership, with new opportunities presented by community tech platforms to connect local produce and consumers, bypassing national distribution channels. A range of similar commoning initiatives, affecting heritage assets and other utilities and infrastructures, may provide the means of advancing public benefit and preventing the siphoning off of surplus value.

Much of this book is focused on practicable steps to address the land and rent norms of capitalist production, through commoning and de-commodification. But in [Part IV](#), we turn to look at the structural reforms that might liberate rural communities from the stranglehold of land enclosure. There is already a rich literature on this topic. Land reform, starting with a compulsory and open access register of landownership, would help expose the scale of private accumulation. In areas accommodating large landed estates, created through historic mechanisms of enclosure, allowing communities or individuals to buy smaller plots at existing use value would create new opportunities for alternative land use. One could call this a legislative right of de-enclosure or re-commoning. Only significant change to the current pattern of landownership described by Shrubsole (2020) could realistically disrupt current capitalist social relations, although as is shown in [Chapter 19](#), private redistributions of land often gravitate back to land concentration at a later date.

But such concentration could be challenged through tax reform that aimed to raise more tax from land and the housing built upon it. Additional taxes on second homes and holiday lets – vehicles for securing beneficial interest from land and economic rents but that restrict wider access to homes – could challenge that concentration by reducing beneficial interest and removing those rents, potentially making homes available to those families who need them. Broader taxes on land value would tend to free rural workers and businesses from the tax burden without increasing the burden on farms; the greater part of that burden would fall on urban areas with their higher land values (farmland values are many multiples less than commercial and residential values,

concentrated in towns and cities). However, land value tax (discussed in [Chapter 21](#)), would promote productive use over holding land for speculation, therefore supporting more equitable patterns of housing supply and consumption, and economic activity.

In less developed economies, primarily in the Majority World, threats to traditional livelihoods by corporations encroaching on the natural habitat and sources of nourishment for people without formal title to land is a critical problem. Avoidance of enclosure and displacement, perhaps through the retention and promotion of customary tenure (see [Chapter 5](#)), is likely to be key to future prosperity, as will engagement with the wider global economy ([Castellanos-Navarrete and Jansen, 2015](#); [Hall et al., 2015](#)), without succumbing to its tendency to enclose and extract rent for private rather than social accumulation. There may be a ‘middle way’ for the countrysides of less developed economies, avoiding outright capitalist accumulation by dispossession ([Harvey, 2005](#)) and engaging with a localised development narrative that enhances prosperity for otherwise marginal communities.

Initiatives to share land rents with ‘First Nation’ communities may provide one pathway towards postcapitalism in countries shaped by a history of colonialism and settler domination, with this issue picked up in [Chapter 11](#), but the case *everywhere* for socialising rent is strong. Rent, as we have shown in this chapter, is a surplus value created *on land by communities*. The manner of its extraction today, often through financial channels, transfers wealth to distant investors and leaves rural communities with the critical challenges of poverty, acute income and wealth inequality, and failing public services.

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# 3

## From enclosure to commoning

Andre Pusey

### Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to uncover and explore the diverse ways in which practices of commoning are emerging and enabling new postcapitalist possibilities to evolve. First, it explores the reconceptualisation of primitive accumulation and processes of capitalist enclosure as recurrent and ongoing, rather than historical, discussing how new regimes of accumulation are expanding processes of commodification and capture of human ‘doing’. Second, it discusses how these processes are resisted with acts of collective reappropriation and social action, alongside the co-production of self-managed social goods and spaces. This section theorises these activities as forming examples of ‘commoning’ establishing part of a collective move towards the construction of the commons. Finally, the diverse ways in which processes of commoning and the production of the commons contribute towards new postcapitalist possibilities is discussed.

### Primitive accumulation and the new enclosures

Although at one time conceptualised as something relegated to the distant past, primitive accumulation and processes of enclosure have more recently been conceptualised as an ‘ongoing’ (Bonefeld, 1988) or ‘permanent’ (Bonefeld, 2001) feature of capitalist societies. New forms of enclosure have been critically interrogated across a multitude of areas from public space and housing, to seed patents and the production of knowledge (Midnight Notes Collective, 1990; Federici, 2009; Hodkinson, 2012). This section discusses this literature and the conceptualisation of processes of ongoing accumulation and the development of the ‘new’ enclosures.



Many readers will be familiar with Marx's discussion of 'so-called primitive accumulation' in volume one of *Capital*, and its evocative description of the violence central to the development of the capitalist mode of production. The term 'primitive accumulation' originates with Adam Smith (1982). Smith asserts in *The Wealth of Nations*, that 'the accumulation of stock must, in the nature of things, be previous to the division of labour' (Smith and Skinner, 1982: 371–2). 'Stock' is Smith's term for capital, and Marx is highly critical of Smith's argument, which he ascribes as playing the same role that original sin does within Christianity – that is, creating an explanation of present conditions through reference to a mythical past (Marx, 1990). Perelman (2000) argues that Smith never explains where 'stock' comes from in the first instance, simply stating 'as soon as stock has accumulated in the hands of particular persons, some of them will naturally employ it in setting to work industrious people' (Smith, 1982: 151). Thus, the bloody and violent history of enclosure and expropriation (the origins of stock) is mystified and hidden within a mysterious 'natural' equilibrium of the market presented as a transhistorical category. Perelman attributes more to this than mere faulty logic on Smith's part; instead, he sees the classical economists as part of a conscious effort to obscure the violence inherent within the transition to capitalism. For Perelman (2000: 2), the classical economists were complicit with primitive accumulation: stating that 'they strongly advocated policies that furthered the process of primitive accumulation, often through subterfuge'.

More recently, a number of scholars have made the case for primitive accumulation remaining a permanent, or recurring, feature of capitalist societies (Bonefeld et al., 1992a, 1992b, 1995; Cleaver, 2000). Werner Bonefeld (2001, 2002, 2011) has argued that not only is primitive accumulation a form of prehistory clearing the way for the emergence of capitalism, but it is also the foundation upon which capitalist social relations are constituted. In Bonefeld's view, it is a 'permanently reproduced accumulation' (2001: 1). Or as John Holloway (2005: 143) states, "primitive accumulation" is not just a feature of a bygone period, it is central to the existence of capitalism'. Again, Bonefeld is clear on this being a continuing and constitutive process:

primitive accumulation is not just a historical epoch that predates capitalist social relations and from which capital emerged. It entails, fundamentally, the constitutive presupposition through which the class antagonism between capital and labour subsists – primitive accumulation is the "foundation of capitalist reproduction" (Bonefeld, 2002: 72).

Supporting this view is Michael Perelman, who argues categorically in *The Invention of Capitalism* (2000) that primitive accumulation is not merely a historically specific phenomenon. For Perelman it ‘remains a key concept for understanding capitalism not just the particular phase of capitalism associated with the transition from feudalism, but capitalism proper. Primitive accumulation is a process that continues to this day’ (p. 37).

Others are also in broad agreement with Bonefeld and Perelman. The Retort Collective (2005: 75) views primitive accumulation as an ‘incomplete and reoccurring process’. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000: 258) concur, stating:

as we pass from modernity to postmodernity, the processes of primitive accumulation do indeed continue. Primitive accumulation is not a process that happens once and then is done with: rather, capitalist relations of production and social classes have to be reproduced continually.

Massimo De Angelis (2007) identifies the key aspect of primitive accumulation as the separation between producers and their means of production. For De Angelis (2001: 5), this concept is injected with the contradictory struggle between the limitless accumulation of capital and social struggles for ‘freedom and dignity’. In this way, we cannot only explain the recurring nature of this dispossession but also its opposite: that of an alternative to capitalism and ‘direct access of means of existence’ (2001: 5). This alternative is the production of and access to the commons. Hardt and Negri (2009: 138) concur that this is not a one-off process. Instead, it reappears and co-exists with capitalism. As neoliberalism operates through accumulation via the expropriation of the common, ‘the concept of primitive accumulation becomes an even more central analytical tool’ (Hardt and Negri, 2009: 138) – a means of analysing the parasitic nature of capitalist accumulation.

Geographers have also revisited these themes, most notably through the work of David Harvey. Harvey (2005) has discussed this permanent nature of primitive accumulation as a tactic to overcome the crisis of overproduction and termed it ‘accumulation by dispossession’. Harvey (2005: 145) argues that all the characteristics of primitive accumulation remain ‘powerfully present’ up to the present day and that some of these mechanisms ‘have been fine-tuned to play an even stronger role’ (2005: 147). However, Harvey also adds that ‘wholly new mechanisms of accumulation by dispossession have also been opened up’ (2005).

Harvey's work has influenced a growing number of other geographers, who also argue that primitive accumulation is an 'ongoing feature of capitalism rather than simply a precapitalist phenomenon' (Hartsock, 2006: 177; see also Glassman, 2006). Vasudevan et al. (2008: 1642) sketch four 'preliminary axes of investigation of the geographies of enclosure: subjectification, legal violence, the colonial present, and the politics of representation'. They identify enclosure as a 'variegated project operating across scales, from the global to the corporeal' (Vasudevan et al., 2008: 1642). They state that it is not their intention to 'offer "enclosure" as a master signifier or theoretical placeholder capable of bringing into focus the whole shape and logic of our present age. More modestly, we believe that enclosure operates – contingently, provisionally, and violently – across a range of scales, sites, and networks' (Vasudevan et al., 2008: 1642).

Glassman (2006) surveys the different schools of Marxist and post-Marxist thought that are re-approaching primitive accumulation. Building on Harvey's work, he labels these phenomena 'accumulation by "extra-economic" means' (Glassman, 2006). Glassman points out that the 'complexity that ongoing primitive accumulation, accumulation by dispossession, and dispossession by extra-economic means lend to social struggles over capitalist development seem to pose severe challenges for social movements' (Glassman, 2006: 622), something that leads Harvey (2003: 166) to suggest that it is 'hard to even imagine connections between them'.

Before Harvey developed his analysis of accumulation by dispossession, the Midnight Notes Collective proposed that a series of 'New Enclosures' were embarked upon as a tactic within capital's wider strategy of neoliberal restructuring. For the Midnight Notes Collective, these new enclosures were in part a response to the successful class struggles of an earlier period. The Midnight Notes Collective (1990: 1) suggests, therefore, that enclosures 'are not a onetime process exhausted at the dawn of capitalism, they are a regular return on the path of accumulation and a structural component of class struggle'. Retort Collective (2005: 193), in agreement with the Midnight Notes Collective argues that 'right at the heart of capitalist modernity, there has been a process of endless enclosure'.

When people engage in successful collective struggle against conditions imposed by capital, capital fights back with a new round of enclosures. Massimo De Angelis (2006: 63) has gone as far as to describe enclosure as a 'frontline of struggle'. The conceptualisation of the enclosure of the commons as a frontline of struggle provides a

productive means of connecting apparently disparate struggles ranging from intellectual copyright and patenting to land and water grabbing to corporatisation and securitisation of urban space.

Building on this analysis of the new enclosures, geographers have discussed the development of the 'new urban enclosures' accompanying the rise of neoliberal urbanism (Hodkinson, 2012). These have become associated with the increase in privatisation of public services and infrastructure, gentrification-led restructuring of city centres and inner-city housing markets, corporate takeover and intensified surveillance of public spaces, and the creation of new, privatised spaces of elite/corporate consumption governed by an increasingly illiberal social control (Pusey et al., 2011). Others have focused on resisting dispossession through alternative modalities of possession and notions of property (Blomley, 2007; Noterman, 2016), reworked David Harvey's concept of 'accumulation by dispossession' (Harvey, 2005) to study processes of enclosure through the lens of 'accumulation by urban dispossession' (Gillespie, 2016) and looked at the enclosure of knowledge and education within universities (Harvie, 2000; Federici, 2009), to name just a few.

Fundamentally this enclosure is not merely about the enclosure of space/places or collectively owned goods/resources but the capturing of meaningful social human activity – what John Holloway calls 'doing' – and transforming it into alienated and commodified labour. That is to say, the struggle against enclosure and primitive accumulation is a struggle against the capital relation and for the production of the common/s. This 'doing' and its relationship to the production of the commons will be discussed further in this chapter, but first it turns to look at the commons in all forms in more depth.

## **From dispossession to the reappropriation and co-construction of the commons**

The ongoing processes of expropriation, enclosure and accumulation discussed above have been met by innovative forms of collective production and organisation, as new forms of commons have been produced concurrently with new processes of dispossession and enclosure. This section will discuss the ways in which these examples of the commons act as a means of re/producing non-capitalist forms of self-management, as examples of collective property ownership as well as the co-production of collective goods and spaces, navigating a path in, against and beyond capitalism (Caffentzis and Federici, 2014; London Edinburgh Weekend Return Group, 2021).

For Sevilla-Buitrago (2022: 19),

The commons can [...] be defined as a set of shared material and immaterial resources, spaces and skills, as well as the institutions, organisational assets, power structures, and cooperative everyday practices and territorialities involved in their production and maintenance.

Hardt and Negri define the common as:

First of all, the common wealth of the material world—the air, the water, the fruits of the soil, and all nature’s bounty—which in classic European political texts is often claimed to be the inheritance of humanity as a whole, to be shared together. We consider the common also and more significantly those results of social production that are necessary for social interaction and further production, such as knowledges, languages, codes, information, affects, and so forth. (2009: viii)

The commons provide examples of alternative forms of social (re) production, collective property and social organisation that replace individualistic conceptions of property ownership with examples of the co-production and co-management of more collective forms of goods and production and management of spaces (Chatterton and Pusey, 2020). For De Angelis (2007: 133) we create new commons through various means, including but not limited to, occupations of land and the building of communities; by struggling against intellectual property rights; and by simply downloading and sharing music. Other examples include protest camps, self-managed social centres and anticopyright and ‘copyleft’ licences, cohousing developments, and proposals for cooperative and common universities (see, for example, Pusey, 2010; Feigenbaum et al., 2013; Pusey and Chatterton, 2016). The struggle is, therefore, not only one of ‘reclaiming the commons’ (Klein, 2001) but also of expanding and ‘circulating them’ (Dyer-Witheford, 2006). As Monty Neill et al. (1997) state: ‘in fighting ... the “new enclosures,” the working class is not seeking simply to defend what human commons remains from the past or what commons was created under variants of twentieth-century socialism, but also to reassert, redefine, and extend the commons’.

Geographers have produced a wealth of scholarship on the commons (cf. Blomley, 2007; Eizenberg, 2012; Jeffrey, McFarlane and Vasudevan, 2012; Chatterton, Featherstone and Routledge, 2013;

Bresnihan and Byrne, 2015; Bresnihan, 2016; Noterman, 2016). This scholarship has added a rich empirical study of the intricate and sometimes fragile nature of the commons. Pusey and Chatterton (2016) have looked at the co-housing project LILAC as an example of the commons. The LILAC (Low Impact Living and Community) project is a low-impact co-housing project close to the centre of Leeds in the UK. It was developed on a former school site and consists of 20 households, managed through a Mutual Ownership Society that endeavours to ensure housing affordability. The homes incorporate straw bale construction and utilise solar energy in order to reduce environmental impact. The design of the project incorporates needs for private housing alongside collective shared resources, and community is part of the design: there is a common house where members eat together twice a week. Pusey and Chatterton (2016) argue that LILAC provides an example of the commons at the institutional, interpersonal and spatial levels. It does this through the legal structure of the project as a cooperative, which embeds mutualism, through the interpersonal relations it promotes as a result of being a cooperative rather than individual owner-occupiers and lastly through the physical layout of the development, which includes shared and communal spaces alongside private housing. Tornaghi (2017) has looked at urban gardening as commons, through the decommodification and collective and cooperative production of local food. Bunce (2016) has interrogated the link between Community Land Trusts and the Urban Commons. Noterman (2016) has investigated manufactured housing cooperative communities as an example of what she terms 'differential commoning'. Others have teased out the postcapitalist potential of rural low impact living experiments, such as the Lammas eco-village in Pembrokeshire (Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010).

Sevilla-Buitrago (2022: 39–40) discusses how the enclosures of the late seventeenth century were not only a means to increase agricultural productivity of land but the productivity of those who did not rely wholly on wage labour. Through removing their access to the commons and the self-reproduction the commons enabled, processes of proletarianisation forced men, women and children to rely far more on waged work. As Ellen Meiksins Wood (2002: 108) states, 'enclosure meant not simply a physical enclosure of the land but the extinction of common and customary use rights on which many people depended for their livelihoods'. Relatedly we can see examples of social movements coalescing around the refusal of work and engaging in processes of self-valorisation and processes of commoning that helps reduce their reliance on wage work (Cunningham, 2005). Examples might include the large-scale squatting movements

in parts of Europe during the 1980s and 1990s, the uptick in itinerant lifestyles coalescing around the free festival circuit and so-called New Age Travellers culture during the same period, as well as the related commoning projects of food cooperatives, 'auto-reduction' and collective living arrangements (Katsiaficas, 2007; Kuhn and Katsiaficas, 2012; van der Steen, 2014; Vasudevan, 2017; Wates and Wolmar, 1980).

The commons are not simply shared and collectively managed 'resources' but products of human co-operation; this process of co-production forms a verb, 'commoning' (Linebaugh, 2008). Commoning is the active process whereby the commons are (re)created. Massimo De Angelis (2010: 955) states, 'there are no commons without the incessant activities of commoning, of (re)producing in common'. Peter Linebaugh (2008), a prominent historian of the commons, has done much work in uncovering the process of commoning in the (re)production of commons, including the establishment of 'common rights'. The commons and processes of commoning associated with them represent alternative social relations to capital based on collectivity, solidarity, equality and co-operation in place of rampant individualism, competition and inequality. For Chatterton, (2010: 626) 'the common is made real through the practice of commoning, which reflects, not so much a set of bounded, defensive or highly localised spatial practices, but dynamic spatial practices'. Commoning is, therefore, a relational process of co-producing the common(s) and new forms of subjectivity. It engages practitioners in forms of prefigurative politics whereby social relations, forms of organisation and in some cases ways of living are reorganised according to the more progressive and socially just ways in which commoners might hope society more generally may be reorganised in the future.

An argument often put forward in support of the enclosure of common land was that it increased agricultural efficiency, improved the land, and that if the open field system had remained in the hands of the poor, their resources would have been depleted. Garret Hardin's (1968) influential essay 'The Tragedy of the Commons' argues that each commoner wished to increase his gain regardless of the impact on others. Silvia Federici (2004: 123), has described this perspective as 'Hobbesian egoism', while E. P. Thompson (1993: 107) argued that it ignores the commoners' 'commonsense'. Importantly, Massimo De Angelis (2007: 134) states that 'Hardin forgets that there are no commons without communities' and that 'there is no enclosure of commons without at the same time the destruction and fragmentation of communities'. So at the heart of the processes of enclosure discussed previously in this chapter, we have the destruction not only of shared spaces and resources but communities and

collective networks of the poor; as George Monbiot states 'as land changes hands, so does power' (1994: np). This destruction of communities and transfer of wealth and power from the poor to the rich is a central feature of neoliberalisation, and of Harvey's concept of 'accumulation of dispossession' (2005), and it is Federici's (2004: 123) view that Hardin's essay was one of the major texts for the drive for privatisation in the 1970s.

Relatedly, Siefkes (2009: np) states that the two traits, which the commons of the past and the present share, are that 'commons need communities (without sufficiently strong communities of people willing to create, maintain and protect them, all commons would or did fall into disarray or become privatised) and that these communities make their own rules to protect and strengthen the commons'. Sevilla-Buitrago (2022: 19) attests that the commons are contested spaces requiring ongoing compromise and negotiation and even at times forms of regulation. The commons are produced by the communities that utilise them. These communities can be made up of urban squatters (Vasudevan, 2015) or urban gardeners (Ginn and Eduardo, 2018; Müller, 2017), inhabitants of low impact rural communities (Pickerell and Maxey, 2009), or an online network of free software advocates.

These communities engage in multifarious processes of free association that helps further facilitate the reproduction of the commons. Nick Dyer-Witheford has attempted to theorise a way the commons are re/produced that incorporates the communities central to processes of commoning, and their practices of free association. For Dyer-Witheford the voluntary association and collective endeavour at the heart of the commons are essential to the circuits of co-operation and collaboration which (re)produce the common(s). Dyer-Witheford has produced a schema for the circulation of the commons based on Marx's circuit of capital, which I will now outline.

In *Capital* Volume I, Marx (1990) illustrates how commodities are produced and sold for money, which is then used to buy more resources to produce more commodities, which are in turn then sold for more money. In Volume II of *Capital*, Marx discussed this cycle through developing a 'general formula of capital', M-C-M. This refers to the way money (M) is advanced to purchase a commodity (C) to produce new commodities, which are then sold to make more money and create a profit, creating more money (M).

The main point being made by Marx with the theory of the circulation of capital is that it becomes a self-generating process, a 'constantly revolving circle' in which every point is simultaneously one of 'departure and return'. This is the process that converts individual commodities



into what Marx termed more ‘complex and composite’ forms: an entire capitalist metabolism. In Dyer-Witheford’s (2006: np) terms ‘it is the path from capital’s molecular level to its molar manifestation’.

In Dyer-Witheford’s schema for the commons, (C) represents not a commodity, as is the case with Marx’s circuit of capital, but ‘commons’, and (A) represents ‘association’ in the place of money in Marx’s circuit. The basic formula for the circulation of the commons, according to Dyer-Witheford (2006), therefore is: A-C-A. As with Marx’s circuit of capital, this can then be elaborated as A-C . . . P . . . C’ . . . A’ . . . repeat ad infinitum. Thus, we can identify both the circulation of specific cycles of commoning and also the intersection of these with other circulations of commoning. This intersection of commons not only helps them to reinforce one another, creating a more resilient ecology of the commons, but also helps the process of increasing the capacities and potentialities of the commons. As de Peuter and Dyer-Witheford state:

The idea of the circulation of the commons proposes a systemic transformation, but starts small, with the cellular model of commons and association that is simple, even rudimentary. It then scales, at levels from the domestic to the municipal to the planetary. The totality it envisages is a multiplicitous one – a complex, composite non-capitalist society composed by an interaction of different kinds of commons with distinct, specific logics.  
(2010: 47)

This provides a useful means of theorising the reproduction and expansion of the commons, and a way of thinking about how commons-based projects and a society based on the commons might scale. Developing this elsewhere, Dyer-Witheford believes that the circulation of the common(s) points to a society beyond capitalism, stating: ‘If the cellular form of capitalism is the commodity, the cellular form of society beyond capital is the common. A commodity is a good produced for exchange, a common a good produced to be shared’ (Dyer-Witheford, 2006: np).

The strength of Dyer-Witheford’s work on the ‘circulation of the commons’ and ‘commonism’ is that it creates a useful attempt to theorise the reproduction of the common(s) and how we might base an alternative to capitalist society on the common(s).

Chatterton (2016: 407) argues, ‘we should not position the common as something always subjugated or in response to the more dynamic practices of capital accumulation’. The common is ‘full of productive moments of resistance that create new vocabularies,

solidarities, social and spatial practices and relations and repertoires of resistance' (Chatterton, 2016: 407), as this volume attests. Importantly, these processes of collective (common) struggle are constituent: they are productive of other values and methods of self-organisation and social relationships. Capital acts to enclose, destroy and co-opt the common(s) when they become a potential limit to its increased circulation and valorisation. As such, the politics of the commons points to hopeful futures with a strong focus on autonomous forms of social reproduction (Dinerstein and Pitts, 2018), popular economies and autogestion (Gray, 2018). The commons therefore represent an example of what it might mean to be within, against and beyond capitalism. Commons and processes of the commoning are not outside of capitalism but are part of a process of acting collectively within and against the status quo in order to begin the urgent process of constructing postcapitalist futures. In the next section, this chapter turns to the relationship between the commons and the emergence of postcapitalism.

## Re/producing the commons

Discussion of the commons and commoning have increasingly begun to be conceptualised under the moniker of 'postcapitalism' (Gibson-Graham, Cameron and Healy, 2016; De Angelis, 2017; Srnicek, and Williams, 2019; Chatterton and Pusey, 2020). This section will explore the diverse ways in which practices of commoning are emerging, enabling new postcapitalist possibilities to evolve and the ways in which they indicate possible postcapitalist futures. It discusses the prefigurative practices of the commons and the way in which they attempt to experiment with new forms of social relations and organisation that can be utilised in the present to prefigure possible postcapitalist futures.

There is a renewed interest in conceptualisations of postcapitalism, originating in the midst of the 2008 economic crisis (Chatterton and Pusey, 2020). Postcapitalism looks to future forms of economy, politics and ways of organising society. It is not a single perspective but a heterogeneous set of approaches. As such, it is not a roadmap or blueprint or clearly delineated perspective, but instead an emerging discussion, a 'postcapitalist desire' (Fisher, 2020). Key considerations of the work on postcapitalist futures have included the commons, automation of work and the adoption of a universal basic income. However, it can be noted that there has been a distinct lack of work focusing on rural postcapitalist contexts, which is something the work within this volume seeks to address.

With this renewed interest there is a growing literature on postcapitalism and postcapitalist futures (Gibson-Graham, et al., 2016; Mason, 2015; Srnicek and Williams, 2015; De Angelis, 2017; Massumi, 2018; Schmid, 2019; Fishwick and Kiersey, 2021; Nelson, 2023; Sutherland, 2023). For example, many have become increasingly interested in the plethora of alternative economic experiments created in order to decentre, subvert or provide an alternative to the capitalist economy (North and Huber, 2004; Cornwell, 2012; North, 2014). In their landmark book, *A Postcapitalist Politics*, Gibson-Graham (2006) outline a series of examples that move us towards a clearer understanding of the plurality of 'postcapitalist' economic practices. More recently, Mason (2015) has argued that transformations in technology are ushering in new possibilities for a post-work postcapitalist world. Similarly, Srnicek and Williams (2015) point to Universal Basic Income and automation as a means of reducing work and creating a postcapitalist future. While Chatterton (2016: 404) suggests that the term postcapitalism is an attempt to 'reinvigorate and reinvent the revolutionary process away from older top-down, elite-led models of change'.

The commons have increasingly been seen as central to the co-construction of postcapitalist futures (see Chatterton, 2016; Gibson-Graham et al., 2016; Dallyn and Frenzel, 2021; Papadimitropoulos, 2021). In particular, there has been increasing discussion of the importance of the 'urban commons' (Gidwani and Baviskar, 2011) in not only resisting urban enclosure (Lee and Webster, 2006; Hodkinson, 2012) but also providing alternative spaces of postcapitalist possibility (Eizenberg, 2012; Chatterton, 2016; Gibson-Graham, Cameron and Healey, 2016). Dinerstein, Pitts and Taylor (2016) have focused positively on the role of the commons. For them, the postcapitalist vision espoused by Srnicek and Williams, based on automation and UBI, 'consolidates capitalism'. In place of a so-called 'fully automated communism' (Bastani, 2019), Dinerstein, Pitts and Taylor (2016) argue for a 'concrete' utopia of the commons in order to create new forms of social reproduction that do not rely on us living under the domination of money, the state and value.

J. K. Gibson-Graham, in their joint work and that with others associated with the Alternative Economies approach, have discussed postcapitalism extensively, arguably formulating the most comprehensive understanding of the term, before more recent usage. Their work has developed a feminist critique of 'capitalocentrism' and highlighted the diverse tendencies that point beyond the capitalist present (Gibson-Graham, 2006). They provide detailed analysis of what it means to

envision, negotiate, build and enact life beyond capitalism through a postcapitalist subject that is involved in 'new practices of the self' (Gibson-Graham, 2006: xxvii).

The Alternative Economies approach has consistently produced research that provides multitudinous examples that counter both the neoliberal narrative that there are no alternatives, and Marxist approaches that, arguably, theorise capital in an overly totalising manner. Gibson-Graham (and Roelvink, 2011; Gibson-Graham, Cameron and Healy, 2013). Gibson-Graham (1996) have strongly argued that many anti-capitalists, including Marxist geographers, have produced capital-centric accounts of the world that ignore, or obscure, the multitude of economic practices they argue exist concurrently with the capitalist economy. It is argued that this totalisation of capitalism both reduces our agency and eclipses the diversity of everyday economic activity that neither originates nor contributes towards capitalist economies. However, for Gibson-Graham et al. the discussion on the commons has also been drawn into a capital-centric discourse which places capital and its attempts to enclose the commons at the 'gravitational centre of meaning-making' (Gibson-Graham, Cameron and Healy, 2016). The authors argue that instead of focusing on capital's ongoing enclosure of the commons, increased commodification of life and reliance on common forms of production we should instead focus on commoning as a social process. They view the practice of commoning as part of a postcapitalist politics that has the potential to uncover commoning-communities that are 'more than human'.

For Dallyn and Frenzel (2021: 865) 'the term *postcapitalist commons* adds an important additional nuance' to discussion of the commons since it indicates their status as being simultaneously in and against capitalism. This term can help when distinguishing between different types of commons, since a number of writers have pointed to the contested and duplicitous nature of the commons (Caffentzis, 2010).

Chatterton (2016) offers a useful synthesis between two distinct areas of academic debate, socio-technical transition studies and work on postcapitalism, invoking the idea of the urban commons as a means to explore the geographies of postcapitalist transition. One of the strengths of this work is its grounding in concrete experiments in urban commoning and practices of postcapitalist transition, using the LILAC co-housing project, which Chatterton is a founder member of, as an example. Chatterton attempts to radicalise the work on transitioning through grounding it in an appeal to postcapitalist futures, mobilised through a geography of the urban commons.

Urban commons such as the LILAC project do provide powerful prefigurative projects with which to challenge the dominant neoliberal hegemony. They break with what Fisher (2022) terms ‘capitalist realism’, and these projects create alternative imaginaries which are important in doing this. They allow the commoners who are part of these commons-communities to engage in a prefigurative practice that mitigates the individualising and isolating tendencies of capitalism and enables the commoners to develop critical social tools for navigating collective initiatives that are by their nature fraught with the damage and contradictions that are endemic when acting within and against in order to build a beyond the present catastrophic state of things.

The focus by some writers of the commons has been (implicitly or explicitly) on the need for the open sharing of common goods – for example, through free access to knowledge and access to common pool resources (Ostrom, 2002). However, Neary and Winn (2012) have argued that a focus on sharing, co-operation and use values is not enough to enable a break with capitalist domination, because capitalist domination is based on the production of value as a uniquely capitalist social relationship of production. Any break with the present and construction of a commonist future therefore would require a conceptualisation of the commons, not simply as a pre-existing social wealth to defend from enclosure but a commonwealth to be produced through new forms of social relations and production.

Utilising Holloway’s conception of ‘doing’ alongside processes of commoning and the circulation of the (postcapitalist) commons might be a productive way of thinking through some of these problems. One of the strengths of John Holloway’s (2010) work is his notion of ‘doing’ as an attempt to theorise a form of non-alienated social activity which breaks with the domination of abstract labour, creating ‘cracks’ in capitalism. Central to Holloway’s method of cracking capitalism is the idea of ‘doing’ as opposed to abstract labour: ‘[t]he argument is simple. We make capitalism: we must stop making it and do something else. This means setting doing against abstract labour: this we must, can and already do’ (2010: 109). This ‘doing’ ties the creation of our (cracks in capitalism) to our (re)production and the class relation. ‘Doing’, Holloway tells us, is activity that is not determined by others, or activity that is potentially self-determined (2010: 84) and ‘the story of the cracks is the story of a doing that does not fit into a world dominated by labour’. Despite the often bleak picture of the domination of capital over our lives, Holloway suggests that ‘our doing is not totally subsumed into abstract labour’ (2010: 97). This ‘doing’

then forms an excess. It exceeds the parameters of the social relations dominated by value and ‘the crack is the revolt of doing against labour’ (2010: 85).

This conception of doing, of this excess, enables to think of commoning and commons as cracks in capitalism producing new postcapitalist spaces of co-production and collective endeavour but also as a means of experimenting with forms of ‘doing’ that act in, against and beyond (in excess) of capitalism, pointing towards postcapitalist futures.

## Conclusion

This chapter first established that a number of writers have strongly argued that processes of primitive accumulation and enclosure are ongoing and constitutive elements of capitalism. Capitalism is constantly made and remade, and with it processes of accumulation, dispossession and enclosure of the commons continue. New areas of life and human creativity are captured within capitals circuit, and new forms of collective creativity and resistance attempt to evade and act in excess of it.

This chapter then explored the commons. One of the strengths of the discussion of the commons is its theorisation of spaces, goods and property that provide an alternative to capitalist social reproduction and their potentials to transition to a postcapitalist future. The commons are not totally outside of capitalism but within and against it, in order to push towards a beyond.

By correlating his concept of ‘cracks’ with ‘doing’, Holloway grounds the ‘other relations’ that are constitutive of these cracks with the refusal of abstract labour and value, and therefore the negation of the substance of capital. By attaching his conceptualisation of ‘cracks’ in capitalism with ‘doing’, and therefore social production, Holloway ensures the spaces of negation and creation that form these cracks are well situated to refuse the means of our subjugation.

This chapter established that there is a growing interest in postcapitalist futures, and the postcapitalist commons have a central role to play in this. The emerging literature on postcapitalist geographies continues to intersect and reinvigorate the work on the commons. This is an urgent task as we seek to establish a way of being and doing that might provide an exodus from the death cult of the status quo.

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## 4

# Postcapitalist trajectories, beyond land

Menelaos Gkartzios

## Introduction

Chatterton and Pusey (2020: 41–2) conceive a postcapitalist landscape comprising wider social and spatial formations that should ‘inhibit the accumulation of surplus value, individualisation, commodification and enclosure, as well as build commons, socially useful production and doing’. While control over land and rent is central to capitalism and postcapitalism, there is a need to look beyond land questions to the futures that might be built on the socialisation of rent and on a departure from globalised capitalist enterprise. The countryside inevitably operates in an increasingly interconnected world – as suggested by the notion of the ‘globalised countryside’ with new emergent politics of place framing its development trajectories (Woods, 2006, 2007) – but I am keen to observe here the ways that postcapitalism frames new imaginations and practices of ‘commoning’ that further challenge inequalities in capitalist societies (Gibson-Graham et al., 2016). Globalisation and capitalist penetration have resulted in hybrid ruralities (Lin et al., 2016), which have been shaped by similar forces, yet have resulted in highly differentiated and complex rural places (a globally ‘differentiated countryside’, see also Murdoch et al., 2003): competitive, extrovert, consumptive, and at the same time wiped out and homogenised by capital domination and neoliberal rationalities (Tonts and Horsley, 2019). So, paradoxically perhaps, while the countryside is under stress and associated with multiple and ongoing crises (Woods, 2023), it also represents sites of resistance and social innovation (Bock, 2016).

In this context of plural rurals, it is critical to understand postcapitalism as a transition that addresses plenty of intersectional inequalities and exclusions that are generated within capitalism, specifically beyond land questions. Afterall, the process of commoning refers not only to material, natural resources, but also to socio-spatial processes (a commoning assemblage including also institutions and grass-roots movements) resulting in new solidarities and ethics of care for place that can work within and against capitalism (Chatterton, 2016; Gibson-Graham et al., 2016). We can think of what local or community control of assets (material and non-material) might look like, how resources could be redistributed and to whom, as well as how people work and live their lives in rural areas, but also engage in practices of commoning beyond human activities. As argued by Chizu Sato et al. in Chapter 10, commoning does not only refer to ownership of local assets or means of production. We can also imagine what values frame rural development paradigms – beyond economic commodification and individual capital accumulation – and how these can signal different trajectories that prioritise community well-being. This would suggest a view of the postcapitalist countryside as closely aligned with Massey’s (1991) ‘global sense of place’, a view that focuses on the challenges of rural places to embrace globalisation and their positioning in a networked world, while resisting the homogeneity, commodification and depletion of their capital resources (see also Gkartzios et al., 2022).

The purpose of this chapter, therefore, is to showcase the variety of postcapitalist trajectories beyond land, enclosure and associated exclusions, focusing on ‘building commons, socially useful production and doing’ (Chatterton and Pusey, 2020: 476). This purpose is achieved through a review of the literature focused on the transition away from capitalism and towards the commoning of practices as already discussed in Chapter 1. The chapter draws from that literature, reflecting on postcapitalist futures linked to community stewardship over essential resources including housing and community infrastructure. It is also considered how postcapitalist practices can develop within capitalist globalisation and persistent neoliberalism. Rather than an apocalyptic end of capitalism, as Chatterton and Pickerill argue, postcapitalism co-exists with capitalism and is evidenced in everyday practices:

Just as capitalist social relations are reproduced at an everyday level, so too ordinary everyday practices can be generative of anti- and post-capitalisms. Post-capitalism, then, is not an end point, some universal sister–brother-hood of human perfection waiting over the

hill. It is reconceptualisations such as these that make post-capitalist practice mundane, but also exciting, feasible and powerful. (2010: 488)

As such, postcapitalist trajectories are extremely diverse and full of contradictions (in the way, for example, they operate within capitalist market transactions and forces; see also [Holloway, 2010](#)). Yet, they all demonstrate a commitment to rethink the present rural condition differently, perhaps imagining a ‘better countryside’ ([Shucksmith, 2018](#)) associated with Chatterton and Pusey’s ‘useful production and doing’ or Massey’s (1991) ‘global sense of place’. This involves practices and values, based sometimes on activism ‘where people express contradictory visions, as well as live life despite, but nonetheless beyond, capitalism’ ([Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010: 476](#)). The chapter’s axiom, therefore, is that such a countryside is possible – or, more appropriately, countrysides, given their global differentiation – and our mission is to mobilise resources, both within and outside the rural locality (which frames ‘neo-endogenous rural development’ thinking, [Gkartzios and Lowe, 2019](#)) towards their realisation. The notion of the ‘globalised countryside’ discussed earlier is important and undoubtedly a profound ongoing condition generating many challenges for rural areas. As such, the postcapitalist countryside is inherently global and networked, while operating with a different set of principles, for example challenging and disrupting ‘intense individualism, corrosive consumerism and financial austerity’ ([Chatterton, 2016: 404](#)).

But how might such countrysides be realised? And, more critically, what might constitute ‘socially useful production and doing’ particularly in a post-productivist, multifunctional and globalised rural context? Drawing on Chatterton and Pickerill (2010), what actions, imaginations, policies and identities embrace postcapitalism? Inherent in this discussion is that such actions and imaginations are trapped within ‘capitalist ways of doing things’ ([Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010: 488](#)) or what Tom Moore in [Chapter 16](#) frames as ‘postcapitalist agitation’. However, while pan-national forms of capitalism will survive recent geo-political upheavals, the premise of this chapter, and of the book, is that opportunities will arise for ‘local resets’ that present new possibilities to re-shore and localise economies and cultures, creating different patterns of development, while remaining global and extrovert. As such, postcapitalist transitions are presented in this chapter through various examples, which conceptualise postcapitalist practice as both ordinary and pragmatic.

## Axiom: the ‘good countryside’ is postcapitalist

I discuss here examples of postcapitalism in rural areas, moving further from land questions, through the postcapitalist claims of the ‘good countryside’ as introduced by Mark Shucksmith (2018), drawing on parallel ideas of the ‘good city’ (Amin, 2006). For Shucksmith, the good countryside is a way to imagine alternative futures, a *better* countryside – moving beyond the pastoral fetishisation of rural areas usually discussed by the hegemonic narrative of the ‘rural idyll’ – by articulating plural visions and practices, particularly as regards the governance of rural places, that result in more socially just rural areas. It is argued that such visions of the ‘good countryside’ and its four registers (that is, repair, relatedness, rights and re-enchantment) can be rooted in postcapitalist transitions too. Below each of the registers of the good countryside is presented, discussing what a postcapitalist transition might be suggesting.

### Repair

The concept of *repair* focuses on the maintenance of physical infrastructure which is also critical for social networks, institutional capacity and community well-being. Shucksmith (2018) cautions that the rural literature tends to prioritise the maintenance of natural ecosystems over physical or social infrastructure, in a similar way perhaps that environmental interpretations of sustainability in policymaking tend to eclipse other dimensions of sustainability aligned with social justice and well-being (Sturzaker and Shucksmith, 2011). There are clear parallels here between repairing physical infrastructure with what Gkartzios et al. (2022) name built (rural) capital, embracing all such material assets (for example, means of transportation and connectivity, housing and so on) and the ways these infrastructures extend and are interconnected with ‘social infrastructure’ (for example, rural service provision), ‘economic infrastructure’ (for example, places of work) and ‘green infrastructure’ (for example, upstream nature-based solutions).

The rural context here can say so much about *other* ways of owning and governing such infrastructure. Much of the rural literature, for example, has discussed the preoccupation of early models of rural development with physical infrastructures (a development model discussed as exogenous, see also Lowe et al., 1995; Gkartzios and Scott, 2014), criticised widely because of its lack of rural contextualisation and its top-down implementation. While in the developed world the exogenous model led to improved physical infrastructure (for example, in

transportation or agricultural production, Woods, 2005), at the same time neoliberal austerity and lack of local institutional capacity has in many cases undermined the provision of many services in rural areas. Various closures of rural services are commonly reported in academic and policy literature including closures of: village shops due to competition with larger retail food chains (for example, Amcoff et al., 2011); schools due to economic rationality (for example, Lehtonen, 2021); local pubs due to the rise of chain pubs and changes in the entertainment experience (for example, Cabras, 2011); and rural hospitals due to financial constraints (Miller et al., 2021). At the same time advances in transportation promised by earlier exogenous models of rural development are set for a step back: rural public transportation levels are in decline (for example, Gray et al., 2006), rural train closures are endemic (for example, Gray and Crichton, 2014), while in other instances the recovery/maintenance of rural rail lines is completely abandoned (for example, following the Tohoku earthquake in rural northwestern Japan, existing rural and regional train lines that were severely damaged were never restored, see also Ichinose, 2012). Digital infrastructure remains problematic in many rural areas in the Global North, a situation usually discussed as ‘the digital divide’ (Warren, 2007), which creates issues both for rural enterprises and also for the social inclusion of rural residents (Tiwasing et al., 2022). These examples demonstrate a failure to repair, although at the same time there is a growth of various bottom-up solutions to such infrastructure problems that resemble the notion of ‘commoning’ implied by postcapitalism.

Regarding housing provision, the literature has explored potential pathways to affordable housing and, more generally, non-market alternatives in housing provision, in an increasingly competitive context for rural areas (see, for example, Brooks, 2022 about the US; Satsangi et al., 2010 about the UK). Increased unaffordability of housing relates to access to land, increased housing financialisation and processes of counterurbanisation coupled with restrictions in housing supply, particularly in areas that are deemed more environmentally attractive, further adding to their socio-spatial exclusion (Gallent and Scott, 2019). Various proposals can be seen in the context of postcapitalism here, for example the creation of community land trusts, which are community-led nonprofit organisations that aim to provide affordable rural housing through commoning of land (see also Moore, 2019, 2021; and Chapter 16 in this collection).

Drawing on the examples mentioned earlier, other cases of commoning assets in the literature (see also Aiken et al., 2008) refer, for example, to community retail shops (see Calderwood and Davies,



2013). These are local shops that are owned and managed by the rural community, in the face of widespread closures of privately owned shops. The research by Calderwood and Davies (2013) in the UK highlights the impact of such social enterprises feeding into an improved sense of community as well as their challenges to remain financially viable. Furthermore, the research also highlights that such avenues usually require extra-local capital in terms of planning and managing the shops (which points to aspects of neo-endogenous rural development discussed later in the chapter), without which many shops would face closure. Community ownership of rural pubs has been explored through the creation of cooperatives which buy (and/or renovate) pubs for the benefit of the community (Cabras, 2011), emphasising again the broader social role of rural pubs (Markham and Bosworth, 2016). Cabras (2011), drawing on the case of Industrial and Establishment Societies in England, argues that these cooperatives present a viable alternative to private entrepreneurship, with positive implications for the community regarding aspects of engagement and social networking, although conflicts regarding the future of these pubs are also reported. Community solutions to broadband addressing the digital divide have also been discussed in the literature such as by Ashmore et al. (2017) drawing on locally led social enterprises that develop broadband infrastructure in rural Scotland, and Gkartzios et al. (2022) on voluntary support in rural Finland. Again, the research by Ashmore et al. (2017) exhibits positive examples with contributions to local identity and experiences of commoning, albeit with persistent problems in the geography of such enterprises picking up on the privilege of selective communities with certain skills to pursue such avenues. Similarly, regarding transport services in rural areas, various research projects have pointed to the growth of community transport schemes, although these appear again patchy and unlikely to meet the demands of the wider rural population (Gray et al., 2006; Rau and Hennessy, 2009).

Many of the processes of repairing rural infrastructure through community ownership of local assets rest on leadership, networks and social enterprises as ways to unpack Chatterton and Pusey's (2020) 'useful production and doing'. The broader institutional and legislative context is crucial here regarding such practices of community ownership. Some of the examples reported here are set in the context of the England's 2011 Localism Act, which has facilitated the community ownership of local assets. However, this approach to localism in a context of fiscal austerity has been fiercely critiqued for the ways it deepens neoliberalism and contributes to rural spatial inequalities (Shucksmith et al., 2021).

Indeed, while the literature examines useful examples of rural social enterprises (see also [Chapter 13](#)), most studies also point to the need for external (and, critically, state) investment/support for such social enterprises to operate as well as problems of uneven responses from the rural community perspective: while some communities will have social and human capital to organise, buy and manage local assets on their own, many, and in fact the ones that have less power and capital, will fall even further behind (see also [Satsangi et al., 2010](#); [Skerratt, 2011](#)). [Hobson et al. \(2019\)](#) discuss this contradiction also as the difference between a neoliberal ‘forced responsabilisation’ resulting from state disinvestment in managing assets of community importance, and a more progressive ‘collective responsibility’ for communities to organise local assets on their own terms in order to resist neoliberalism. This suggests that while commoning practices such as those described above are possible, their geography is highly uneven and their postcapitalist problematisation requires careful scrutiny, especially in austerity contexts.

## Relatedness

For Shucksmith, *relatedness*

may be understood in terms of social justice, an ethic of care to insider and outsider, so encompassing provision of welfare, education, health care and shelter as of right . . . . As in cities, relatedness must imply welcoming difference and diversity, something which is not always associated with rural communities despite their claim to neighbourliness and virtue.  
(2018: 167)

Numerous scholars have argued that inequalities have been increasing under late capitalism ([Williamson, 2006](#); [Piketty, 2014](#); [Jodhka et al., 2017](#)). [Bock et al. \(2015\)](#) also observe an increase of inequalities in the rural context following the global financial crisis and review the ways that issues around poverty and (broader) social exclusion became a focus for rural policymakers; however, with different priorities across different contexts and different interpretations regarding what social inclusion entails. More recently, debates around spatial justice have emerged in rural studies, emphasising the importance of rurality in terms of access and distribution of resources (that is, welfare, education, healthcare, housing and so on) as well as the processes that result in (un)equal social

relationships (see also [Madanipour et al., 2021](#)). For Woods (2023) rural spatial justice has five interrelated foci:

- The distribution of resources across territories;
- The right across various social groups to access and live in the countryside – a right to the ‘rural’, drawing on Lefebvre’s ‘right to the city’;
- The role of the state and elites in the production of spatial inequalities;
- The lived experience of spatial injustice – whether material or perceived;
- The articulation (and mainstreaming) of spatial justice as a model for rural development.

Within this broader context, practices and policies that promote diversity and equality are situated at the heart of relatedness ([Satsangi and Gkartziou, 2019](#)). A postcapitalist transition addresses inequalities that are embedded and generated within capitalism, including the social exclusion and unequal power dynamics experienced by various social groups in the countryside. Indeed, much research in rural studies following the ‘cultural turn’ has been about examining such experiences through nuanced explorations of rural identities and subjectivities ([Clope, 2006](#)). At the same time, policy belatedly recognised the importance of context-sensitive interventions shifting away from top-down sectoral (that is, agricultural) support towards territorial and integrated area-based approaches ([Lapping and Scott, 2019](#)). Such a transition to broader (and more inclusive) rural development does not refer solely to re-allocation of services to the community but also to what services are even attempted in the first place and for whom, implying that many needs are not even recognised in rural policymaking ([Bock, 2018](#)).

Shucksmith (2012) reminds us that rural inequalities need to be framed within class analysis and certainly a large body of research has explored class dynamics in the countryside – see, for example, works from Murdoch (1995) to Meij et al. (2020). It is argued that in more industrialised countries the countryside is becoming ‘more middle class’ (notwithstanding differentiation across geography and middle-class actors, see [Urry, 1995](#)), which favours consumerist uses of the countryside, for example in the way that the urban middle classes tend to counterurbanise, further gentrifying rural spaces, or the touristification of rural places. There is a long discussion in rural scholarship about who the countryside is for ([Satsangi et al., 2010](#)) particularly as regards the

social representation of rurality, which has more recently challenged, besides class identities, the whiteness of the countryside (Holloway, 2007) or its heteronormativity (Hubbard, 2008). The research suggests that multiple inequalities are imbued in the social construction of rurality and especially in the 'rural idyll' (for example, as regards gender roles, see the classic work by Little and Austin, 1996). Satsangi and Gkartzios (2019) review a large body of literature to demonstrate the ways that identities beyond class (that is, ethnicity, gender, disability, sexuality, age and their intersections) frame persistent inequalities in the rural context.

As an example of diversity in the countryside, Gkartzios et al. (2022) review inequalities for rural LGBTQ groups in the particular context of rural Nova Scotia in Canada. Inequalities are well reported in relation to meeting this community's needs and the lack of service provisions (for example, regarding services for people living with HIV, dealing with discrimination in social and health services, lack of doctors dealing with transgender issues) as well as incidents of homophobia, despite the growing visibility of LGBTQ groups and the queering of rural spaces in recent years. Rather than replicating the urban-rural narrative as regards those experiences, the research has also demonstrated that homophobia is as prevalent in the countryside as in the city, while some rural born LGBTQ people found it difficult to connect with metropolitan LGBTQ communities and lifestyles, contrary to the acceptance imagined for LGBTQ people in the metropolis (see, for example, Baker, 2016). Such articulations in research are important because they also challenge the exclusive association of LGBTQ living with urban contexts – a preoccupation sometimes discussed as metronormative (Halberstam, 2005), feeding into the broader urban-rural binary that in many cases undermines the rural as an inclusive space for LGBTQ communities.

The LGBTQ movement has made significant progress in recent decades in the Global North, although experiences of LGBTQ injustices are commonly reported (Goh, 2018). Undoubtedly, we need more research on LGBTQ people and the lives they live beyond the metropolis (Stone, 2018). But what could a postcapitalist transition offer to relatedness if those shifts towards inclusion and acceptance are already taking place? After all, many LGBTQ spaces have opened up and proliferated within advanced capitalism (Sears, 2005). Without undermining the importance of understanding the needs of such social groups in the rural context – and many authors have argued that addressing inequalities is selective in rural policymaking (Bock, 2018) or driven by heteronormative assumptions (Doan, 2011) – a postcapitalist transition can move even

further. In line with feminist scholarship, postcapitalism can challenge the commodification of such identities within capitalist and neoliberal narratives of development – as has been the case for example in the gentrified ‘gay village’ (see also [Binnie and Skeggs, 2004](#)) or through the commercialisation and corporate sponsorship of pride events (see [McCartan, 2022](#)). For [Sears \(2005\)](#) it is the queer experience itself that is commodified and captured within capitalist social relations, and as such has distorted LGBTQ communities:

a person becomes visible as ‘queer’ only through the deployment of particular market goods and services. Others are invisible, either because they are literally left outside the door (for example, because they cannot afford the cover charge) or because they cannot look ‘gay’ or ‘lesbian’ if they are old, fat, skinny, transgendered, racialized, stigmatised as disabled or ill, or obviously poor.  
([Sears, 2005](#): 108)

As such a postcapitalist transition does not merely nurture policies of inclusion and diversity in the rural context. It also frames a different set of values and objectives, a commoning of struggles (see also [Chapter 10](#)), about how experiences of gender, sexuality and other identities intersect with rurality and place-making, resisting not only the reproduction of such inequalities but also the commodification of minority identities, which masks intersectional inequalities and privileges within those identities.

## Rights

The register of ‘rights’ concerns governance, the right to participate in the public realm, and in the rural context is associated with ‘literatures on rural disadvantage, exclusion, participation, citizenship, governance and power’ ([Shucksmith, 2018](#): 167). The scholarship on rural governance and its shifts is extensive and not the purpose of this chapter. Furthermore, interpretations of these terms, although helpful for a postcapitalist vision, are not consistent either in scholarship or policy practice. [Shortall \(2008: 451\)](#) argues that while social inclusion and civic engagement are not motivated by making profit, their interpretation in policy circles is in many cases insufficient to make them a ‘realistic policy objective’. However, it is worth remembering that rural development policy (particularly in Europe but not exclusively) has revolutionised forms of bottom-up rural development, drawing on new governance models and platforms

for participation based on active citizenship and the mobilisation of networks between local and non-local stakeholders for the benefit of rural areas (sometimes styled as neo-endogenous or networked rural development, see [Gkartzios and Lowe, 2019](#)). An example in rural policy literature that is often used to articulate enhanced and bottom-up rural governance is the European Union's LEADER programme (for reviews see [Ray, 1997, 2000](#); [Shucksmith et al., 2021](#)). Such programmes challenged previous exogenous models of rural development (as mentioned earlier), by mobilising various stakeholders to work in partnership in favour of rural development but always emphasising the different ways that local resources – both tangible and intangible – can frame sustainable and inevitably differentiated patterns of place-based development (see also [Gkartzios et al., 2022](#)).

While, in theory, this represented a new and exciting shift of governance in line with the rural rights registry, on the other hand, the implementation of LEADER has also been criticised. Drawing on a case study in the north of England, [Shucksmith et al. \(2021\)](#) suggest that LEADER operates within hierarchical forms of governance – a type of top-down control encapsulated as 'government at distance' – obscuring the ability of the local partnership to deploy local-based capitals and knowledge. Similar concerns have been expressed in the literature by other authors too in various contexts, regarding the ability of LEADER to realise its 'neo-endogenous' ambition within broader administrative and political barriers (for example, [Esparcia Perez, 2000](#); [Marquardt et al., 2012](#); [Bosworth et al., 2016](#); [Navarro et al., 2016](#)).

Furthermore, the geography of rural capital unevenness (spatial variation and differences in all forms of capitals that 'make' rural areas) produces very different outcomes for rural areas. To simply argue that bottom-up responses drawing on enhanced governance and active participation will work for all rural places is questionable. The ideal mix of top-down and bottom-up intervention will always depend on local context, including the forms of place-based capitals in the countryside, and the positionality of rural actors within wider regional and global policy networks ([Gkartzios et al., 2022](#)). This puts the dialectic between top-down and bottom-up intervention at the heart of postcapitalism, accepting that the notion of 'self-help resilience' can be a destructive and neoliberal narrative associated with reduction of services (for example: [Lundgren and Nilsson, 2023](#)). However, resilience can also be a transformative experience drawing on activism, togetherness and an ethic of care for rural place. [Imperiale and Vanclay \(2016\)](#) describe this community resilience and the ability of a rural community to

self-organise in the face of a disaster (the 2009 earthquake in L'Aquila, Italy). Specifically, the authors describe how this resilience was expressed by local people, suggesting a commoning of the problems experienced at the time:

an overriding sense of responsibility to help others; the strong feeling of experiencing empathy for others; the solidarity that emerged from sharing sorrow and pain; the immediate concern about the wellbeing of the elderly and children (irrespective of who they were), and the need to collectively care for them; the obviousness of sharing resources no matter how limited; and the joy of cooperation in doing collective tasks, even in the face of tragedy. (Imperiale and Vanclay, 2016: 208)

An opportunity for a postcapitalist transition can be located in the context of managing the COVID-19 pandemic in Spain, as summarised by Gkartzios et al. (2022). Utilising an existing LEADER-focused network across public, private and third sector organisations, during the global pandemic, the relevant actors were successfully mobilised, beyond their original mission, in order to: organise a volunteer-led programme to support the manufacturing and distribution of homemade masks and the disinfection of community areas; develop a 'solidarity campaign' to support isolated residents, distribute food and promote digital communication skills; and plan the recovery of the area creating protocols regarding the return to work, launching a safe tourism programme and supporting the digital development of local business (see also ENRD, 2020). The project would not have materialised without volunteers, but again those volunteers would not have been able to coordinate their actions without the existing structure of a local-based network that was able to act and re-act in the face of a global health crisis. There is no available research regarding the underpinning of the values of the volunteers and the actors in the broader network in the particular case study, but the commitment to place exhibited by the volunteers – or, in thinking with Chatterton and Pusey, their 'useful doing' – as well as the ability of the existing network to refocus attention, energy and resources, resembles a process of commoning, creating spaces of resistance and transformative resilience (see also Scott, 2013) beyond capitalist thinking and individualisation.

## Re-enchantment

For Shucksmith (2018), re-enchantment refers to the celebration of rural culture (be it festivals, libraries, cafés, village halls, place-based traditions and ways of living, and so on). In the context of place-based capitals as presented by Gkartzios et al. (2022), re-enchantment relates to rural socio-cultural capital and the emergence of neo-endogenous approaches to rural development that tend to valorise cultural assets as part of territorial development (Ray, 2001; see, for example, Kneafsey, 2001; Tregear et al., 2007). The importance of a postcapitalist transition and the dangers of destroying or depleting such capitals matters due to the commodification of cultural capital within neoliberal narratives of development (a ‘capitalist gaze’ that brands rurality as commodity, see also Fløysand and Jakobsen, 2007), but also because those spaces that are associated with rural cultures perform multiple functions in the rural context – they ‘make’ the community (Liepins, 2000). Furthermore, it is worth remembering that while the countryside is often attached to conservative and populist discourses (Mamonova and Franquesa, 2020; Van der Ploeg, 2020), rural cultures can also be attached to radical and anti-capitalist politics – what Halfacree (2007a) discusses as ‘radical ruralities’ – which are also sometimes linked with counter-cultural mobilities (such as back to the land, see Halfacree, 2007b): ‘The radical rural locality ... revolves around environmentally embedded, decentralised and relatively self-sufficient and self-reliant living patterns’ (Halfacree, 2007a: 132).

As an inseparable element of culture, artistic practice, and especially socially engaged artistic practice within rural development frames, can support postcapitalist transitions (see also ‘postcapitalist aesthetics’ by Emily Brady in Chapter 12). The social engagement aspect refers here to artistic practice where artists focus more on working with communities than making art objects, and in that sense the focus is more on the ‘experience of art’ (that is, the process of art making, drawing on the pragmatist philosophy of John Dewey) than the artwork itself (that is, the output) (see also Gkartzios and Crawshaw, 2019). Rather than presenting artistic practice as a postcapitalist vehicle *per se*, we view here the power of collaborative or socially engaged artistic practice to common with people, ‘to make and fashion things in common’ (Gkartzios and Crawshaw, 2019: 601) in line with the notion of ‘useful doing’ (Chatterton and Pusey, 2020).

Such rural examples draw not only on large-scale international art festivals in the global countryside that use community-focused and place-based artistic practices (see an example about rural art festivals in



Japan by [Gkartzios et al., 2022](#)) but also in local and small-scale artistic interventions that disrupt top-down practices and knowledge hierarchies within rural governance structures ([Crawshaw and Gkartzios, 2016](#)). For example, within a socially engaged artist residence programme in the north of England (see also the artist residency programme in The Maltings, Berwick-upon-Tweed, Northumberland <https://www.maltingsberwick.co.uk/for-creatives/residencies/>), the theme of rural housing was explored through artistic practice. This included the creation of a community walk in a post-industrial coastal site earmarked for housing development, which generated a reflexive dialogue and the articulation of local community concerns and imaginations about the future of the particular site, for example ‘not to overdevelop’ and what kind of housing they would like to see, how the history of the site should be informing its future development trajectory, as well as problems of participation beyond the ‘usual suspects’ in formal planning consultation practices ([Gkartzios and Crawshaw, 2019](#)).

By way of a more direct link to postcapitalist transitions, Wait and Gibson (2013) examine non-market practices of creativity through the example of a women’s cooperative not-for-profit arts space in a rural town in Australia (see Spiral Gallery Co-operative in Bega, New South Wales, <https://www.spiralgallery.org.au/>). Motivated by the need for feminist arts spaces in a town that is otherwise characterised by its conservative politics and heteropatriarchy (and not as part of any significant wave of counter-cultural mobilities as discussed earlier) the cooperative has become, for more than 25 years now, a space of ‘fugitive energy’ for ‘women, migrants, artists, ‘blow-ins’ and ‘alternative life-stylers’ (2013: 78). It is a space that has allowed women artists to come together, explore feminist politics, and to develop professionally as artists. Although operating within the parameters of the capitalist system, the gallery has offered a space to explore postcapitalist possibilities:

Examples of non-market economic transactions at the Spiral Gallery include: the voluntary labour of ‘sitters’ that open the gallery six days a week; participation in an alternative currency system of ‘Sapphires’ that fosters sustainability and interdependency within the Bega Valley Local Exchange Trading System; setting of prices to enhance the sustainability of the cooperative; and ‘openings’ that foster engagement with artistic creativity.

([Wait and Gibson, 2013: 76](#))

Programmes and practices like those described briefly here are important because although they operate within a global capitalist economy, they have the ability to disrupt the narrative of creativity as a catalyst for economic development which has been criticised for its neoliberal tendencies (see, for example, [Gibson and Klocker, 2005](#); [Fleming, 2009](#)). Such practices can also offer spaces of possibility to ‘common with’ and to resist capitalist underpinnings of social transformations and/or of ways of being in the countryside. Obviously, socially engaged artistic practice in the countryside needs to emerge from the specific parameters of rural place, rather than through top-down prescription. In that context it does not necessarily need to be fixed within a postcapitalist mission but may still provoke imaginations of better rural futures which can be rooted in postcapitalist thinking and practice. Drawing on Barbara Stevani and others as part of the Artist Placement Group (APG) and their revolutionary approach to take artistic practice outside the studio and to connect it with place, institutions of governance and social relationships (encapsulated by the phrase ‘Context is half the work’; see [APG, 2016](#)), the expectation here is that the artistic practice and the engagement process with communities in rural places will create benefits on its own. This is important because it also highlights the dangers of instrumentalising artistic practice in particular development narratives and associating artistic practice with direct and linear outputs, especially in terms of development goals ([Crawshaw and Gkartzios, 2016](#); see also [Chapter 12](#)).

## Conclusion

Shucksmith’s four registers of the ‘good countryside’ are clearly interrelated: the provision and construction of affordable housing is about ‘repair’, but it also invites thinking about ‘relatedness’ and spatial justice. Experiments with socially engaged artistic practice remind us of the registry of ‘rights’ in participation and citizenship, but also of ‘re-enchantment’ in terms of the connection of artistic practice with rural culture. While possibly not exhaustive, these registers offer a critical framework to think about postcapitalist transitions too. Perhaps a fifth register can be added: the ‘*research*’ that we do in rural places, especially informing policy debates and planning actions. How do we do postcapitalist research *with* rural places (rather than *of*, implying the commitment to place exhibited by scholars interested in researching rural places)? Rather than following normative and, supposedly, unbiased

models of research design, postcapitalism and rural commoning invites more immersive and dialogic research designs, demonstrating thinking about how rural social phenomena and relationships operate or disrupt capitalism.

Such framings of inquiry in the rural context depend on inter- and trans-disciplinary research, disrupting disciplinary knowledge silos and accepting knowledge production beyond the university. Rural research needs to remain extrovert and international (pointing to a 'global sense of rurality'), relevant to people's lives, comparative (in unpacking the global and regional differentiation of rural places, Murdoch et al., 2003), but firmly situated in place, in the material and immaterial assets that 'make' rural places (networks, built infrastructure, agriculture and environmental resources, economic flows, and so on) (see Gkartzios et al., 2022). We can also think here about the broader role of decolonising rural knowledge and the role of indigenous and vernacular knowledge, practices, and even scholars in the making of postcapitalist narratives of rural development within academia and beyond (see also Gkartzios et al., 2020; Chapter 11 in this collection).

It is concluded that postcapitalist transitions are inevitably multiple and varied, but already observable within capitalist transactions and social relations. As discussed in the examples presented in this chapter, not all of them share radical or anti-capitalist values, but they all share a vision around *commoning* (of people, resources, services, practices, experiences, struggles, imaginations). More critically they share an everyday praxis, in that they are already observable in alternative models of rural development and/or rural living. Through the use of the four registers of the good countryside (Shucksmith, 2018), what I have tried to argue here is that the good countryside is inherently postcapitalist, and these registers provide a useful discursive framework, albeit not exhaustive, to understand and promote postcapitalist transitions in an increasingly differentiated and multifunctional countryside.

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Part II

## **Commoning processes and experiences**





## 5

# Postcapitalist struggles and the 'gift of land'

Franklin Obeng-Odoom

## Introduction

The laissez-faire revolution (Martin, 2012: 94) has been defended in works such as Richard Pipes' (1999) *Property and Freedom*, in Jennifer Murtazashvili and Ilia Murtazashvili's (2021) *Land, the State, and War: Property Institutions and Political Order in Afghanistan* and in Milton Friedman and Rose Friedman's (1979/1980) *Free to Choose*. At the roots of this revolution are private property rights, perfect competition and pure market exchange. 'There is no such thing as a free lunch', Milton Friedman, the foremost proponent of Chicago School economics, contended (Friedman, 1975). So, every parcel of land must be privatised and monetised, enclosed and commodified. To be secure, sustainable, efficient and effective, all land must be competitively sold in a supermarket of land.

This revolution is promoted by think tanks like the Institute for Liberty and Development. Bretton Woods institutions, including the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, also promoted this view, as do many economic consultants (for example, de Soto, 2011), and the media (Shin and Boonjubun, 2021). From this standpoint, gifts of land cannot exist, let alone flourish. If such gifts exist, they must be privatised or fail to meet their needs. The Property and Freedom Society (2024) embodies these values. But, as works such as Karl Polanyi's (2001 [1944]) *The Great Transformation* show and the introductory chapter affirms, greater enclosure of land has stirred more conflict, more uncertainty and more insecurity. So, we must go beyond this laissez-faire revolution (Martin, 2012: 94).

Sharing the gift of land has been promoted as a postcapitalist alternative since the Gilded Age. John Pullen's (2014) *Nature's Gift* documents how Henry George promoted this postcapitalist land struggle in Australia. But, surprisingly even Erik Olin Wright's (2010) *Envisioning Real Utopias* says little or nothing about postcapitalist land. The literature on the commons is also relatively thin on land. I wrote *The Commons in an Age of Uncertainty* also as an attempt to address this gap (Obeng-Odoom, 2021), but gifts of land, and related forms of postcapitalist land struggles, are misunderstood and hotly debated. Some suggest that such gifts are a distraction; others consider that these are 'stepping stones' to postcapitalist land struggles (*Good Government*, 2016, 2020; Hardy, 2016; Marten, 2016; Barnett, 2019). In general, social scientists are divided on whether gifts are motivated by altruistic, social, or market reasons (McGoey, 2016; Kesting et al., 2021). The foregoing raises the following questions: What are gifts of land? How are they made? Why are these gifts given? When created are they secure? Are gifts of land stepping stones to a transformative society or they are Trojan horse gifts?

Neither Marcel Mauss' (1954) *The Gift* nor Chris Gregory's (2015 [1989]) *Gifts and Commodities* address these questions. The more recent book, *The Gift in the Economy and Society* (Kesting et al., 2021), does not address these questions, either. While rural areas or countrysides around the world are imagined Eldorado of land gifts (Barnett, 2019), vigorous studies of rural and urban land research in planning (for example, Gkartzios et al., 2020; Scott, 2022) seem to sidestep the issue. But both in academia and the media (for example, *Good Government*, 2016, 2020; Barnett, 2019), snippets of existing studies and comments could help to sketch some answers. For that purpose, these scattered works need to be synthesised from 'texts' which can, therefore, become a 'strategic point of departure' (Veblen, 1920: 467).

Based on this methodology and drawing on these sources, I argue that gifts of land are quite common across the world. These gifts are typically given for social justice purposes, are non-reciprocal and are finalised through elaborate processes that make them secure. These land gifts are not necessarily Trojan horse gifts (but they could, indeed, be), and they are not always 'stepping stones' either; many gifts of land can provide much-needed momentum towards transformative, postcapitalist, society. These prospects are magnified, when combined with redesigning institutions to discourage 'rent theft'.

The rest of the chapter illustrates these arguments by examining 'Postcapitalist gifts in the Global South', evaluating 'Land gifts, commons and commodities in the Global North' and explicating principles 'Towards a postcapitalist future'.

## Postcapitalist gifts in the Global South

### Africa

In 2014, the Supreme Court of Ghana ruled that gifts of land are secure (see *Grace Ayeley Welbeck versus Grace Okaikai Okin*).<sup>1</sup> Because gifts of land are so common in Africa, as Lynn Khadiagala's (2002) work, focused on Uganda, shows, the Supreme Court's ruling is consequential.

N. A. Ollenu's locus classicus *Principles of Customary Land Law in Ghana* (1962) can help to clarify the nature of such gifts in Ghana. One way of obtaining land is through gifts: 'a piece of land may become stool property by means of gift' (Ollenu, 1962: 13). Again, 'the stranger may also acquire a determinable estate by gift' (1962: 72). Determinable here means land is to be possessed not formally owned as freehold, but it assures all the certainties. All the recipient has to do is to take possession of the land (Ollenu, 1962: 30, 113), while the giver must ensure that native institutions such as chieftaincy system and the system of earth priests are aware of the gift (Ollenu, 1962: 86). Publicity and transparency are key values in gifting (Ollenu, 1962: 109–10, 113). It is customary for donors to inform their families and bring them along as witnesses for the donation to be valid (Ollenu, 1962: 113). Additionally,

to constitute a valid gift there must be: (i) a particular estate or interest in the land which is to pass from the donor to the donee (ii) an acceptance of the gift by the donee in the lifetime of the donor (iii) the delivery of the land by the donor to the donee.

(Ollenu, 1962: 112–13)

The actual process of transfer can be quite ritualistic. Recipients are taken round the specific land, while stating that it is a gift they have received. Recipients also express *acceptance* by providing a token, such as a drink or cloth. None of this acceptance is *reciprocity*, which in and of itself makes gifts advocated by the 'Western left consensus' valid (see, for example, Elder-Vass, 2020). From the 'radical position', marked by its desire to shift hitherto fundamental economic and social principles, the 'proof' of a gift is *acceptance*, not *reciprocity*. 'Acceptance' must be token, what the court (in the case of *Beatrice N. Asare versus Teing and anor.*, cited in Ollenu, 1962: 113) called 'the presentation of drink, or of some small amount of money, to the donor, part of which is served to be shared among the witnesses'. The *motive* of the act of acceptance has nothing to do with reciprocity.

Instead, it is evidentiary. Thus, in customary practices and laws, after the public event of gifting, another delegation of family members, excluding the donee, visits the donor again with token items, but the motive for doing so is to verify independently that indeed the donee has been gifted land (Ollenu, 1962: 114–15). So much for the process.

Questions about tenure security need to be clarified, too. Gifts are secure. ‘A gift of land validly made is irrevocable’ (Ollenu, 1962: 115). ‘Gifts represented absolute rights, and therefore no residuary rights remained with the donor’ (Sackeyfio-Lenoch, 2014: 203). Gifts can be made to anyone or groups. The Gas of Ghana (singular ‘Ga’: a Ghanian people from Accra) gave land gifts to immigrants who founded Sabon Zongo (Pellow, 2002: 47). The Gas could also give land in other ways such as grants and inheritance (Parker, 2000: 97; Sackeyfio-Lenoch, 2014: 138–42;). The key point is that a gift of land confers ownership; not just use rights (Sackeyfio-Lenoch, 2014: 141, 203). For infants, parents or other family members can hold the land in trust for them until they are able to do so themselves (Ollenu, 1962: 126). It has been well documented (see, for example, Asante, 1975: 281–92) that gifts of land have fostered cooperative, inclusive and ecologically sound living. Table 5.1 illustrates the nature of the ramifications and some concrete examples.

Apart from how strangers obtain self-employment through gifts of land, recipients also develop social enterprises. This system is able to meet what J. M. Keynes called ‘The political problem of mankind’ because it can ‘combine three things: economic efficiency, social justice, and individual liberty’ (Keynes, 1926/1978: 311).

**Table 5.1** Land: society, economy and environment

Implications of the gift of land	Examples
(a) Self-employment	Redirecting ‘imputed rents’ to productive activities/using common land for subsistence farming
(b) Social enterprise	Community enterprises created from cocoa production (on common land) and social housing projects
(c) Socio-ecological and public wealth	Local production and consumption of food and other goods/services. Social housing, public land for public purpose and the protection of land and water bodies

Source: Adapted from Gordon Nembhard, 2014a, 2014b; Obeng-Odoom, 2021; Ahoa et al., 2020

The gift of land is also sustainable. It is not used to develop a plantation system, agribusiness or huge estates of mechanised farming. Instead, the gift of land is used for small-scale Indigenous farming. Crop rotation is practised to provide both food and revenue from sales. Strangers are also gifted with land. A social and solidarity economy arises locally where strangers who are self-employed share the harvest based on how much capital natives invest. As S. K. B. Asante (1975: 287) has noted, ‘the land system, in effect, became the solid foundation of the political and social organisation in traditional Ghana. The security and integrity of the land system were fundamental to striking a “proper balance” between authority and liberty’. Elders have not formed a ‘leisure class’, and neither have chiefs (Hill, 1963; 1966, 1986; Obeng-Odoom, 2020b). Similar comments apply to Côte d’Ivoire, the world’s largest cocoa producer (Araoye, 2012). There, in spite of neocolonial attempts to disenfranchise so-called non-true Ivoirians, there are no widespread exploited peasants or proletariats either.

In cities, where this gift of land is also widespread, social housing can be developed (Obeng-Odoom, 2008, 2013a, 2013b). For example, in partnership with Habitat International Housing Scheme, decent affordable housing has been developed around Ghana in line with gifts in land and commons institutions (Obeng-Odoom, 2008, 2013a). This provides further strengthening of the ‘foundations of radical philanthropy’ (Herro and Obeng-Odoom, 2019), which has stimulated the local economy and driven sustainable local development characterised by the use of local building materials, community labour and local government support. The governance of the project is participatory, and many people have developed their skills of managing projects, participating in projects or developing specific parts of projects.

Pamela Kea (2010) has looked at similar gifts in the Gambia. There, the gift of land is centred on the customary institution of entrustment. This signals *entrusting* or particular gifting of land by hosts to strangers who, in turn, show appreciation by giving ‘small gifts (for example, a bowl of food, items of clothing)’ (Kea, 2010: 151). Locally known as *karafoo*, this gift of land is prevalent in cities such as Brikama, which are urban spaces closely connected to Banjul (Kea, 2010: 59–91). The institution enables urban economies to flourish regardless of urbanisation, suggesting that property relations, rather than sheer size, could perhaps be more important in explaining the planetary crises. A notable feature of *karafoo* is that many female strangers and female hosts in Brikama have enhanced their livelihoods through the gift of land. According to Kea, ‘agrarian clientelist relations, although based on unequal access

to the means of production, ultimately facilitates a relationship of land and labour sharing between groups of female farmers, allowing recent migrants to be incorporated into larger support networks' (2010: 12), while addressing problems of local labour shortage.

Both female hosts and female strangers are productive and benefit from entrustment (Kea, 2010: 153–63, 167–86) because it enables strangers with new ideas and skills to become community members, who enhance community vitality, while safeguarding their own livelihoods. Simultaneously, through the gift of land, female hosts feel empowered as they develop their own land-based innovative social enterprises of local exchange of food produce. It is significant that only strangers who show respect for the land and who are willing and able to care for it themselves are given the land (Kea, 2010: 152–3); there is no room for speculative use of land.

This evidence can be helpful to contextualise S. K. B. Asante's observation that 'indigenous juristic and social ideas represent a sophisticated concept of responsible ownership which could well furnish the golden mean between extreme individualism and the more exuberant types of monolithic socialism' (1975: 292). As shown in the book *The Commons in an Age of Uncertainty* (Obeng-Odoom, 2021), gifts of land are common in Africa more widely. Of course, the criticism that African land tenure relations marginalise women in general and that such marginalisation applied in both colonial and post-colonial epochs, must be taken seriously (for an extensive review, see Federici, 2011). Yet, the conventional approach to resolve it, commodifying land through title registration, so that women can access land in the market is, perhaps, even worse than the problem. With corporations in the market place, African women risk becoming landless. Maintaining the status quo of customary land tenure relations and seeking to include a number of female decision makers on land allocation boards, however, is no durable alternative. Again, as Silvia Federici (2011) argues, with the enclosure of African land as a large-scale project, a localist solution is unlikely to be effective. Federici's preference is for African land tenure relations to remain communal, but women would need to appropriate it themselves through a 'silent revolution'. Women can farm wherever they find space, trade on available public or private land, and use whichever land is available.

## Gifts in Asia

Gifts of land abound in Asia, too. Such land is central to the Hindu communities in Indonesia as well as the Islamic and Buddhist communities in Thailand. Critics question whether they provide security of tenure, access to finance, effective urban planning, and highest and best use. My work with Anne Haila (Obeng-Odoom and Haila, 2024) that uses thematic analysis of original data, collected between 2019 and 2023 from Bali, Indonesia, which is well documented to have an alternative land tenure system, helps to address these questions. From the evidence, it seems that these gifts of land can address the question of security of land tenure, finance, effective planning, and highest and best use. In addition, these alternatives provide the foundations for a community-based approach to urban development, quite distinct from a commodity-based way of living which is centred on land title registration and has raised the spectre of speculation, dispossession and the disintegration of urban community.

Our work is not an outlier. Consider the research of land donations to mosques in Thailand. Sefer Kahraman (2021) interviewed imams at four mosques in Thailand. In addition, he studied the Holy Quran to understand the gift of land in Islam called *waqf*. It is a gift like no other because of three distinctive features: ‘perpetuity, irrevocability, and inalienability’ (Kahraman, 2021: 650). *Waqf* land is, therefore, secure. A concrete form of Islamic economics, the antithesis of Western, land-commodity-centred economics, it is forbidden to commodify the gift of *waqf* land. It is usually allocated for housing the poor, community uses, including cemeteries, and schools or religious purposes. These gifts of land, instituted for centuries, are managed by carefully selected trustees of mosques who understand community dynamics. In allocating *waqf* lands, for example, the committees prioritise those with the greatest need: the disabled and the orphaned. Sefer Kahraman’s study (2021: 657) noted that a ‘social rent’ (of just 5 per cent of average market rent) is charged and that revenues are directed to a sinking fund for maintaining *waqf* social housing.

Among Buddhists in Thailand, too, such practices, exist. For example, after interviewing 11 monks who supervise different wats or temples from 2016 to 2019, along with systematic observations of how temple land is used in Bangkok, Chaitawat Boonjubun and his collaborators (2021) show that land donations in Buddhism have lasted since the fourteenth century. These lands have been donated by the Thai king, the Thai state and the Thai people generally. Donated land becomes ‘temple land’ which, in turn, is used for housing members of the



community, for vending and for farming. Some of this land is also used for religious purposes. By law, gifts of land can neither be the object of speculation nor property for sale. Leases are brief and longer leases are subject to state oversight. If any sale is allowed it must be to the Thai state, which acquires such land for public purpose. Social rent (about 0.3 per cent of open market value) is charged for social housing built on donated land. This social housing is for the poor, regardless of religion.

These land gifts in Asia are clearly postcapitalist, but, like elsewhere, these institutions are undergoing major changes. Capitalist backlash threatens these gifts. In Indonesia, as our research ([Obeng-Odoom and Haila, 2024](#)) shows, even when there is no demand for the commodification of land, top-down processes from both Jakarta and Washington DC institutionalise the process of undermining the gift of land. These commodities have been framed as 'gifts'. It is 'free' to commodify land through titling, a gift that is increasing household debt, rent theft and displacement, a gift that is at the heart of 'progress and poverty' ([George, 1879](#)). These are Trojan horse gifts.

## Land gifts, commons, and commodities in the Global North

The countries of the Global North are often portrayed as the cathedrals of capitalism. But even among these countries, there have been some gifts of land, some common land practices and some municipal ownership of land. From April 1649 to April 1650, William McGrath ([1961](#)) shows, Gerrard Winstanley and his Diggers Movement tried to implement a silent and peaceful alternative to capitalist land tenure systems. Private property in land was the central problem so the main solution had to be collective land tenure systems. These Diggers 'were a broadly pacifist group, devoutly Christian in a non-conformist tradition ... The number of Diggers remained tiny, rising to no more than 52 in Surrey, but their impact and influence has been enormous' ([Barnett, 2019: 8](#)). Consider their approaches. 'They rejected claims of private ownership of the land', often asking 'if God did not mandate private ownership, why should they respect it?' ([Barnett, 2019: 8](#)). 'The earth was a common treasury', so wrote Gerard Winstanley, the theorist behind the movement ([Barnett, 2019: 8](#)).

The first step towards this ideal, according to movement pamphlets, was to attract gifts of land, to be triggered by the successful cultivation of common land. This was to be peaceful, not a Marxist revolution but the pursuit of evolutionary change through the use of common land in the

most successful way in order to encourage others to donate even more land. St George's Hill in England was the grand grounds for experimenting this alternative. Headquartered in the UK, the Diggers were also pacifists. Yet, 'the local landowners ... were far from convinced ... They were quick to realize that it struck at the very base of the established social order, and they did not hesitate to discourage the attempt' (McGrath, 1961: 57).

In response, the Diggers explained their demands on landlords as follows. Ultimately private property in land is a curse. It has to be abolished. If not, at the very least, the poor could be given the right to cultivate the commons and the heath, which belonged to this class of the propertyless until private property was imposed (McGrath, 1961: 58). Collective land, Gerrard Winstanley contended, would liberate people from bondage. The landlords resisted this movement, using a combination of mob attacks, legal suits and raids by the army. Opposition grew even among the public (McGrath, 1961: 57–66). Eventually, the movement fizzled out after only 24 months (Barnett, 2019: 9) of the movement's attempt to reshape rural society in England, as with others like the Levellers that co-existed during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

A more enduring campaign was launched by Henry George and his followers. Arising from the contradictions in the Global North during the Gilded Age of the nineteenth century, the Georgist Movement was not simply in the countryside but also in urban centres. Henry George's (1879) *Progress and Poverty* put the case for 'making land a common' by shifting taxes on everything else onto land value. While many were fascinated by and fixated on the fiscal component of George's remedy, Henry George himself was critical of this tax-centred approach to his remedy, which he came to call 'Single Tax Limited'. His preference was a 'Single Tax Unlimited' by which he emphasised that it was the goal of abolishing progress and poverty that were primary, not the fiscal remedy (George, 1889; George, 1891: 23–4). Accordingly, he suggested that other postcapitalist land struggles consistent with the Georgist remedy would be welcome.

*Henry George and the Crisis of Inequality* (2015) by Edward O'Donnell documents both the campaign for the movement's vision, especially in the US. Using boycotts, protests and working-class organisation, Henry George and his followers both in the workers' party, the United Labor Party (ULP) and elsewhere demanded to common the land. Successes were many, including what O'Donnell calls 'the great upheaval, 1886–1887' which demonstrates how potent the movement's use of strikes and boycotts were. George himself did not win the mayoral race in New York, but his wider social impact (153–66) is now well known. In Chicago, the members of District Assembly 24 overwhelmingly voted to read *Progress*

*and Poverty* (1879) for 20 minutes before every meeting began. In New York City, cigar makers would choose one worker to read *Progress and Poverty* to inspire the workers as they worked. To obtain public attention, speakers had to quote *Progress and Poverty* (O'Donnell, 2015: 153).

Mayors influenced by the teachings of Henry George took power in Detroit, Chicago, Cleveland, Vancouver and Milwaukee. In Britain, Mayor Joseph Chamberlain's term witnessed municipalisation that broadly reflected a Georgist agenda (Lough, 2016). Some of these mayors also espoused state-socialism, municipalism or welfarism, regarded by some Georgists as a mere Trojan horse gift (*Good Government*, 2020: 1–2). But, the point here is that, in the Global North, too, there have been postcapitalist alternatives. Indeed, in continental Europe, more generally, research shows that the Swiss Alps provide evidence of flourishing gifts as commons. According to Anne-Lise Head-König (2019: 170), corporations or associations that own common land (160–1) have adopted diverse collective strategies to keep common land, even if there have been challenges in some respects. In turn, the success of corporations using common land have been uneven. Yet, even '[t]oday, corporations ... are still very numerous ... there are numerous corporations with a large spectrum of resources, which can reinvest their profits in socially compatible activities for the benefit of all the inhabitants of the political commune (Head-König, 2019: 170). Indeed, the Bernese Civic Corporation (*Burgergemeinde*), one of the wealthiest communities in the municipality of Bern, continues to thrive based on how it uses its common land: for inclusive housing, flourishing and socially oriented shopping centres, social enterprises, including publicly owned ones in which people have shares, and radical philanthropy to address social problems (Stuber and Baumgartner, 2019: 187–8).

In between the commons and gifts are land trusts. They have generated heated debates. Some consider them as tokenistic and hierarchical land arrangements in which a cartel of landlords serving as trustees extract and appropriate socially created rents (*Good Government*, 2016: 1–2). But others (Hardy, 2016; Marten, 2016) hold that some land trusts are more inclusive, even Georgist (Turnbull, 2009). It seems that the form of land trusts matters. The rules for decision-making and management shape whether they are inclusive. But they could be crushed, scaling up could be difficult and, if so, land trusts do not have much potential to change the form or transform private property in land. But these radical ideas have largely been increasingly watered down, caricatured or reversed.

A systematic study of 468 party manifestos in the US (77), the UK (98), Sweden (187) and Germany (106) between 1880 and 2018 by Alexander Dobeson and Sebastian Kohl (2024) shows that such land gifts obtained growing bi-partisan support in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. During this time, land was needed for direct use. But, increasingly, from the 1970s, a distinctive form of ‘property-owning democracy’ emerged. Landowners came to see themselves as ‘private property’ owners. They demanded a more decisive change from their ‘property-owning democracy’ to a bolder, more direct ‘capital-owning democracy’. In this shift, social justice concerns for land gifts were pushed aside for a view of land as ‘capital’. This could not be an accident. As demonstrated in *The Housing Question* by Frederick Engels (1872), under capitalism, all such schemes *tend* to become a platform for advancing capitalist interests. Whether it is taking loans from public banks or commuting rental payments into mortgage payments, selling all rental properties to their owners or providing public housing without removing the exploitation of labour, the ‘housing question’ remains unresolved. Engels’ (1872) focus, of course, was on labour, not land. But the symmetry between the two cases is strong: only anti-capitalist gifts of land can fundamentally transform the system.

## Discussion and conclusion: towards a postcapitalist future

These cases show that ‘postcapitalist politics’ (Gibson-Graham, 2006) require that we go beyond (i) capitalism as we know it, (ii) ‘the end of capitalism (as we knew it)’ in Marxian analyses (Gibson-Graham, 1996) and (iii) postcapitalist land economies (see Chapter 1, this volume) in order to draw out and explore non-capitalist practices actually existing today.

Claiming that the gift of land echoes and emphasises these principles raises the following questions: What are gifts of land? How are they made? Why are these gifts given? When created are they secure? And, are gifts of land stepping stones to a transformative society or they are Trojan horse gifts? The analysis of texts on gifts clearly shows that, as non-reciprocal gifts, gifts of land are less numerous than other gifts discussed in the Mauss-Gregory models. Still, gifts of land are quite common across the world. These land gifts are typically given for *social* justice purposes, not for ‘welfare’ or commodity fare, but they do not, in any way, exist outside markets. Instead, they echo and emphasise the

embeddedness of markets in society (Polanyi, 1957). Gifts of land are not given in market settings, but they attract rent (for example, in Thailand) and could even be used to secure a loan in the market (for example, in Ghana), although such markets have been socially engineered and, often, externally imposed (Obeng-Odoom, 2021: 165–94), calling into question Oliver Williamson’s contention: ‘In the beginning, so to speak, there were markets’ (Williamson, 1981: 1547). Still, these markets largely operate in social economies. Accordingly, gifts challenge the dualistic view that they are either market-serving or society-affirming, self-serving or society-serving, within societies or economies (Dolfsma, 2021). The ‘gift of land’ is finalised through public and comprehensive processes that make them widely acknowledged and secure. Even if, as the evidence shows, such gifts may not be sufficient and they can, indeed, be Trojan horse gifts, and are not always ‘stepping stones’, many gifts of land can provide much-needed momentum towards transformative, postcapitalist, society, especially if combined with the pursuit of ‘making land common’.

The gift of land must, therefore, be distinguished from a particular care paradigm to philanthropy developed in Catholic social thought (Soskis, 2014) but more widely seen as a model for apparently a ‘postcapitalist’ alternative. In *Rerum Novarum* (Leo, 1891), Pope Leo XIII advocated care of the poor by the rich, of the weak by the strong, of the disabled by the abled, of workers by capitalists, of children by adults (Leo, 1891: 5, 10, 14–16, 19). Leo famously advocated philanthropy as a *duty* of the rich and the right of the poor. Not everyone would be rich, he argued, but riches should be no privilege. They must be a duty of giving, which must be done well. ‘It is a duty, not of justice (save in extreme cases), but of Christian philanthropy – a duty not enforced by human law’ (Leo, 1891: 8). The poor, on the other hand, have a duty of obedience and loyalty. As workers, the poor must not disrupt the process of production. They must toil and serve. The rich with property and soil must not toil but must give charitably (Leo, 1891: 6).

Here is a win-win homogenous arrangement in which there is no class interest or conflict but rather a congenial society in which the rich and the poor play their respective roles: one giving philanthropy and orders and the other paying with their labour; one with land and property, the other without land and property-less. To each is given according to their ability, so landowners obtain deserved land and workers have not worked hard enough to obtain land, but each group must have rights and duties to receive and to give care. Pope Leo XIII offered a virtue ethics par excellence. In his words,

[f]rom contemplation of this divine Model, it is more easy [sic] to understand that the true worth and nobility of man lie in his moral qualities, that is, in virtue; that virtue is, moreover, the common inheritance of men, equally within the reach of high and low, rich and poor; and that virtue, and virtue alone, wherever found, will be followed by the rewards of everlasting happiness.

(Leo, 1891: 8)

This papal strategy is clearly commonplace, but it is highly misplaced. As Henry George (1891) noted in his historic reply to Pope Leo XIII in *The Condition of Labour*, it should not be the case that the conditions for property and poverty are allowed to divide society into rich and poor for the former to give to the latter as their moral obligation as the Pope had argued (Leo, 1891). Rather the *raison d'être* for philanthropic giving must be removed entirely. In this sense, the question about for how long philanthropy must be in human society is easily addressed: the success of philanthropy is the root of its own demise.

There can and there are sometimes problems with governing the gift of land. For example, the Habitat for Humanity Housing Scheme suffers problems of housing quality, a mismatch between members' aspirations and project goals, and a declining interest in shared labour (Obeng-Odoom, 2008; 2013a). Yet, these do not constitute tragedies. Gifts of land have transformed individuals and communities, and they have changed entire nations and shown the potential to change continents (Haila, 2016; Obeng-Odoom, 2020a, 2020b). Because of the centrality of commodified land to the socio-ecological crises today, among others through processes of continuing fossil monopoly-based growth, exploitation of labour and evictions, the gift of land is fundamental in the process of inclusive and decolonised economies with limited rent theft (George, 1884; Obeng-Odoom, 2020a, 2020b).

Research (Rose, 1986) shows that gifts to the public have enhanced the quality of public life, sociability, sustainability commerce, and public wealth. Gifts to families and communities have given them a new and meaningful life (Boonjubun et al., 2021; Kahraman, 2021). Common parcels of land collectively managed by citizens and the state can be put to public uses such as public roads and public transport. Gifts of land tend to facilitate true free trade (Obeng-Odoom, 2020b). They increase social wealth. Gifts of land provide a strong basis for recreation and social nourishing, afforestation and societal greening, parks and gardens, and even arts, as we see in Indigenous Australian communities in the countryside and urban spaces (Fitzmaurice, 2007). They become the

foundations for public education, public squares, public health facilities, public institutions and public enterprise. Where land is already private, the value can be taxed and the revenues invested in a social fund that can be used for the provision of public services. As Georgists (Haila, 2016; Obeng-Odoom, 2020a, 2021) have shown empirically, whether it is in the Global South or in the Global North, gifts of land have enabled communities and societies to be inclusive and to flourish on our one earth.

Shifting taxes away from labour and onto land value is crucially important. But leaving postcapitalist struggles at this level alone would reduce the power of this struggle to ‘a single tax limited’ and its reductionist focus on fiscal policy (George, 1889; George, 1891: 23–4) without, for example, considering what Maha Ben Gadhia and colleagues (2021) call *Economic and Monetary Sovereignty*. Research (Gallent et al., 2004) shows that, in the UK, fiscal measures are important but, alone, they cannot address the second home crises in the countryside. Indeed, it seems that the Supreme Court of the US could regard this approach as unconstitutional, too. In the *Moore versus United States* case,

Justice Clarence Thomas, for example, repeatedly suggested [in addresses and oral debates] that unrealized income from corporate stock could be taxed because the corporation has realized that income even if it hasn’t distributed it to its investors ... [but] *A similar tax on unrealized income from real estate, however, would not be allowed.*

(Millhisser, 2023, np, italics added)

It is crucial to emphasise ‘justice’, the *essence* of Georgist political economy, not ‘single tax’, which is only the *means*. Research (Ho, 2021; Purves, 2022) shows that, while societies like Singapore have strong land policies that neglect the single tax progress, they also suffer widespread inequalities. Addressing rent theft is pivotal for inclusion and justice. As a global, postcapitalist strategy, taxing away internal and international rent theft, and demanding reparations can strengthen the ‘single tax unlimited’ (Obeng-Odoom, 2021, 2023a, 2023b). Investing the resulting revenues into a fund to address *social problems* is a vital additional step. Simultaneously, making land gifts may not be the only postcapitalist alternative, but no postcapitalist struggles can be complete without the ‘single tax, unlimited’ as, fundamentally, there can be no postcapitalist future without postcapitalist land struggles.

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## Note

- 1 See the full judgment provided by the Ghana Legal Information Institute on its website: <https://ghalii.org/gh/judgment/supreme-court/2014/158> (accessed 6 April 2020).

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## 6

# Experimental food commons in capitalist heartlands

Adam Calo

## Introduction

Some of the most powerful postcapitalist logics, imaginaries and social projects owe their origins in food. Nothing could be more core to concerns of the means of production than produce itself. Control over the basis for social reproduction offers a power of self-determination that confronts the disciplinary force of the wage relation. That is why concepts like food sovereignty, agroecology and re-peasantisation have seized the imagination of post and anti-capitalist movements worldwide (Desmarais, 2002; Patel, 2009; van der Ploeg, 2009). Some argue a transition out of capitalism necessitates an agriculture that is subsumed under the logics of ecology instead of the market (Duncan, 1996).

But something interesting – and perhaps troubling – emerges when proponents of alternative food systems attempt to practise non-capitalist modes of farming in ‘capitalist heartlands’<sup>1</sup> like the US, the UK and much of Western Europe. There, the radical promise of a postcapitalist food system tends to be watered down into elite-to-elite production and consumption circuits. Such production relations are embodied by apolitical and technocratic farming typologies like farm-to-table restaurants, regenerative agriculture, and nature based-solutions. Or, as Julie Guthman (2003) sees it, ‘yuppie chow’.

After decades of critical appraisal of the so-called ‘good food movement’, it is clear that something rotten at the core of most alternative food projects inhibits their postcapitalist potential (Guthman, 2000; DuPuis and Goodman, 2005; DeLind, 2010; Alkon and Agyeman, 2011). In this chapter, I argue that the hidden force that dilutes the

transformative capacity of radical food projects is the land beneath them. Entrenched exclusionary land relations that discipline life in liberal sovereign states emit an obscured force that moulds agriculture to the logics of a narrow, yet powerful conception of property. Trying to practise radical food without a politics of reimagined land relations places alternative food production at the mercy of the property regime (Calo et al., 2021). Alternative food projects may thus be developing practices apt for a postcapitalist countryside, but because they rely on dominant property relations to survive, these movements fail to represent an *anti-capitalist* stance.

Unable to reimagine or contest hegemonic land relations, alternative food imaginaries in the capitalist heartlands have taken a pernicious form of neo-Chayanovian escapism. Chayanov's analysis of peasant farming economics in the Russian countryside circa 1900 offers a compelling rationale for how smallholder farmers appear to resist being transformed by looming capitalist imperatives (Chayanov, 1986). In the Chayanovian view, smallholders embedded in subsistence agriculture control important means of production, especially their labour power. Small diverse farms therefore have the capacity to make a suite of social and ecological decisions that are unbounded beyond the profit motive. But in today's world of countryside land speculation, the Chayanovian utopia is only available to a narrow set of farmers – who either inherit a smallholding or leverage immense capital to create the conditions to buy land. The result is an emergence of lighthouse farms, that indeed offer crucial lessons for how to practise new production systems but fail to offer a base for transformative politics. This form of neo-Chayanovianism is more of a peasantry cosplay than a new class strata with collective power to resist capitalist logics.

In this version for alternative food systems, the nature of property is not a problem. The problem is that property is not evenly distributed to smallholders, which would otherwise be able to use their productive forces to produce food sustainably. This idea *leverages* the power of private property as the main tool to gain the required agency to produce food without the hooks of the unregulated market. Thus, the bastions of agroecological production and solidarity economies in the Global North are found to be practised on private property of exclusionary value. This is the story of John and Molly Chester's farm in California,<sup>2</sup> Barbara Kingsolver and her family's efforts to root themselves to their Appalachian farm and live on a local produce diet<sup>3</sup> and Joel Salatin's Polyface Farms – all cases of devoted land managers whose stories of agroecological triumph only begin *after* securing or inheriting multi-million dollar properties.

Without a radical politics of land transformation, advocates of this agrarian populist vision see the only feasible path forward as a retreat to the countryside and pursuit of self-sufficiency (Smaje, 2020).

Compared to the use of agroecology as a method in struggles of liberation among social movements like La Via Campesina and the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra (MST – Landless Workers’ Movement), the permaculture farms and holistic grazing exemplars succumb to the critique of hobby farming (Sutherland, 2012). The MST, with their legal sophistication and politics of occupation strikes fear into the *New York Times* world politics section.<sup>4</sup> The second career heroes of *The Biggest Little Farm* ruffle no feathers and draw praise from the elites sectors of society. The food movements of the Global South possess class conscious notes of Che Guevara, while their counterpart in the Global North is exemplified by *Chez Panisse*.<sup>5</sup>

Recently, however, some actors traditionally associated with the neo-Chayanovian model have become, perhaps reluctantly, engaged with new innovations around land access, use and control. A small wave of ‘food commons’ projects have launched farmland acquisition and redistribution efforts that force renewed thinking about the limits to projects of ‘good food’ in the Global North. The use of commons in the food system is commonly deployed as a set of values and priorities around food in opposition to the status quo where food is treated as a commodity (Vivero-Pol, 2017). Yet, what might we make of the language of commons without engaging with its original conception: matters of landscape and territory?

Food commons projects that aim to acquire control of food production and distribution via collective land and asset ownership and then implement experimental governance and tenure systems may offer distinct logics of production, ownership and landscape. Such a combination of peasant economic logics mixed with legal remedy to prevent capitalist penetration may begin to realise the promise of a Chayanovian anti-capitalist form of production and breathe new life into the rhetoric of a commons (Calo et al., 2023; Hu et al., 2023). This chapter first establishes the critique of neo-Chayanovian approaches to food system reform, then details ‘food commons’ projects from the US, the UK and the Netherlands as means of evaluating how these experiments attempt to drive a path out of capitalism within the liberal sovereign heartland.

## Chayanov's evergreen promise for postcapitalist countryside

The enduring force of the peasantry, especially as a feature of liberatory struggles in the Global South, has reinvigorated attention to Chayanov's utopian thesis of the peasant economy (Chayanov, 1986). Chayanov, like a real-life Konstantin Levin of *Anna Karenina*, traversed around the Russian countryside studying peasant livelihoods and postulating endlessly about the 'Agrarian Problem', eventually putting all of his theories and calculations into a dusty tomb. Chayanov argues that there is an internal logic within peasant production that has the power to resist the totalising force of capital accumulation. The reasons for this are essentially twofold. First, reserves of family labour allow peasants to 'self-exploit', or decide on their own terms when to apply more work to deal with market or ecological uncertainty. Second, Chayanov argues that the flexibility of peasants to fine tune their labour effort depending on their own aspirations of living standards made them economically superior to capitalist farms who could only march to the tune of surplus production.

These two dynamics allowed peasants to produce under a logic of 'enoughness' rather than the profit motive. When 'enoughness' is the guiding logic of production, farms can avoid the exploitation (between classes as opposed to 'of the self') of wage labour (Banerjee, 2023). This resistance essentially halts the treadmill of production that the profit motive inevitably demands (Gould et al., 2004).

When I visited an agroecological farm in Cuba for some environmental reporting, the liberatory and ecologically regenerative potential of Chayanov's theories resonated strongly. In the view of the farmer, a marginal addition of Cuban pesos meant little. The farm's organic, biodynamic milk was sold to the state for about 45 cents a gallon. The virtues of labour self-determination were highlighted, where some days the whole family was in the fields planting rice and on others everyone was swimming in the reservoir. I was told the story of the 'ideal chicken'. The patriarch of the farm was not looking for the 'best' chicken, he told me. He was not looking for the chicken that gave the most eggs or reached the best price. He was looking for the chicken that resisted disease, that did not make a lot of noise, that would breed well with his current stock. For readers of Chayanov, it is this combined control over the means of production blended with an alternative logic of production that makes the single proprietor farm unit a key force in a postcapitalist world.

But beyond Cuban agroecologists and early twentieth-century Russian smallholders, the capacity for peasants to resist integration into an increasingly globalised capitalist world is part of a long running debate about agrarian change (Kloppenburger et al., 1996; van der Ploeg and Renting, 2004; Goodman, 2004; DuPuis and Goodman, 2005; Lyson, 2007). Two opposing avatars of this debate are Henry Bernstein and Jan van der Ploeg. For Bernstein, the agrarian question must be viewed from the lens of class (Bernstein, 2010). The reach of capitalism is so profound that what might appear to be self-sufficient smallholders with internal logics of production are better described as petty commodity producers that also enter into exploitative wage relations. Bernstein's key evidence of this is 'differentiation' of the peasantry, where countryside food producers tend to split into wealthy landowning bourgeois farmers who rely on hired labour and 'semi-proletarian' farmers who are wholly dependent on market logics to earn enough income to survive (Bernstein, 2014).

Bernstein follows a teleological argument in the Marxian tradition, building on early agrarian questioners like Lenin, who saw the wealthy peasants as a proto-capitalist bloc against socialist transformation and Kautsky, who saw the peasants as backwards, desolate and in need of modernisation (Banaji, 1976). For Bernstein, those who squint and see permaculture farms as agents of societal transformation should look again to see a landlord collecting rent, and entrepreneur accruing property value and a business model seeking cheap labour to maintain a rate of profit.

Bernstein has been rightly criticised for too enthusiastically writing off the existence of the global peasantry, claiming the agrarian question answered. The strongest of these critiques have come from peasant scholars and academics from the Global South who point out that social concerns and political power dynamics are more embroiled in questions of peasant movements today than ever before (Moyo et al., 2013; Banerjee, 2023). Nonetheless, Bernstein's contributions set a high bar for those who see the transformative potential of Chayanovianism. Whatever smallholder farmers are doing on the land, if their class relations are exploitative and they are part of globalised commodity production logics, then what is the point of viewing them as potentially anti- or even non-capitalist?

In contrast, van der Ploeg suggests that evidence for transformative neo-Chayanovianism is all around us. Van der Ploeg sees the increasing number of organic farms, the consistent drive among young urbanised people to practise farming, the declining productivity of capitalist farms and a flourishing of ecologically oriented agricultural models as signs of *re-peasantisation* (van der Ploeg and Renting, 2004; van der Ploeg, 2014).



It is argued that these new peasantries demonstrate both an economic and ecological advantage over capitalist farms (van der Ploeg et al., 2019). By focusing too much on class dimensions of the agrarian question, proponents of the re-peasantisation thesis point out that the ecological limits of industrial farming create a liberatory space for smallholder systems that reduce input dependence and maximise local biophysical interactions. Small farms, because of their labour flexibility and capacity for local knowledge, demonstrate higher yields and more biodiversity than larger farms, while remaining just as profitable (Ricciardi et al., 2021). In a world of increasing shocks because of ecological disturbance, diversified smallholder farms are likely more resilient than large scale industrial systems with input dependence and narrow adaptability (Petersen-Rockney et al., 2021).

Smallholders can pursue knowledge intensive practices that create multifunctional farming systems that are economically and yield competitive to industrial farms with devalued labour (Ponisio et al., 2015; Bezner Kerr et al., 2023). Multifunctionality builds on Chayanov's findings that peasants could use their labour reserves to diversify their production depending on the subsistence needs of the family. In the case of crop disease, for example, a peasant farm can rely on a minor speciality crop or switch to artisan craft production, whereas disease of the main commodity in monoculture is terminal.

The more ecological interactions are centred, the more van der Ploeg's lens on neo-Chayanovianism cannot be ignored. Politically, scholars and activists see hope in the transnational environmental movement that have real capacity to challenge imperial power (Borras Jr. et al., 2022). Maybe, as some argue, the energy budgets of a low carbon future will *force* a re-peasantisation, and thus it is best to start building that way now (Smaje, 2020). Regardless, there is a good argument that the original agrarian questioners may have focused too much on class and not enough on ecology. As Banerjee (2023) summarises: 'Agrarian questions today, therefore, increasingly veer towards the axis of social, ecological and health issues rather than the older, traditional questions of the formation of class and agrarian capital in rural areas' (2023: 686).

In contrast, Bernstein's call to centre class is especially relevant if we consider current trends among contemporary contested agri-futures (Gugganig et al., 2023). From multiple perspectives, the ecology question can be resolved without addressing the class question through the 'right' application of technology. Many ecomodernist visions of agriculture for example, envision a state of super industrialisation that makes food so abundant and cheap, it frees up land for biodiversity conservation

and carbon sequestration (Balmford, 2021). Here, Bernstein might warn of some kind of ‘green Kulak’ or something resembling a family farm that maintains their legitimacy to practise landlordism and extract rents through demonstration of sound soil management or high yield. Look to Scotland, as a rise of ‘green lairds’ seize climate change investments, using the logic of Net Zero to implement a suite of new land management arrangements but without a hint of landownership change (Martin et al., 2023).

Building on peasant movements’ undeniable power and transformative potential, without succumbing to exploitative class relations, is the challenge of imagining postcapitalist countrysides. Jun Borrás (2020) calls this effort for such an emancipatory rural politics rather than falling back towards and authoritarian populist trajectory an ‘absurdly difficult but not impossible agenda’. The path to realising this absurdly difficult agenda in capitalist heartlands, at least in part, is through re-imagined land relations.

## The problem with neo-Chayanovianism in capitalist heartlands

Chayanov’s utopian vision of a ‘peasant economy’ that has the capacity to resist pressure to over-exploit ecological function and human labour has enduring appeal for those embedded in a struggle for a more sustainable food system. But the dominant mode of rural gentrification and farm-to-table politics in capitalist heartlands makes Bernstein look instructive and uncritical re-peasantisation naïve. Chayanov himself developed later theoretical work in *The Theory of Peasant Cooperatives* suggesting the logic of peasant economy would need to be bolstered by state action and movement solidarity, lest it be subsumed by capitalist farms (Hu et al., 2023). Thus, a Chayanovianism focus just on the economic structure of smallholder farms without enabling policy environments or social movements was perhaps never really thought of as a durable resistance to capitalist penetration.

However, this type of agronomic practices without politics now defines the food movement discourse in capitalist heartlands. Take regenerative agriculture, a concept that fetishises practice and glosses over politics (Tiftonnell et al., 2022; Bless et al., 2023). Neo-Chayanovian models in capitalist heartlands take a particular land use vision – one based on ideals of individual landownership, single proprietor farming, neoliberal logics of change and whiteness (Calo, 2020a).

Grafted onto existing property relations, this structure of alternative farming fails to represent a challenge to or even an insulation against capitalist production logics (Calo et al., 2021). Moreover, they may also deepen labour and ecology exploitation and capital consolidation (Horst and Marion, 2019; Shoemaker, 2021).

The second effect of this back-to-the-land imaginary is a vacuum of postcapitalist politics. Here, the hollow politics of 'good food' creates a space for more ruthless imaginations of the rural to take its place. As the contribution of the agricultural sector to environmental and social harms becomes more apparent, an ascendant ecomodernism has rightly critiqued romanticised smallholder claims to sustainability. Ecomodernists mock the bucolic concept of the noble agrarian, pointing out how both the elite consumption networks of smallholder farms are a recipe for change only for the well off as well as the way industrial farmers uphold themselves as hardworking commonfolk despite their multimillion-dollar enterprises (Monbiot, 2022). Without a stronger theory of the rural, the dubious power of local food to meet the objectives of a green transition opens the door to a crass anti-rural sentiment and green capitalist techno-optimism that is popular on the left and the right (Ajl, 2021).

Instead of farmers, the ecomodernist protagonists are labour-saving technologies like GMOs and data-driven agricultural management that promise to free farmers from a life of drudgery. Relying on the logic of land sparing, this vision has become perhaps unsurprisingly attractive to elements of the progressive environmentalists who wish to see land use concentrated in a small footprint to allow for biodiverse lands to be freed up 'elsewhere'. While neo-Chayanovianism stumbles, ecomodernism offers an easy option for state powers, who are increasingly pressured to act against the climate-change-inducing behaviours of industrial agriculture. Why foster an emancipatory rural politics when the technofix will suffice?

Newly empowered by broad calls for environmental sustainability, private capital has seized new legitimacy to take control of assets and make them green. The result may be a new green land use regime but with even more wealth accrued to minority interests. Perhaps this is a fair tradeoff to stave off the worse outcomes of climate change and biodiversity collapse, but without a meaningful counter to this vision, the 'farm free future' imagined by some proponents of precision fermentation and sustainable intensification, may soon be a reality (Monbiot, 2022).

The shape the countryside takes in capitalist heartlands is a high-stakes game in the story of postcapitalist futures. If the import-dependent food systems of wealthy nations continue to rely on devalued labour of the Global South for its food stuffs, then it makes the task of postcapitalist

societies in a global sense that much more foreclosed. Thus, the food systems of the Global North are much more than a question of local ecology, and land justice, but also a force that drives exploitative global class relations (Ajl, 2023).

### Neo-Chayanovianism's reformist slide

In Holt-Giménez and Shattuck's (2011) framework for food system interventions post the 2008 food price crisis, the authors presented a typology of responses to the growing problems of the corporate food regime. They categorise the politics of food movement interventions along a continuum of neoliberal, reformist, progressive and radical responses. The authors argue that recent food crises have retrenched the power of neoliberal and reformist trends that employ strategies like trade liberalisation, eco-certifications and food aid that aim to keep food abundant and cheap. Here, the dominant models to stabilising the food system are repeatedly based on logics of food enterprise or food security. Strategies like overproducing to lower prices, developing innovative business models and investing in food aid from wealthy to less wealthy countries still run at the top of government priorities and enjoy the lion's share of donor finance.

While strong progressive and radical trends have emerged like community-supported agriculture networks and new farm labour organisations as a type of 'counter movement', Holt-Giménez and Shattuck suggest that moving past the corporate food regime can only occur if new alliances between progressive and radical tactics might emerge: 'The challenge for movement-building is to reach beyond the easily occurring, tactical relationships to forge strategic alliances across the progressive and radical trends' (Holt-Giménez and Shattuck, 2011: 134).

But while Reformist and Neoliberal trends organically align and support each other, an alliance between progressive and radical food movements is not a given. Small farmer landowners may engage in Progressive acts of agroecological practices and social food projects. But under increasing climate threats that damage the productivity of their land they may rebuff radical movements' calls for land redistribution or food decommodification. The risk, Holt-Giménez and Shattuck argue, is a Reformist slide of the Progressive food actors:

As the world's food, fuel, financial and climate crises worsen, the contradictions between the food regime and food movements will likely deepen. The Reformist trend will continue to reach out to

organizations in the Progressive trend in an attempt to build its social base of support and pre-empt their radicalization.

(Holt-Giménez and Shattuck, 2011: 133)

In capitalist heartlands like the US and Europe, the emergence of a new amalgamation of Progressive and Radical food efforts that might amount to deeper transformation has not really materialised. Instead, this prescient warning of a Reformist slide among progressive actors appears to be evident in the uncritical neo-Chayanovianism that still dominates food movements in industrialised countries. The growth of apolitical regenerative agriculture and its articulation with new green certifications, new corporate actor's investment into niche food like Patagonia Provisions,<sup>6</sup> and emergence of new progressive uptake of agri-tech like precision fermentation and advanced gene editing suggest the frustrations of progressive actors to effect change have sought comfort in Reformism.

Thus, while Holt-Giménez and Shattuck's argument that new coalitions between Progressive and Radical trends are needed to create the social power to affect food regime transformation appears as prescient as ever, it remains less clear how to accomplish this, especially in capitalist heartlands.

Despite the observed failings of the food movement in the Global North, I argue that centring land relations into food system solutions forces the question of 'who benefits?' to the fore. It is this question that may clarify the politics of food system interventions and create a power-aware dialogue that may move actors towards a new coalition of progressive and radical food strategies. Just as Chayanovian optimists have theorised, the present social ecological moment may have opened a crack where food as politics is back on the agenda. Certain progressive food actors' turn towards land politics demonstrates evidence of this conjuncture.

## **Experimental food commons: centring ecology via land**

Across the wealthy industrialised world a group of food system actors have linked their ambitions of ecologically sound food production to calls for radically new land relations. All of these experiments show an attempt at threading the needle between strong property entitlements and the demands of agroecological production. Compared to the farm-to-table/farmers' market model which entrenches current patterns of unequal landownership, these food projects are evidence that a new way of thinking about land is required to deliver a more transformative food

politics. It is unclear if these models will only serve as islands of production insulated from capitalist logics. Without a greater transformation to the legal entitlements of property, they may ultimately be warped by forces of ‘impersonal domination’. These types of legal experimentations and loophole-seeking may be a far cry from land occupations that form the basis of many social movements. But they may offer a replicable intermediate strategy for geographies hostile to direct confrontation of deeply held notions of property. Above all, they perhaps reveal a reality that if progressive farm activists are to meet their values of sustainable food, they must engage in the radical struggle over re-imagining land relations (Calo et al., 2023).

Here, I briefly trace the land politics of experimental, land-based food commons that emerge from within capitalist heartlands in the US, the UK and the Netherlands. I draw from ongoing empirical observations of these programmes’ missions, discourses and analyses of their legal structures. The programmes all share a common vision that in order to meet their goals of ecological food production, they must secure control of land and use that control to rework its access regimes.

### The Agrarian Commons, US

The Agrarian Trust’s *Agrarian Commons* project, raises capital and purchases agricultural land at market value or through tax incentivised gifting. The trust then establishes a ‘Commons Board’ which is a separate non-profit legal entity made up of (in theory) a member of the trust, a member of the farming community and a community member local to the land in question. The land title is transferred to the Commons Board, which offers 99-year leases to incoming farmers. Through this model, the new farmers are able to own buildings and businesses on the land but not the land itself. The Commons Board uses language in the lease agreements to structure the land use in the values determined by the board representatives. The Agrarian Trust, a 501 c(3) non-profit organisation is essentially a parent company of the Commons Board, which gets established as a unique 501 c(2) at each acquisition site. The structure limits the liability of the Agrarian Trust, using the 501 c(2) for the sole purpose of holding title and thus preserves the tax-exempt status of the non-profit. Presently, the Agrarian Trust manages 12 agrarian commons at various stages of development.

The Agrarian Commons project states values of farmland preservation, ecologically sensitive farming, land justice for marginalised groups, and supporting the next generation of farmers. A notable

established project is the Little Jubba Central Maine Agrarian Commons, which features board membership from the Somali Bantu Community Association of Maine, an organisation that represents a large refugee community in the state.

### The UK's Ecological Land Cooperative

The Ecological Land Cooperative (ELC) is a community benefit society operating in England and Wales with the goal of supporting a new generation of agroecological farmers. The ELC raises funds through a public share offer. In the share offer description, the ELC offers a 3 per cent annual rate of return for their investment. Investors can opt out of interest accrual and are encouraged not to withdraw funds for at least three years. Investors gain voting rights in the cooperative, but only 25 per cent of the voting share, whereas the rest of the voting share is allocated to working members.

The ELC acquires planning permission to develop land into clustered agricultural smallholdings, which is frequently stated as a key barrier for smallholder land access. Their standard model is to establish three adjacent units out of a larger acquisition. Sale of a portion of the land not aligned with the planning permissions or agricultural value is sold to build revenue for the transition. Land is leased to ecological farmers on 150-year leases, and binds each tenant (or leaseholder) to a comprehensive land management plan that operates across the entire site. Tenants are offered the standard lease or a rent-to-buy option. The ELC provides the support of planning permission for dwellings, and it maintains a number of capital costs like water permitting and property conveyance.

The ELC maintains six sites across England and Wales, where some of the sites consist of three clustered farms.

### Aardpeer, Land van Ons, and Kapitalocean, The Netherlands

In the Netherlands, there are a number of start-up organisations that operate in a similar way to the ELC and the Agrarian Commons that raise public funds or share offers and use the power of ownership to structure favourable leases for agroecological tenant farmers. Land van Ons calls itself a citizen cooperative, mostly supported by volunteer board members. They raise public share offers of any value and prevent resale only after two years to limit speculation. They curate their own custom list of agricultural values that align with low input and high knowledge production. They manage 17 sites in the Netherlands and state the ambition to reach 300,000 hectares, or 15 per cent of Dutch

agricultural land within a 10-year period. Aardpeer operates as a land investment vehicle to serve a variety of social and ‘nature-based’ farming organisations that all struggle with access to land. Aardpeer is a social foundation with ties to the ‘green’ bank, the Triodos Regenerative Money Centre. The main difference is that Aardpeer taps into larger social investment sources like public sustainability bonds in their efforts to purchase farmland and lease it out to farmers.

The outlier in the Netherlands is Kapitaloecen, a foundation that calls itself a ‘postcapitalist experiment’. The model is on its face similar: fundraising, land acquisition and redistribution. The difference is the ambition of what the foundation calls a model of collective non-ownership. In the one site where Kapitaloecen is active, the foundation gives interest-free loans to a land association that purchases the land. The land association leases the land to a different corporate legal entity (the farmers/land managers) for €0. Decision-making over the land is thus an entanglement of members of the foundation, the business and the land association. In effect, this model is similar to the Agrarian commons 501 c(2) and 501 c(3) legal innovations, but Kapitaloecen suggests that the practice of donating surplus capital into land that will then never be sold is a way to remove capital from the market as a form of transition practice to a postcapitalist state.

## **Experimental food commons, beyond neo-Chayanovianism?**

A brief survey of initiatives for intervening in land markets in order to bring about ecologically sensitive agricultural production raises a number of questions about their postcapitalist potential. Exploring if these projects can escape the pitfalls of neo-Chayanovianism requires examining questions of scale, values, politics and their engagement with property.

First, while some of these projects have bold ambitions, their relative scale in each national context is rather miniscule. Even some initiatives that maintain an impressive portfolio of sites still operate in a model of smallholder agriculture. This makes sense, as the economic viability of agroecological production has been shown to align with small farm size (Ricciardi et al., 2021). At the same time, this may represent an unspoken commitment to a yeoman mythology of family farming virtues as opposed to some form of socialised production (Calo, 2020a). Moreover, the transaction costs of acquiring property through market mechanisms and legal loopholes may simply be too slow and costly to challenge the



corporate food regime. Acquisition through market mechanisms may also have an unfortunate rebound effect where the price of agricultural land under pressure for farmland conservation could drive the price up further, slowing the rate of farmland acquisition (Morris, 2008).

The second looming question is the character of the agricultural values of each project. All share a nominal commitment to smallholder farming, tenant protections, ecological production methods and biodiversity conservation to some extent. Others value planning, access for low-income or marginalised peoples, viable businesses organic production, direct-to-consumer production, the rights of nature, or even an explicit anti-capitalist agenda. The diversity of potential agri-food futures is on display within the practices of these organisations and their ability to enforce these values is through the power of landownership and lease arrangements. Importantly, some of the organisations mediate the absolute power of property through legal loopholes and complex juristic personae that distribute decision-making beyond the primary financier or land-owning entity.

This leads to a consideration of how these organisations 'resolve' the land question. It appears that most rely on the power of landownership to rework the land relations that dictate farming practice. It is only purchase that gives these projects the power to implement the structural conditions that foster agroecological production. Some, like ELC, include rent-to-own provisions, which suggest an ultimate arrangement of smallholder proprietors rather than holding the land in some sort of commons. Perhaps the use of ownership to disrupt the problems of strong property regimes is a feasible transition or drawdown strategy in the broader story of postcapitalist countrysides, but a major challenge for these types of legal innovations is how they can avoid the Reformist slide. As Wittman et al. (2017) discovered through a survey of alternative land trust models in British Columbia, even the participants in collective farming operations still hoped to one day own their own plot of land. There may be cultural values of property ownership on capitalist heartlands that may overrule clever communing schemes. Such a force is the engine behind authoritarian populist farmer protest movements, where state planning to reign in the environmental devastation of industrial agriculture is perceived (somewhat rightly) as a threat to land access.

It is also important to view these projects alongside efforts that make appeals to the state to intervene in land sales. For example, the EU Land Directive proposed by La Via Campesina Europe attempts to use EU legal entitlements to suggest a mandate to intervene in agricultural land speculation and consolidation. A decade of lobbying in California

has established an Agricultural Equity Act, which mandates all future agricultural law to consider equity and recognise marginalisation. Atop this guarantee, a new Equitable Land Access Taskforce has recently been established in the state house. In the experimental food commons projects I have reviewed, the state is notably absent, save as a guarantor of the deployed financial and legal vehicles to finance, own and distribute land.

Regardless of these questions, it is clear that these experimental food commons are a break from the Neoliberal and Reformist food movement politics of the early 2000s, which were defined by green entrepreneurship and a knowledge deficit models of revived agrarianism (Calo, 2018).

Some of the organisations have grown out of the Progressive food movement tradition, but the centring of land may help resist Reformist tendencies and embrace a more Radical stance (Calo, 2020b). For example, The Agrarian Commons was founded by Severine von Tscharner Fleming, the director of the Greenhorns, which is a young farmer organisation typical of an entrepreneurial and individual grit theory<sup>7</sup> of food system change. It is a major shift to see politics of land redistribution and reparations as a guiding principle in how the Agrarian Commons makes decisions about what land to target and which tenants to recruit. Attending to this divide between food movements that centre land transformation and those that elide the land question, is crucial.

## Conclusion

The path to any vision of postcapitalism runs through the countryside. Chayanov laboriously described an internal logic of smallholder agriculture that, to this day, behaves quite differently from the process suggested by theories of capitalism. With more and more literature demonstrating the social, ecological and economic potential of agroecology, a muscular Chayanovianism is certainly central to postcapitalist countryside.

But equating Chayanov's insights to an oversimplified family farm business model is insufficient. As the 'good food' movement and its critics have demonstrated, grafting alternative food production practices to a property regime that is the engine of capitalism entrenches exploitative production and creates a vacuum of anti-capitalist politics that other ecomodernist factions will happily fill.

Yet, the economic logic of smallholder production paired with a structural element that facilitates the resistance of the profit motive may uphold the fuller expression of Chayanov's utopian vision (Hu et al.,

2023). For the power of peasant logics to be harnessed, it must be paired with an ‘emancipatory rural politics’ that intervenes in market logics at multiple points of production and consumption.

Direct engagement with re-imagining the legal and social norms of property is a crucial part of this challenge (Calo et al., 2021; Shattuck et al., 2023). Perhaps through this realisation, or the winnowing availability for land access through market access mechanism alone, new experimental food commons projects are popping up within capitalist heartlands.

There are many looming questions concerning the capacity for these experiments to withstand capitalist penetration, especially as that capacity relies on securing multi-million dollar properties as a first point of intervention. Might these initiatives meet the same fate as neo-Chayanovianism, where the end result is a smattering of islands of agroecological production? Or are these strategies a ‘non-reformist reform’ (Akbar, 2022) that creates space to think differently than the way the episteme of property (Trauger, 2014) disciplines the imagination?

Despite these concerns, these experiments are a clear break from the farm-to-table theory of change that has plagued the postcapitalist aspirations of re-peasantisation. They point their efforts, at least in part, to the structural leverage points that allows capitalism to penetrate into agricultural production. These type of strategies for ‘vertical integration’ follow a line of more critical Chayanovian thinking that has a deeper potential for a utopian vision of non-capitalist food production to persist and expand.

## Notes

- 1 With the term ‘capitalist heartlands’ I invoke a certain geographic assemblage that is characterised by social, political and ecological relationships. These are wealthy nations, industrialised societies and often settler colonial states. They possess strong legal entitlements and cultural adherence to private property. Some analogues to the term found in the literature are minority world, Global North and de-agrarianised societies. All have their caveats and it is appropriate to critique my main arguments by identifying sites of radical food within these spaces or spaces where the logics of capital aren’t as hegemonic yet still milquetoast agri-food politics prevail.
- 2 The protagonists of the popular film *The Biggest Little Farm*, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt8969332/>.
- 3 <http://www.animalvegetablemiracle.com/book.htm>.
- 4 See their profile of the MST, Nicas (2023) ‘If you don’t use your land, these Marxists may take it’, *New York Times*.
- 5 For a window into the politics (or absence thereof) of an elite-to-elite consumption and production exemplar of *Chez Panisse* see Alice Water’s 2022 treatise on good food: *We Are What We Eat: A slow food manifesto*.
- 6 A food producing offshoot of the ethical outdoor clothing company Patagonia <https://www.patagoniaprovisions.com>.
- 7 The persistence and special effort required of an individual to bring about long-term change.

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# Making a postcapitalist countryside? Community landownership in Scotland

Madhu Satsangi and Andrew Purves

## Introduction

The ownership of land and the use and access rights it entails have been the subject of long contestation and political and, at times, overtly physical struggle. This chapter looks at the growth of community landownership in Scotland and the extent to which it marks the creation of a distinctive set of postcapitalist relations in the ownership and use of land in rural Scotland.

The chapter begins by assessing what we might mean by postcapitalist relations in landownership: what are their principles and how might we measure any outcomes? We then explore the origins of community landownership in Scotland with the aim of assessing whether its rationale and principles can be considered to be distinctively postcapitalist. We also consider episodes of land reform, and concomitant attempts to spread ownership rights through community ownership. Here, we reflect on the extent to which they represent the pinnacle of what can be achieved without diluting the interests of landed capital. Does the role of Government suggest a state-led or state-enabled challenge to private capital? We then survey what community landownership has produced across Scotland in terms of new assets and employment. Our question here is whether there are distinctive means of using land as a factor of production for these outputs. The themes are pursued in two case studies of community landownership: one mainland and one island. Our conclusion reviews findings and outlines what might need to change to more firmly establish postcapitalist relations in rural landownership.



## The quest for land

Scotland has a highly concentrated system of landownership that is largely feudal in origin (Wightman, 1996; Callander, 1998; although strictly speaking feudalism has now been abolished, see below). While the dominance of large areas of the country since the eleventh century by landed monopoly, or oligopoly, created fertile ground for the germination and thriving of a benevolent paternalism, it also made a terrain that allowed a jealous guarding of power and privilege and a denial of community aspiration (Satsangi, 2007). That latter motivation accelerated across Scotland with landowners aspiring for more efficient land use, labelled improvement and modernisation, first repeating the phenomenon of enclosure practised across England over a long period. Devine (1989) notes that enclosure in Scotland occurred later (from the mid-seventeenth century) and more rapidly than in England. Enclosure and consolidation were key processes in rooting capitalist structures in rural society, they 'altered the organisation, function and purposes of land from one in which several members of a community had rights of use to a new condition in which single occupants had complete control' (Devine, 1989: 148).

Through the eighteenth century across the Highlands, especially in the years after 1746 (Hunter, 2018), clan chiefs abandoned the ties of kinship for the pursuit of commerce. Concomitantly, respect and loyalty among the populace were replaced by distrust and hostility. In lowland Scotland, dissent and alienation were far less prevalent (Devine, 1989; see Aitchison and Cassell (2012) for documentation of resistance episodes). Yet in both highland and lowland Scotland, unprofitable people were evicted from the land, to be replaced by money-earning sheep and (later) deer for so-called 'sport'. Clearance could be induced through incentives to migrate; it could also be brutally enforced, as seen in the Highlands particularly (Hunter, 2018). The distant UK Government seemed either little interested in people's suffering (when raised by some Liberal MPs) or content to see it as an inevitable, if unfortunate, consequence of the need to achieve 'progress' through such modernisation. Such was the pattern until the genesis of a 'land war' in the Battle of the Braes: resistance in that part of Skye (1882) finding cross-island support and MPs sympathetic to the tenants' cause finally persuading Government to set up a Commission of Inquiry in May 1883 charged with understanding conditions in the Highlands and Islands (Hunter, 2018). Its report, and the earlier granting of security of tenure to agricultural tenants in (what was then the colony of) Ireland, was to lead to the Crofters' Holding (Scotland) Act of 1886.<sup>1</sup>

In granting security of tenure to crofters, the Act can be interpreted as both radical, in that it broke the hitherto inviolable ownership rights of the landed, and insufficiently radical in that it neither protected all (the landless labourers, ‘cottars’, were excluded) nor allowed crofts more land, which might have ensured that their inhabitants could earn at least their living from its produce. In the wake of the First World War, a further significant piece of legislation came in the 1919 Land Settlement (Scotland) Act<sup>2</sup> enabling land acquisition by the Board of Agriculture from existing private landowners through negotiated sale or, if necessary, by powers of compulsory purchase (MacLeod, 2023).

## The growth of community ownership

It was the evidence of landed power abuse or misuse, together with the twin recognition that in the twentieth century, feudal power relations were an anachronism (Johnston, 1909/1999) and that ‘the land question’ (McCrone, 2001) was central to Scottish national identity, which arguably spurred Scotland’s reborn Parliament to a course of land reform legislation.<sup>3</sup> The principal effects of the Acts (The Abolition of Feudal Tenure (Scotland) Act, 2000; The Title Conditions (Scotland) Act, 2003; and The Land Reform (Scotland) Act, 2003) were to substitute outright ownership for feudal ownership,<sup>4</sup> create a new code of access, add a pre-emptive right for secure tenant farmers under the 1991 Agricultural Holdings (Scotland) Act to buy their holding when the landlord decides to sell and, of most concern here, create a community right to buy (Satsangi, 2007).

A recognised community body, having previously declared interest in a land parcel, thereby became entitled to bid to purchase that land on its owner’s putting it up for sale. In order to be recognised, the community body has to have at least 20 members drawn from a defined and recognisable community. A bid to purchase has to gain majority support in a ballot with a turnout of at least half of the members of the defined community (Highlands and Islands Enterprise, 2003). In some cases, public monies might be made available to support such a bid (see below). Significantly, in the crofting counties, crofting communities became entitled to bid to buy land that they tenant whether or not an owner wishes to sell.

Perhaps inevitably, the Acts represent a compromise between those who had long been pushing for reform (see, for example, Wightman, 1999b) and sections of landowning interests determined to resist any

reduction in their powers. The consequence is that the policies were seen both as only a tentative step towards real reform and an envious land-grab spirited by a collectivism that had generally been thought to have collapsed along with the Berlin Wall (see [Warren, 2000](#)). Nevertheless, the fact remains that the Acts together represent a reform of land tenure seldom seen in advanced Western democracies. The Scottish Government returned to consider land reform about a decade later, with legislation via the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act of 2015 and the Land Reform (Scotland) Act of 2016. These are seen, however, to have failed to embrace an agenda for sustained change, despite that having been set out by its advisors on the basis of consensus among key interest groups ([Scottish Government, 2014](#)).

Neither the 2003 nor 2015 and 2016 Acts created community landownership in Scotland. [Boyd \(1999\)](#), [Bryden and Geisler \(2007\)](#), [McIntosh \(2004\)](#) and [Conaty et al. \(2005\)](#) concur that the principle of the common ownership of land can be traced back to the Chartist movement of the nineteenth century, though [Bilsborough \(1995\)](#) argues that it in turn owes intellectual debt to the English Levellers of 200 years earlier.

Moreover, many of Scotland's community landowners have become so quite irrespective of the 2003 Acts. Picking up our earlier historical overview, the first community land acquisition, in 1908 in Glendale on the Isle of Skye, followed a highly charged struggle, assessed in the leading history to have marked the beginnings of the Highland land wars ([Hunter, 2018](#)). The country's longest-established but scarcely heralded community land trust – the Stornoway Trust (on the Isle of Lewis, the most populous of the Western Isles) – dates from 1923, covers almost 65,000 acres and has a total population of 13,500 ([Boyd, 1999](#)). It was gifted to the community by the laird (Lord Leverhulme), but other trusts have relied on public support from the (UK) National Land Fund, set up soon after the end of the Second World War. [Wilson \(1994\)](#) documents some of its acquisitions but notes that from the mid-1950s it changed its name to the National Heritage Memorial Fund and its focus to art and buildings. [Bryden and Geisler \(2007\)](#) refer to the dilution of feudal powers in the 1970s and [Boyd \(1999\)](#) comments on the resurgence of interest in community landownership in the 1990s. The purchase of land by crofting communities in Assynt, Borve and Melness (all 1993) were widely heralded ([Chenevix-Trench and Philip, 2001](#); [Bryden and Geisler, 2007](#)). From 2001, the Scottish Land Fund took over the vestiges of previous public funding to support community land acquisition and to date has supported 23 communities in purchasing all or parts of an estate and retaining full land management.

So, how does this history relate to this book's broad concerns with modes of production? We have outlined how land has figured in an evolving agrarian regime, in the transition to industrial capitalism and its advance. The persistence of old hierarchies of control in social relations across rural Scotland is striking. From one perspective, moving forward, the focus on land might be seen as somewhat inconsistent with the postcapitalist thesis. For, part of this, as documented by Mason (2016) following Drucker (1993) and Romer (1990), is that the old factors of production of land, labour and capital have been 'supplanted by people, ideas and things – the familiar principle of scarcity has been augmented by the important principle of abundance' (Warsh, 2007, quoted by Mason, 2016: 119–20). While this may be true, people still need a place (land) on which to think.

Land – its ownership and the allocation of responsibility for it as well as the benefits that flow from it – remains a key resource across the world: witness the continuation of movements such as the International Land Coalition, with its goal 'to realise land governance for and with people at the country level, responding to the needs and protecting the rights of those who live on and from the land' (International Land Coalition, nd).

Land continues to command a price, and land price inflation is a significant economic policy concern in many countries. A clear perspective puts struggles over land firmly in the frame of moving beyond capitalism and to right its ills within a socialist democracy. This perspective was expressed powerfully in 1909, with the Labour MP (and, for a short time in 1931, Scottish Office Minister), Tom Johnston, publishing a seminal history, evidenced from official sources, of *Our Scots Noble Families*. He regarded State ownership of land as a goal of working-class struggle in rural Scotland, a parallel class objective to (urban) industrial workers' struggle for ownership of the means of production. Key to the struggle was a recognition of class interests:

[T]o-day, in Scotland, our artisans and peasants appear to believe that ... ancient noble families hold their privileges and lands ... (through) Divine Providence; that their wealth has been justly earned; and ... their titles are but rewards for honest service to the State. The first step in Reform ... is to destroy these superstitions ... our Old Nobility is not noble, ... its lands stolen ... by force or fraud; the title-deeds are rapine, murder, massacre, cheating, or Court harlotry.

(Johnston, 1909/1999: xxxiv–xxxv)

The emphasis on State ownership is important here and it was to remain central to the perspective on land reform from the Scottish Left for much of the twentieth century. Andy Wightman, whose work on landownership has been key to documenting the evidence for land reform (for example, [Wightman, 1996, 1999a](#)) argued in his McEwen memorial lecture that the Scottish goal of State ownership contrasted with an orientation towards cooperative or community ownership, seen elsewhere in Western Europe and in Sweden and Denmark ([Wightman, 1999b](#)). While cooperative ownership had flourished since the eighteenth century (at least until more recent moves to encourage private ownership ([Danson and Burnett, 2021](#)), Scotland's landowner power has for long ensured no such movement.

Is it possible within this history to identify *ex post* the rationale(s) of community landownership? One perspective, following the last discussion, is that it is an essential part of a move towards a more equitable distribution of land resources and the benefits that accrue from them. Retaining benefits within the community and local recycling of surpluses from activities is key, marking a break from the extraction of surplus value by a single private landowner possibly remote to the location where they are generated (a motive recognisable in the community asset ownership movement, see [Archer et al., 2019](#)). It is important to recognise, however, that a community buyout does not necessarily equate with ownership 'in common' and an equal sharing of the profits. Assets are let to individual members of the community and the surplus value is re-invested in projects that are intended to benefit the whole community. The distinction is reminiscent of the distinction that Obeng-Odoom ([2021: 61–8](#)) makes between 'joint rights' held individually by those in the community (members) and 'equal rights' held or enjoyed in common by everyone living in the vicinity. Thus, a capitalist market logic still operates.

Within that context, however, spreading control over land resources marks a democratisation of rural economic development ([Bryden and Geisler, 2007](#)). In these respects, they are similar to community anchor organisations in the UK, collectively different to similarly titled organisations in the US (where local ownership is not emphasised, see [Henderson et al., 2018; Doyle, 2023](#)). A review of international experience showed that: 'legal ownership of title is a key aspirational goal for many communities, particularly where the socio-cultural context has historically limited and/or removed community rights' ([McMorran et al., 2019: 7](#)).

Gaining legal ownership of title is intrinsically valuable, but it is also valued instrumentally. That is, it allows for actions to secure a sustainable future for the community to be defined and implemented.

The widespread nature of this motivation speaks to a common (but not universal) shared experience of long-term decline under private ownership, with indifference or hostility to community aspirations for development. Moving from the status of a vulnerable community to a resilient community (Fox O'Mahony and Roark, 2023; Fischer and McKee, 2017; Skerratt, 2013), beyond monopoly capitalist ownership through community ownership, is therefore believed to be essential.

## What has community ownership delivered?

More tangible than the motivations for community landownership have been the physical assets secured post purchase: notably, affordable housing, business premises and village halls. Purchase has also allowed employment opportunities to be provided. Further tangible outputs within are seen in population levels, in particular among younger people as revealed by school rolls. Thus, Satsangi (2007) assesses experience on the Isle of Gigha in its first three years under community ownership. A population that had fallen from 180 and a school roll of 28 in 1981 to 110 and a school roll of 7 in 2001 rose to 135 and a school roll of 18 in 2005. This had been enabled through the sale of land for new affordable housing provision (18 houses) by a registered housing association and the sale of six plots for individual houses. Table 7.1 summarises the key achievements of community land trusts.

**Table 7.1** Achievements of community land trusts

12 community land trusts who had owned land for 5 years or longer had:

- Upgraded 151 houses, built 6 new houses themselves and a further 33 in partnership with others;
- Released 141 plots of land for housing development, contributing significantly to the positive population trends evident in many communities;
- Redeveloped 20 other estate buildings for a variety of uses;
- Installed almost 7 MW of renewable energy capacity.

The 12 communities spent over £2.5 million on staff and local contractors in 2012/13 alone, a fivefold increase on the comparable figures at the time of the land's acquisition. Direct staffing over this period increased fourfold from 22 employed at the time of acquisition to 103 in 2012/13. The 12 estates have seen their turnover increase 2½ times over – that is rising from £1.7 million at acquisition to £6.1 million in 2012/13.

Source: Bryan and Westbrook, 2014: Open Government Licence v3.0

Looking in detail at the experience of four community landowning trusts, the evidence provided by Danson (2023) corroborates the results of the earlier studies. He also shows that the new fact of landownership had allowed community members, as a whole, to generate and increase their capital in the classical meaning of the term: wealth used to create more wealth.

## **Community ownership: postcapitalism or feudalism accommodated?**

New empirical evidence on community landowners' aspirations and motivations and what they are in the process of delivering is gathered and discussed in this section. Data are drawn from two community landowners: a mainland example and an island case. The sources used are documentation on the landowners' websites and those made available to us and interviews with the community landowners' representatives (both staff and board members) and, in the south of Scotland case, with the former landowner. The Island case also draws on other published material. The authors also obtained interviewee comments on draft case study reports. Most discussions of community landownership have drawn on data from the Scottish Highlands; here an aspect of originality is in providing a south of Scotland case.

### **Case study 1: mainland Scotland**

#### Context

The origins of this community buyout lie with the creation in 1994 of a public–private partnership established to address the post-industrial decline of the region. The particular settlement sits on the River Esk, close to the border with England.

Most of the mill towns in the Scottish Borders suffered a collapse in the textile industry from the 1970s, although this settlement perhaps suffered more than others due to a lack of scale (fewer than 3,000 residents), and remoteness from the main centres of population (Hawick, Galashiels and Selkirk), which offered a wider variety of alternative employment. Most initiatives were small scale, and focused on the immediate needs of the community; however, when the opportunity came in 2019 to bid for a part of the private Estate on the moorland above the town, that early capacity building meant that there was an entity and

Board of Trustees who won the confidence of the Scottish Government to put together a feasibility study for a community buyout.

The land above the town was until 1757 considered as ‘commonly’ used as grazing land by everyone in the area and a source of fuel (peat), as well as a good hiding place for ‘reivers’ (sheep and cattle thieves) in an area disputed for centuries between England and Scotland. At that time, one landowner petitioned the Court of Session to divide the commonly among his neighbours and himself, which after a survey and consultation among the elders was granted in an Act of Division that excluded about 100 acres of ‘common moss’ henceforth marked annually by the community during the more ancient tradition undertaken in many Border towns – the Common Riding – to mark and reaffirm this new boundary.

Over time, the moorland became a part of the Estate of the largest landowner in the UK with some 230,000 acres – now managed by a company who in 2016 took ‘the strategic decision to reduce landholdings in line with the aim of reducing our footprint’. In an interview with the Estate Director, the aim appeared to be an effort to reduce the extent of the Estate in order to re-invest in any remaining land and buildings (over 200) to improve efficiency and reduce carbon emissions, and thereafter increase returns. In 2016, the Scottish Parliament passed a Succession Act, which changed the rules around ‘heritable’ property (land, or immovable property), which a Trustee interviewed indicated might have been a factor. It might have prompted a change in attitude towards the sale of land. The change to the succession law made it more difficult to keep a landed estate in single ownership where there was more than one child to inherit. Tax reform may also have been a factor, with the removal of the business rate exemption on land used for hunting/shooting.

While the company published a balance sheet net asset value of £314 million, and a turnover of £87 million, (only £8 million from farming) in the year to March 2022, it reported a profit of £6.3 million after tax, and ‘an unsecured Private Placement (of £149 million), locking in a long-term source of funding with a blended maturity of c. 32 years, at a fixed cost of debt’ indicating an entity that is ‘asset rich, cash poor’. Traditionally, the moor had hosted ‘sporting’ activities, and at the beginning of the twentieth century supported the most prolific grouse shoot in the UK. Grouse numbers are now severely limited, in part due to rising numbers of predators (raptors) in the surrounding forests.

Today, the Estate website plays down these ‘sporting’ activities, instead focusing on ‘Community’ and ‘Environment’ (these are two of the three drop-down menu headings, together with ‘About Us’ on their website). This history, and the cordial relationship between the town and



successive dukes meant that the people always considered the moor was 'theirs', but had in recent years detected a change of direction or emphasis in how the Estate was to be run.

The aspirations of the landowner now appear to be very similar to that of the new community landowner. The emphasis is on forestry, agriculture, renewable energy, visitor services, hospitality and commercial property. In common with some other large landowners (members of Scottish Land & Estates), the Estate has moved away from their defence of traditional activities (hunting, shooting and fishing) to provide employment, towards aligning themselves with the Land Reform agenda of the Scottish Government 'by championing and supporting rural businesses that provide economic, social and environmental benefit to the countryside'.

The financial predicament of the company would explain the decision to sell the 25,000 acres above Langholm. Smaller deals had been concluded in the previous few years, including a petrol station (sold to a Trust) which had been closed for 10 years in 2018. It is ironic in a book about postcapitalist countrysides that the re-opened petrol station is unmanned, with no workers selling their labour, but the community earning a penny for every litre sold.

Since then, the Trust has bought additional 'leisure assets' comprising 100 acres in and around the town (population. c. 750) from the Estate, including Big House (the laird's previous residence), now a community centre with a bunkhouse upstairs sleeping 14, and laundry; a golf course together with 750 acres allowing for the creation of mountain bike trails, a camp site and opportunities for walking to replace an intrusive plantation of 'sitka' spruce and create new flood defences with new mixed planting.

### Community buyout and governance

The people of the settlement never believed the laird would sell 'their land' even to the point that when the opportunity arose, some people in the town did not see why they had to 'pay' for it, and opposed the buyout for that reason. Others felt threatened by what a new owner might do, not that it might affect their livelihood, more their way of life and relationship with the moor.

This (separate) Trust has seven Trustees and is a Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisation (SCIO). It raised the money to purchase 10,500 acres from the laird in two phases for a total price of £6 million. Large grants and donations were secured from the Scottish Land Fund

(£2 million), several private foundations, and thousands of supporters who donated smaller amounts through a crowdfunding exercise. The second phase was completed in November 2022, 19 months after the first. The Estate was supportive throughout the purchase by, for example, agreeing to maintain the initial valuation for both phases, and continues to co-operate by sharing knowledge and holding regular meetings to co-ordinate their ongoing land management. A further 11,390 acres of the moor were sold in April 2023, to a company established to purchase land, 'to scale conservation' and build 'natural capital' by engaging with communities.

### Achievements and looking forward

As well as the 10,500 acres, the purchased territory came with nine buildings and an 'in hand' farm supporting 1,000 sheep and a full time shepherd; there are, in addition, four employees in the Trust office. A public meeting is held every year to communicate with the community, although the initiative has an open-door policy, and feels well embedded. Four of the buildings are currently tenanted, either to private renters or for holiday lets. Since the buyout, a business plan for the period 2022–7 has been put together by the Trust. The aim is to diversify income streams for financial stability and to build community wealth, not to be reliant on short-term project-based grants, with plans to upgrade and renovate all buildings, get them tenanted, restore the moor by removing non-native trees, plant native species, promoting eco-tourism, glamping, community gardens, carbon offset and so on. The trust is open to approaches from new or existing businesses wishing to make use of the land, while retaining the focus of it being a nature reserve. One aspiration is to sell land for self-builders, to get more people living on the land with covenants to prevent them being used as holiday homes, or if they are sold, the Trust would have the first option to buy them back at prices linked to local incomes.

A trading subsidiary has been set up to handle business activities and secure any surplus for reinvestment by the Trust. Understandably, it is too early to determine the success or otherwise of the buyout, but interviews with an employee and two Trustees conveyed a high degree of optimism and energy within the organisation. The development manager, who has worked on other community buyouts over a long period, pointed out that it can take 20 or 30 years for plans to come together and for real change in outcomes, but confirmed that, although not easy, community buyouts do improve incomes and living conditions for anyone who wants to make it work.

Similar to other geographically adjacent trusts, there is a high reliance on grants from the Scottish Government and private foundations. The trust aspires to repeat the experience of more remote communities pioneering the community ownership model and see that reliance diminish.

## Case study 2: island

### Context

This island is the second largest of the small islands off the coast of the Isle of Skye in the northwest Highlands. Its total area is 31 km<sup>2</sup> and has one principal road of approximately 7 km length. According to a history written by a former director of the Trust (see below, [Dressler, 2007](#)), people are believed to have lived there since the early Bronze Age, with the island territory long being disputed, often brutally, between two clans (MacDonald and MacLeod) until the sixteenth century. Residents took the Jacobite side and, like many other communities, were subjected to Hanoverian-led revenge and persecution in the years following its failed uprising (which had culminated in the Battle of Culloden in 1746).

The island was sold in 1829 to a Highland doctor who, like many new owners, having established that it would be more profitable to populate the land with sheep than with people, proceeded to clear the land ([Satsangi et al., 2010](#)). The cessation of deliberate population reduction may have been the consequence of giving residents security of tenure in the Crofting Acts. But that legislation could not ensure population recovery, particularly when the landowner was focused on their own comfort and either hostile to, or disinterested in, such a prospect. For the island, the result was that a pre-Clearance population in its hundreds (500 estimated by [Haswell-Smith, 1999](#)) fell to 60 by 1988 ([McIntosh, 2022](#)).

By that time, the island's owner had seen relationships between himself and islanders deteriorating with his motive being to ensure that the island kept 'its slightly rundown ... Hebridean feel' (quoted by [McIntosh, 2004](#): 164).

### Community buyout and governance

As a founding member of the Trust, Alastair McIntosh ([2004, 2022](#)) has documented the history of community attempts to purchase the island in 1995 and 1997. The first attempt failed as it could not raise the purchase

price, with the owner frustrating and undermining the community interest along the way. The subsequent laird, an idiosyncratic artist, had a very short tenure, during which the Trust reorganised.

When that owner made public his intention to sell, the Trust launched a major public funding campaign to raise the £1.5 million acquisition price. Consultation and active engagement with all residents was key to the Trust and meant that it could bid knowing it had the support of the whole island. While the local authority (Highland Council) and two non-departmental public bodies (Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) and the Scottish Wildlife Trust (SWT)) were supportive (and indeed the Council and SWT are guaranteed representation among Trustees), no public money was given or lent to the Trust. There were many small donations but an anonymous donation of £1 million made community purchase of the island, eight houses and An Laimhrig ('The Pier' building, which houses the island shop and post office, tearoom, craft shop, Trust office, waiting area and toilet/shower facilities), two farms and croft land realistic.

A key concern for islanders at the time of buyout was their lack of security of tenure, coupled with the recognition that a new landowner could be as inimical to their interests as either of the last two, or worse. Further decay of housing stock and key infrastructure and the further decline of the island was therefore a distinctly possible outcome. Arresting and reversing decline was an essential objective in community purchase, today expressed in the Trust's mission: 'to provide and create opportunity for economic development, housing and infrastructure, whilst conserving our natural and cultural heritage to ensure that development takes place in a sustainable way' (Eigg Heritage Trust, 2023).

The constitution of the Trust was developed by a lawyer well versed in land reform, although it is somewhat different from that of other Trusts for community landowners.<sup>5</sup> It has three members: Highland Council (two directors allowed, although the Council typically takes up only one through the councillor elected for the ward), the SWT (one director) and the Isle of Eigg Residents' Association (four directors). All of the island's residents are members of the association by right, and the constitution therefore ensures that residents' voices are paramount in decision-making. For key participants in the Trust, this outcome makes for a particularly strong democratic model.

The Trust is also unique in having a chair who is not a resident of the island but is its appointee and whose key role is to see that decisions are made based on consultation and in recognition of possible different perspectives, therefore supporting islanders. It was noted that Eigg had

not seen different factions emerging among residents. In determining the structure, the advantage of the chair being independent with thus no direct or personal stake in a decision outweighed any possible disadvantage from that same position. The chair also represents the Trust and can be an arbiter for any concerns that islanders may feel are not being heard. In all of these respects, the way in which the island is run marks a radical departure from the past, where the single landowner's interests superseded all others. Almost 30 years after community buyout, resident interest in the Trust remains high. There is high interest among residents in becoming a director. Again, this position is not universal among older buyouts, where participation and engagement have seen peaks and troughs.

### Achievements

The mechanism for delivering against the Trust's mission is through three subsidiary companies ([Isle of Eigg Heritage Trust, 2023](#)):

- 'Island' Trading Limited owns and manages An Laimhrig. It has sold plots of land for newbuild housing and other ventures, including a microbrewery, and built a bunkhouse. It also has a sustainable woodland company, replacing felled non-native species with native trees.
- 'Island' Electric, set up to build and manage the island's electricity grid. The significance of this is that the island is not connected to the National Grid and was reliant year-round on diesel generators. Power is supplied by a mixture of small-scale renewables – four wind turbines, one large and two smaller hydroelectric plants and a solar PV array, with diesel back up.
- 'Island' Construction Limited, set up to undertake renovation works on the Trust's properties. To date it has completed five total house renovations plus two further house improvement/insulation projects. It also carries out infrastructure projects and small-scale repairs. It employs, ad hoc, a number of local subcontractors.

Each of the subsidiaries works on a profit-making basis. However, surpluses do not accrue to any individual but rather are remitted to Trustees for reinvestment. The businesses have benefited from advice from HIE and SWT, with small-scale financial support (grants from HIE).

## Looking forward

Unlike many other parts of rural and remote Scotland, the island has an age structure that is not weighted towards older people. The school roll is healthy and the Trust is looking to future projects: increasing the fuel efficiency of its housing stock is recognised as a priority and beyond that looking to new business developments. The case study island has had a particularly high profile with the public, government and its agencies, not least because the buyout preceded land reform legislation and Government recognised the virtue of a high degree of community consensus in buyout proposals.

## Conclusion

Community landownership has become more widely accepted across the political spectrum because it has been seen to have worked in regenerating areas, especially in remote and rural Scotland and notably on some islands. Agencies that have been supportive have moved from a perhaps somewhat protective and paternalistic outlook to being enabling partners and the island has been seen as a model for other buyouts (for example, Gigha). Before he became Scotland's inaugural First Minister, Donald Dewar saw that:

Before the take-over, (the island) was a high-profile example of the wrongs that land reform in Scotland needs to right: a series of absentee landlords who did little or nothing to benefit – and much to mar – the lives of the people who lived there. Since the take-over, it has been synonymous with the opportunities that can flow from self-determination and the removal of barriers to development.

(Dewar, 1998: np)

In both case studies, echoing previous research, we see that the deliberately collaborative business model of community landownership, and its commonly documented ethos, is fully consistent with a set of principles in designing a 'transition' to postcapitalism of ecological sustainability and ensuring that the transition is a human one (Mason, 2016: 266–8) and one of its objectives in letting market forces 'disappear' from what he terms strategic public services (p. 272). It can also be seen that community landownership marks a different organisation of the traditional factors of production, noted in [Chapter 1](#) as a central characteristic of postcapitalism. Market forces have not, however,

disappeared from the delivery of services in either case study area. The mainland case study does show, however, that community landownership has allowed a 'traditional' means of raising income through killing animals for 'sport' to be abandoned in favour of environmental conservation.

The modus operandi of community landowners maximises the building of social capital: here, in emphasising residents' governance capacities and in placing priority on resident voice in determining community futures. Prioritising community voice is only possible because it is the community body that has the powers of landownership. Both of these are recognised by Rydin (2023, 2024) as key features in configuring planning for de-growth, a movement that extols building postcapitalism from the bottom up, rather than working top-down from a grand vision. Pusey's chapter in this collection further recognises how de-growth thinking relates to other components of postcapitalist thinking.

Defining a prospectus for community landownership needs, however, to reflect on local realities. Achieving it is only possible with the input of a significant amount of voluntary effort among the purchasers, even when (as in the mainland case study), they have a supportive seller. Thus, there are few informed commentators who suggest community ownership as a panacea for all cases of rural depopulation. More widely accepted is that there is scope for enlarging the amount of rural community control over their future through land purchase.

Although outright hostility to community ownership is perhaps not voiced as loudly in public as it was in the early years of this century, 67 per cent of Scotland's private rural land is still owned by 0.025 per cent of the population, and only around 3 per cent is in community ownership (Peacock, 2023). The last two decades of land reform have not altered Scotland's position: it retains 'one of the most unequal landownership patterns in the Global North, characterised by excessively large land holdings exerting monopoly effects, and absentee landownership' (Doyle, 2023: 431).

At the time of writing, Scotland awaits a further round of land reform legislation, where such a direction could be embraced (see Macleod, 2023) or where limited change restricts communities to a small niche in a neo-feudal landownership regime.

## Notes

- 1 As set out by the Crofting Commission (nd), crofting is a system of landholding unique to Scotland. 'A croft is a relatively small agricultural land holding, which is normally held in tenancy, and which may or may not have buildings or a house associated with it ... Crofting has had its own specific legislation since 1886, ensuring security of tenure, fair rents and compensation for permanent improvements. The Crofters' Holding Act of 1886 also provided the right to bequeath the croft tenancy to a member of a crofter's family. Later legislation provided other rights to crofters, such as the right to assign a croft tenancy, subject to approval, to a person of their choice or indeed to purchase their croft. Crofters also have responsibilities defined in legislation which include: a duty to be resident on or within 32 kilometres of their croft, a duty not to neglect their croft, and a duty to cultivate and maintain their croft or to put it to another purposeful use.'
- 2 A 'Land for Heroes' Act to parallel the 'Homes Fit for Heroes' Housing, Town Planning and so on Act of the same year, both spurred by ex-servicemen's return.
- 3 The course of legislation was set taking advice from a Land Reform Policy Group (Scottish Office, 1999). Eloquent flavours of the debate can be gathered from the John McEwen Memorial Lectures (for example, MacGregor, 1993; Hunter, 1995; Bryden, 1996; McCrone, 1997).
- 4 Thereby ending, somewhat perversely, feudalism's beneficial custom of obligation to the public good (Wightman, 1999a).
- 5 It also differs from the model constitutions set out for community trusts to be compliant with the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003. <https://www.gov.scot/policies/land-reform/community-right-to-buy> (accessed 21 August 2003).

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# Community landownership: means and outcomes – experiences of community acquisition processes in Scotland

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## Introduction

A remarkable programme of land reform through community ownership is unfolding in Scotland. Engaging with themes of experimentation, transformation and direct democracy, an increasing number of land and asset-owning community groups are enacting postcapitalist alternatives to traditional models of private landownership in both rural and urban areas. Although globally the definitions of community property are diverse (Lawrence et al., 2020), Scotland is unusual in creating new forms of property ownership by a community (Hoffman, 2013; Lovett, 2020): private ownership that usually refers to legal ownership of title by a company or charitable organisation with a constitutional type tightly defined by Scottish law (Combe, 2020). This is unlike the ownership of land by municipal organisations and the more traditional commons, both of which are widely found in continental Europe (UNECE/FAO, 2019; Lawrence et al., 2020).

The land reform movement in Scotland began with grassroots action driven by insecurity and disempowerment and has been enacted and justified by Scottish Government policy on the grounds of fairness, public good and sustainable development (Ross, 2019). Community organisations in both rural and urban Scotland have legal rights to buy land and other property (largely buildings, but including assets such as

piers, slipways, and river fishing rights), as well as financial support via the Scottish Land Fund. Through a desire to reinvent and reinvigorate ownership of land and assets away from prevailing top-down and elite models, the outcomes of communities taking ownership of land or assets may be considered an important component of a shift towards ‘postcapitalist commons’ (Chatterton, 2016). However, this raises important questions, both in relation to the process of acquiring land and assets (for example, fairness, legitimacy, conflict), and how the different routes to ownership affect participants’ experiences of collective action and empowerment.

With these points in mind, this chapter explores the lived experiences of people in communities in Scotland that have sought community ownership, to gain deeper understanding of the barriers and opportunities for a future with postcapitalist alternatives to traditional private landownership models. The findings are based on commissioned research that assessed both the effectiveness of community ownership mechanisms and the potential to improve and simplify these mechanisms to enable the expansion of community ownership in Scotland (Mc Morran et al., 2018).<sup>1</sup> Through qualitative interviews and workshops with both rural and urban people, this research provides a fresh perspective on the experiences of communities seeking routes to empowerment and collective action through property ownership.

Our findings are important not least because community ownership is becoming increasingly normalised across the UK (see Nason, 2022 for a detailed review), supported by the Conservative Government’s ‘Levelling Up’ agenda and the UK Government’s Community Ownership Fund (UK Government, 2023). The experience of communities seeking to own land and property in Scotland can and does provide valuable lessons regarding legislation, funding and other support necessary for successful outcomes from community asset acquisition. While the historical context in Scotland differs from the rest of the UK, community landownership in the Scottish case provides a critical lens through which to explore how the act of challenging dominant property models can deliver different outcomes (Calo et al., 2021; Doyle, 2023) and potentially provide a keystone for postcapitalist futures in the countryside.

## Postcapitalist routes to land and asset ownership in Scotland

A century has now passed since one of the earliest substantial community acquisitions of land in Scotland took place. In 1923, the then owner Lord Leverhulme transferred part of his estate to the local community in Stornoway and its vicinity, which resulted in the establishment of the Stornoway Trust. Postcapitalist processes are therefore not new in this case, with a long history of communities rising to the challenge that Smith (2020) and Gibson-Graham (2003) recognise as freeing the terms ‘community’ and ‘local’ from their connotations of powerlessness and irrelevance. Collectively, buyouts represent a direct response to the status quo, with Scotland continuing to exhibit one of the most concentrated patterns of private landownership in the world (Wightman, 2010; Merrell et al., 2023). Community land acquisitions have often been driven by issues of insecurity, neglect and disempowerment linked to localised rapid community decline, owing to neglectful and absentee private landownership (MacAskill, 1999). Community acquisitions of land and assets have also commonly been driven by a perceived opportunity for enhancing local socio-economic development and community retention – reflecting wider growth in community activity and the establishment of ‘asset based’ models of community development (Flora et al., 2004; Land Reform Review Group (LRRG), 2014). Ownership of land (and associated assets and development rights) is therefore increasingly viewed as a mechanism for facilitating community retention and growth, employment creation and facilitating inward investment and capacity-building (Mc Morran et al., 2014).

It was not until the 1990s, however, that the community land movement began to build momentum, with the landmark purchase of the 8,620 ha North Lochinver Estate by the Assynt Crofters Trust in 1993 (Brennan, 2001), followed by other high-profile community buyouts of the Isle of Eigg (1997) and Knoydart (1999), both of which occurred in direct response to perceived neglectful private landownership (Boyd, 2003). In some cases, communities that have acquired one asset have gone on to acquire larger assets and land as their experience and capacity has grown (LRRG, 2014).

The establishment of the Community Land Unit (CLU) within Highlands and Islands Enterprise<sup>2</sup> (HIE) in 1997 (tasked with providing advice to existing and prospective community landowners) and the introduction of the Scottish Land Fund (SLF) in 2001 to support community land purchases and subsequent management of these landholdings,

demonstrated government support for increasing community ownership and formalised the process of community acquisition (see [Table 8.1](#)). The establishment and evolution of the organisational and legislative framework for community acquisition has shaped many aspects of the buyout process – including formalising the definition of ‘community’ and the structure of community bodies (most commonly companies limited by guarantee) engaging in buyouts. Community bodies are typically required to have constitutions that demonstrate geographically defined, open membership, local control, public benefit objectives and non-profit distributing status, although the precise wording required to specify these characteristics varies between mechanisms. This new legislative framework created possibilities to respond to socio-economic challenges through land and asset ownership and arguably generated potential for what García-Lopez et al. (2021) would describe as ‘beyond-capitalist ways of life’.

Since 1990 the total area of community owned land has increased more than fivefold, with a rapid expansion between 2001 and 2006 (coinciding with the first Scottish Land Fund), and a slower rate of growth since 2006. Nonetheless, community landownership continues to represent a very small proportion (just under 3 per cent) of the total land area of Scotland, with the bulk of this land area represented by a small number of very large rural landholdings<sup>3</sup> ([Scottish Government, 2023a](#)). Notably, most community acquisitions occurred without use of the provisions of the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 (instead via negotiated transfer, as described in the later Results section) and most acquisitions have been from private landowners (LRRG, 2014; [Scottish Government, 2017](#)). The LRRG (2014) reported that just 6 per cent of the area then in community ownership had come from the public sector, although this proportion is higher in the Highlands. The pattern may vary between sectors and asset types; among community woodlands a much greater proportion of the area in community ownership has come from the public sector, much of it through the National Forest Land Scheme.<sup>4</sup> The majority of community-owned land is located in remote, rural areas, in Na h-Eileanan Siar (the Western Isles) and Highland regions; indeed, over half of the land area in Na h-Eileanan Siar is community owned ([Scottish Government, 2023a](#)). Various explanations have been suggested for this uneven distribution, including lower land values, the higher level of market failure on the periphery, the influence of crofting and the existence of high levels of social capital in remote regions (LRRG, 2014).

**Table 8.1** Overview of the statutory routes to community land and asset ownership

<b>Route</b>	<b>Statutory mechanism</b>	<b>Types of asset</b>	<b>Process</b>
Community rights to buy	Part 2 of the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 <sup>1</sup> and Part 4 of the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015	Any land (rural and urban) and some rights associated with land.	Community registers interest in the land to have first option to buy when the land is offered for sale or makes late application when the land is on the market.
Crofting community rights to buy (including Transfer of Crofting Estates)	Part 3 of the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 and the Transfer of Crofting Estates (Scotland) Act 1997 <sup>2</sup>	Eligible croft land, including some rights and the interest of the tenant in tenanted land.	Crofting community must establish majority community support, identify eligible croft land and resources needed to acquire land.
Asset transfer	Part 5 of the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015	All assets owned by local authorities, Scottish public bodies or Scottish Ministers.	Community makes formal request to the relevant authority. At least 20 members of a community body required for property purchase.

1 Parts 3A and 5 of the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2016 also now include provisions for absolute community rights to land that is either wholly or mainly abandoned or neglected, or being used/managed in a way that causes harm to environmental well-being (3A) and to further sustainable development (5).

2 The 1997 Act enables the government to dispose of publicly owned crofting estates (or parts of such estates) and other relevant property in the crofting counties to approved crofting bodies (Combe, 2020).



## Community ownership outcomes

The acquisition of land and assets by communities has been increasingly recognised as resulting in far-reaching economic, social and environmental outcomes (for example, Skerratt, 2011; Bryan and Westbrook, 2014; Mulholland et al., 2015; Macaulay and Dalglish, 2021; Danson, 2023). Community ownership has been found to facilitate the development of a framework for economic development, through access to land and assets in combination with enhanced participatory governance and rebuilding of community capacity (Skerratt, 2011; Doyle, 2023). A review in 2014 of 12 established community landholdings demonstrated that since community acquisition of those holdings, the total combined turnover had increased from £1.7 million to £6.1 million, with staffing increasing from 22 to 103 and a total capital investment of £34 million since acquisition, including £16 million in renewable energy initiatives (Bryan and Westbrook, 2014). The development of business hubs by community land bodies has also occurred and business development has increased since acquisition (from 83 to 185 businesses on the 12 landholdings) (Bryan and Westbrook, 2014).

Skerratt (2011) identified reduced out-migration on community landholdings since acquisition (linked to inward investment and increased housing availability), and stable or increasing populations. Community landownership has also been linked to increased individual and community confidence and cohesion, associated with collective action and security of tenure, which enhances community capacity and motivation, and facilitates long-term planning (Slee et al., 2008; Hunter, 2012; Mc Morran et al., 2014). The experience gained through the process of community land acquisition can also impact on community energy, capacity and empowerment in relation to local decision-making processes and commonly results in the emergence of local leaders, as well as increased transparency in decision-making (Slee et al., 2008; Macaulay and Dalglish, 2021; Doyle, 2023). The process of ownership and community governance can therefore result in communities building stronger internal and external networks – increasing efficiencies and access to wider resources and enhancing community resilience (Lawrence, 2009; Skerratt, 2011; Danson, 2023). Community landownership has also been associated with a reconfiguring of resource management away from passive approaches towards proactive, community-centred models that incorporate the re-working of traditional land uses and the reconnection of communities with the land and environment (Mackenzie, 2013; Mc Morran et al., 2014).

Importantly, the extent of outcomes from community landownership can vary, depending on factors such as the income potential of the asset(s), the length of time since purchase, community capacity and the existence of stakeholder partnerships (Mc Morran, 2016). Critical challenges faced by landowning communities include economic viability, division and conflict in the community, limited social capital and limited resources and assets (Mc Morran et al., 2014). Funding for purchases and post-acquisition costs remains a challenge to community asset acquisition and ownership processes in Scotland, and across the UK (Nason, 2022).

With all these points in mind, our research explored the lived experiences of people acquiring (or trying to acquire) community assets via the different routes, as well as those involved in the process in other capacities. Understanding these experiences provides insight into the feasibility of, and implications for, transitions to postcapitalist alternatives within the land market.

## Methodology

The research was conducted in three stages. First, a review of relevant academic and other literature identified several barriers and opportunities related to community ownership in Scotland. The review was supplemented with scoping interviews with 19 representatives of government agencies and departments, non-governmental organisations, private sector representatives and local authorities, all with a remit related to community ownership. The interviewees discussed several topics, including the barriers faced by communities in acquiring land through legislative and non-legislative routes, the potential solutions to these barriers, and suggestions for ways to improve the interaction and complementarity between the different routes to ownership (shown in Table 8.1).

In the second stage, 56 interviews were conducted with people from three distinct groups, to build on the findings of the scoping discussions. Interviewees included 32 members of community bodies from across Scotland with experience of the acquisition processes outlined in Table 8.1,<sup>5</sup> 13 professional intermediaries (for example, lawyers, land agents) and 12 'non-community' landowners with experience of the different routes to ownership (for example, former landowners who had sold, or attempted to sell, land to communities). In these discussions, interviewees were asked to recount their lived experiences of community

land and asset acquisition and reflect on positive and negative aspects. They were also asked to suggest changes to the legislative process and support mechanisms. After the interviews, two workshops were held with community representatives to capture additional perspectives from groups who had not taken part in the earlier discussions (for example, those located within central Scotland). The workshop discussions focused on similar themes to the interviews, including their lived experiences and reflections on challenges and opportunities for change.

The qualitative data from the interviews and workshops was analysed thematically. Below, the results are described in relation to the ownership routes summarised in [Table 8.1](#). The analysis enabled the development of recommendations for change, which are then presented and discussed within the frame of postcapitalist futures for rural communities.

## Results

### Negotiated transfer

Most community asset acquisitions in Scotland have been completed through negotiated transfers that take place outside of legislative or other formal mechanisms, via a community approaching a landowner (or vice versa) to discuss a potential sale. Interviewees from all groups suggested that this is the preferred route to community ownership. Historically, this has been the most common way for communities to acquire land or assets, with many landowners prepared to work collaboratively to complete sales amicably when communities react to an opportunity. It was perceived as ‘friendlier’, and support is available in the form of a good practice protocol published by the Scottish Land Commission (2023). Similarly, negotiated transfer was seen by some scoping interviewees as a ‘good route’, in particular when the property in question is sold at or below the valuation price, which allows communities to focus on what they need instead of creating a feeling within the community that they must buy ‘everything’ (for example, an entire rural estate). Nonetheless, legislative routes such as the Community Right to Buy (CRtB) were regularly regarded by community members as important for negotiated transfer because they can use the existence of the legislation to help them progress discussions with landowners. However, some professional intermediaries viewed this ‘veiled threat’ of the legislation as having a negative impact on negotiated transfers because this has a negative impact on the tone of negotiations. They explained that applying the good practice protocol needs two willing

parties and there have been issues when those using it have not 'honoured its spirit'. For example, a landowner can use the strict adherence to its stages as a delaying tactic or blocking mechanism, and a community can require a landowner to follow the process strictly while at the same time adjusting or skipping steps themselves.

A common sentiment within all interview groups was that positive experiences of negotiated transfer tend to exist where the landowner and their representative(s) have already established a relationship with the community and there are clear lines of communication between the parties. A smooth negotiation is also reliant on a clearly identified community need, strong leadership within the community body and a democratic process such as a ballot that shows a clear decision in the community to take ownership of an asset. Despite these mostly positive aspects, participants from all groups also noted important challenges related to communication between landowners and communities when they work towards a negotiated transfer. An important, practical issue is that, without a willing seller, preparatory funding from the Scottish Land Fund is generally not available for feasibility studies, business plans, legal costs and so on. In cases where there is no willing seller, communities also have limited options to explore options for progressing along this ownership pathway.

Community interviewees expressed frustration that it can be hard to 'get the landowner to the table' and establish clear lines of communication, while non-community landowners described the challenges they encountered when trying to ascertain who are the 'official' representatives of a community. The latter can be particularly challenging if the community body is disorganised or lacking in capacity, either in terms of governance arrangements, or because of a perceived lack of knowledge regarding the commercial potential of the land or asset(s) and the running costs. Landowners were also concerned in some cases that they would not receive financial compensation for costs incurred if either party pulled out of a deal in a non-legislative scenario.

The timescale for negotiated transfers is lengthy, even when compared to legislative routes that also take time. This can impact negatively on a landowner's business planning and resource input, as well as the volunteer effort required from the community body. Community bodies can incur remarkably high legal costs over an extended period of negotiations. Specific challenges also arise in the case of negotiating sales with charitable landowners. The role of charitable trustees to achieve 'proper value' on disposal of any charity or trust asset is a key challenge for communities wishing to acquire assets from these types of

owners. Although some public interest charities have explored leasing arrangements with communities, these tend not to be taken up by communities because of the lack of access to revenue funding for leased land and assets.

### Community rights to buy

The drivers for communities pursuing this route can vary, but community right-to-buy (CRtB) applications are commonly either a response to the potential loss of an asset or service and a desire to secure the asset, or an effort to acquire a local asset perceived as underutilised, to make use of the asset for community benefit. These ownership aspirations often relate to concerns about declines in population and employment opportunities, coupled with a desire to harness local assets to facilitate job creation, affordable housing, and the preservation of local heritage and identity.

The existence and increasing awareness of the legislation (and the well-known success of key buyouts) was widely viewed as having created an environment for negotiation through a repositioning of communities and the dynamic between landowners and communities, with power now existing 'on both sides'. The legislation had increased community confidence and influenced the attitudes of landowners about the communities who live on their land.

The process was noted by some interviewees from all groups as balanced between community and owner interests, with respect to the underlying ethos (that is, public benefit and sustainable development), the valuation process and setting reasonable timescales (which helped to maintain momentum). A small number of public sector interviewees argued that the arduous nature of the process represents a strength, as it tests the capacity and will of a community for asset ownership, which was a view not commonly shared by community interviewees. As one public sector participant stated, 'it works in that if you cannot complete the application, you should not get the asset'. Community interviewees also referred positively to learning during the process, building experience and networks, and the existence of funding streams and other support frameworks. These frameworks include the Scottish Government Community Land Team and the key role of third-party facilitators.

A key challenge was the appropriate use and application of the CRtB. This path to ownership should only be used in cases where there was a specific requirement for a legislative route and where no less onerous route was available; however, examples emerged where communities had been compelled to attempt this approach even when alternative pathways

were available. Similarly, the use of CRtB to acquire publicly owned assets<sup>6</sup> was widely viewed as inappropriate and considered a failure on the part of the public body, for example in relation to community engagement. A further challenge to the success of this process was the submission of CRtB applications solely with the aim of thwarting a proposed development.

Complexity and high failure rates were also considered a challenge to the CRtB. Interviewees commonly stated that CRtB is a complex route which, combined with the need for a willing seller and low re-registration rates,<sup>7</sup> has resulted in a very low success rate for CRtB in terms of achieving ownership. As one professional intermediary explained: 'there is a general feeling in the profession that the complicated legislative hurdles a community body has to overcome are formidable. It needs a fairly determined bunch of people to see it through ... it is not for the faint-hearted'. Community interviewees also highlighted the challenges of responding to an opportunity such as an impending sale and completing a complex application process fast enough to avoid a late or failed CRtB application. Some communities viewed the timescales as making it 'an uneven playing field', with one community describing a situation where a suitable area of land had come up for sale, but they had run out of time to make the required alterations to their constitution and complete a CRtB application before the asset was sold. Specific aspects of the process seen as challenging to complete within the timescales included the valuation, which is required before a community ballot commences, preparing the business plan, and carrying out the ballot.

Managing expectations around the process was also recognised as a challenge by interviewees in all groups. While some awareness of CRtB exists among communities across Scotland, this is much higher in the Highlands and Islands. Despite this, many interviewees felt that communities were often unaware of the success rates of CRtB applications, what the process entails and that alternative routes such as negotiation exist in some cases. Scoping interviewees and community groups highlighted the risk of unrealistic expectations of CRtB; the term is seen as misleading, as it is a right to pre-emptive purchase only and not an absolute right to buy. As one scoping interviewee stated: 'some communities have very unrealistic expectations, they expect CRtB to deliver ownership quickly, but it is not quick, and the outcome is very uncertain and often the community does not get the asset'. Several community interviewees felt they had underestimated how arduous the process would be, and failure often led to community groups becoming demotivated and cynical about the process.

The most fundamental barrier to CRtB and community ownership remains owners who are unwilling to sell, or who withdraw their land or asset from the market during the process. Some communities argued that the ability of owners to withdraw from a sale, or fail to ever market the asset, is counter intuitive to the ethos of the legislation and the effort involved for communities: ‘CRtB is really very limited ... if the owner refuses to sell after all your hard work you have a black hole instead of a viable project.’ In some cases, this had led to protracted and difficult negotiations between communities and owners. While most interviewees recognised the role of the legislation in facilitating dialogue, a minority noted that for some owners a CRtB application represented a ‘line in the sand, which made negotiations more difficult, as they viewed it as an adversarial challenge’. This had the potential to create strained relationships, particularly where the landowner was a community member or ‘neighbour’. This was potentially exacerbated where landowners had limited awareness of CRtB, had concerns about asset valuation, and did not understand the CRtB does not represent a compulsory right to purchase. Some landowner interviewees highlighted their inability to influence the process or participate in a meaningful way, as one stated ‘the landowner is not really a stakeholder in the physical process [of CRtB]’.

Other important, practical challenges included difficulties experienced by communities in identifying landowners and clarifying the boundaries of a site, as well as communicating with landowners who are not resident on their land.

### Crofting community rights to buy

Relative to the CRtB, the Crofting CRtB and Transfer of Crofting Estates (ToCE) routes are very rarely used legislative mechanisms, with a limited number of communities having attempted to acquire their land using these routes.

Despite limited use, a key strength of the Crofting CRtB is that it represents a mechanism by which crofting communities can acquire and control the croft land where they live and work, and to acquire the interest of the tenant in tenanted land (that is, the community body becomes the new landlord). It represents an absolute right to buy and is therefore a key underlying element of a wider land reform agenda in Scotland, and a background factor in other crofting buyouts. In the two crofting communities which have so far attempted this route, the key drivers related to the potential for job creation, income generation (including through renewable energy development), a reversal of out-migration, and the long-term survival of crofting communities and heritage.

In relation to the ToCE, the Scottish Government is in principle very willing to sell crofting land to crofting communities and townships. The Scottish Government crofting estates (covering 95,000 ha) therefore present an opportunity to increase the area of land under community ownership. Despite the low current interest from communities on public crofting estates to see transfer, existing crofting buyouts and the support provided to these communities offer clear potential for demonstrating the potential outcomes of community ownership.

The Crofting CRtB was widely recognised by participants as being overly complex in practice, including for example the requirement to map all croft holdings, which resulted in substantial delays, frustration and demotivation on the part of the volunteers facilitating the application process. The distinct and complex nature of crofting tenancies resulted in additional challenges relative to an estate with no tenancies or crofts. There was limited availability of support for the process (both in financial and advisory terms), despite the huge complexity of the task, and a misalignment of existing funding streams and the Crofting CRtB in terms of the requirement of the Scottish Land Fund for funding entire communities as opposed to specifically 'crofting communities'. In addition, there was an apparent reluctance of many crofting communities to take on the ownership of management of their estate where the landlord is benign and 'non-interfering'. The disparate nature of multiple townships across large land holdings can create considerable difficulties in terms of unifying the dispersed 'community' around a buyout.

For the ToCE route, a key reason noted by scoping and crofting community interviewees for the lack of uptake of this route is the common perception of the Scottish Government as a satisfactory and benign landlord. As a result, crofters on government-owned crofting estates often did not see a strong logic for them to acquire the land, particularly as they benefitted from crofting tenancies, which had a high degree of long-term security, and they questioned whether this security of tenure might be affected by community ownership. In some cases, crofting community groups also viewed acquiring the estate (and the associated workload) as beyond their capacity.

Interestingly, it was noted that that awareness of this route among communities was low, and where this route had been attempted, it has proved a slow, complex, and challenging pathway to ownership (slower than many buyouts from private owners). The original ethos of the Act was to encourage straightforward transfers with minimal cost, but the current situation fails to reflect this and suffers from a lack of clarity.



## Asset transfer

Some asset transfer requests included in this research were driven by a threat, or perceived threat, of loss. Groups were motivated by a wish to 'save' an asset, including 1,000 ha of former and potentially restorable Caledonian pine forest listed to be sold by (the former) Forest Enterprise Scotland, and a late Victorian castle on a Hebridean island that was falling into disrepair. Others were triggered by awareness that an asset would be put up for sale on the market, or awareness of a vacant building, both seen as opportunities for community development. The longer history of the National Forest Land Scheme provides some positive examples where community ownership of assets has provided access to capital, income and community self-esteem that has generated further community development (see [Lawrence, 2009](#)). Forestry and Land Scotland's Community Asset Transfer Scheme builds on these positive experiences and was recognised by scoping and community interviewees as a model of good practice for implementing Scottish community empowerment legislation into a transparent and accessible procedure in practice.

While the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 on asset transfer was widely welcomed by scoping interviewees, there have been difficulties with implementation of the asset transfer process. Relevant authorities and communities were described as on a steep learning curve. Some local authorities were recognised as more proactive than others – in many cases, relevant authorities have now listed their assets, and a few have developed a rigorous process for processing asset transfer requests. Overall, however, most community interviewees felt at the time of the research that the process was not yet well established, with few relevant authorities having integrated asset transfer into their existing structures and practices. In this regard, the legislation was deemed much more attractive in principle than in its implementation.

Engaging with the new legislation has been challenging for many local authorities, and interviewees from these public sector organisations described struggles with resources and process, concerns about the financial impact of the loss of the asset, and a degree of uncertainty about the capacity of communities to take on assets. A related challenge was the perceived difference in culture between community groups and local authorities, exacerbated by both a lack of awareness within local authorities of the impacts of asset transfer on their own operations, and by negative expectations and experiences on the part of community groups. Scoping interviewees attributed challenges facing asset transfer processes to political will at different scales. There was a desire for 'culture change

[that] needs real leadership from the top and much more could be done by the Scottish Government to lead on asset transfer and communicate clearly to local authorities and public agencies what exactly is expected of them’.

Concerns were also raised about the objectivity of those making decisions within local authorities about asset transfer requests. This was in contrast with the process established by Forest Enterprise Scotland (now Forestry and Land Scotland) for its Community Asset Transfer Scheme, which uses an independent panel to assess applications and recommendations on whether to agree to a transfer. This was highlighted by some participants as a more robust approach that helps to avoid such conflicts of interest (or suspicion of such conflicts).

Some community interviewees indicated that, in some local authorities, the 2015 Act had prompted entrenchment and a slow-down of processes. In these cases, local authorities were perceived as being less strategic, adaptive and flexible because of legislation. Some processes which were historically negotiated between communities and local authorities were seen as having become more bureaucratic, and leases which used to be nominal (or ‘peppercorn’) were described as more likely to instead be set at commercial rates. Some scoping interviewees even perceived the asset transfer legislation as having potentially discouraged negotiated sales.

Increasingly, local authorities are diversifying into a range of semi-private arrangements which also presents challenges for asset transfer legislation. An important grey area was identified in connection with Arm’s Length External Organisations (ALEOs), and with public–private partnerships and joint venture companies with the private sector, which are not legally required to respond to asset transfer requests in the same way as local authorities.

Overall, many community participants expressed exasperation and exhaustion with their experiences of an unclear and ad hoc asset transfer process. Many highlighted the huge burden on voluntary effort and the time needed to review the legislation, and work out how to engage with the appeals process. As one scoping interviewee noted: ‘They [communities] have a lot to do in the time set – it only tends to work to time if people know what they are doing, and the community is already formally organised.’ Regardless of the level of input from a community development officer, community volunteers were still required to undertake a significant workload to manage the asset transfer process and costs to the community often mounted up rapidly (for example, planning costs, valuation fees, feasibility studies, VAT advice). It was not always clear what the costs

of asset transfer would be for communities, while local authorities felt that they should not cover the costs associated with losing an asset. The communities' concerns about the costs of the process were compounded by those related to managing the asset after acquisition, with ownership seen as 'not the end point' and acknowledgement that 'if there is a real political will that recognised the social and economic and environmental benefits of community groups developing land, there has to be support in place for the next step'. Post-acquisition support was a key challenge to all community landowners, irrespective of ownership route. These cross-cutting themes of benefits and challenges are described in the following discussion.

## Discussion

The routes available to communities in Scotland to pursue the acquisition of private and public land and other assets have developed considerably in recent years. Critically, negotiated transfers, legislative development, and key buyout 'success stories' have had a collective impact in delivering growth across the community ownership sector and in facilitating more dialogue between landowners and communities to encourage negotiated transfers. In several cases described in this research, community groups recognised the positive emotional impact of a successful acquisition, with resulting impacts on community motivation, cohesion and empowerment. Considerable further opportunities for increasing community ownership exist, including in relation to the transfer of publicly owned land in rural and urban areas. Furthermore, key examples of progressive landowners facilitating transfers, local authorities with an established track record of well-developed asset transfer, and previous successful transfer schemes such as the National Forest Land Scheme (Lawrence, 2009) provide opportunities for informing existing and future processes relating to all legislative and non-legislative routes.

Nonetheless, a fundamental challenge for community ownership in Scotland remains the unwillingness of some land and asset owners to sell to or engage in negotiations with communities. The relationships between communities and landowners (including private landowners, public bodies, and NGOs) can also be influenced by a variety of factors (for example, conflicting land or asset market valuations). This can be exacerbated by difficulties in identifying and contacting (at times remote) landowners, the structure of landownership (for example, the ownership of public assets by ALEOs, private landownership by trusts and so on),

and the associated complexities associated with mapping ownership or acquiring other information required for CRtB applications. Indeed, as this study shows, the existence of legislative mechanisms can have both positive and negative impacts on the potential for negotiated sales and asset transfers. A critical challenge therefore remains to balance the need for creating a climate for negotiation and positive dialogue, with the implementation of legislative mechanisms (including the newer compulsory purchase routes established by the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2016) to address challenging cases and to facilitate sustainable community development.

The availability of funding was widely recognised as fundamental for enabling community acquisitions, with many interviewees arguing that this was a more important driver than the existence of relevant legislative pathways. Since this research was completed, the Scottish Government has committed to increasing the Scottish Land Fund from £10 million to £20 million per year by 2026 ([Scottish Land Fund, 2021](#)), although rising land prices are considered a key challenge to current and future community land purchases ([Mc Morran et al., 2022](#)). Furthermore, participants reiterated that the lack of dedicated post-acquisition development funding was arguably the most significant challenge for delivering wider sustainable community ownership in Scotland. Scoping and community interviewees argued for the greater recognition of the need to resource the development of sustainable community ownership and development, as opposed to a political focus on increasing community ownership.

Access to funding relates closely to issues of community capacity, with participants noting that certain communities were disadvantaged (for example, in acquiring funding for land purchases) due to limited available community capacity, experience and professional support, often due to geography (for example, whether they are located with the region served by Highlands and Islands Enterprise). Community participants highlighted the benefits of building networks and sharing experiences both within their own community and with other communities with similar experiences of attempting to acquire land or assets, noting again that there are considerable differences in capacity between communities. Some community groups described feeling ‘out of their depth’ during application processes for CRtB and asset transfer, and commonly referred to the need for extensive skill sets and to manage expectations in terms of the time pressures, responsibilities and emotional cost. Volunteer fatigue and concerns regarding community capacity persist as limiting factors in fulfilling the potential of community landownership in Scotland.

## Looking forwards: community ownership and postcapitalist transitions

A key concern raised by this research was the lack of strategic approach for the transfer of land from private or public hands to community ownership (a point reiterated by [MacLeod, 2023](#)). Because communities are often unaware of property sales until late in the process, due to sales occurring through informal marketing or communication channels of which the community are unaware, community groups are reactive in their approaches to asset acquisitions (or they miss opportunities completely). The ongoing prevalence of ‘off-market’ private land sales ([Merrell et al., 2023](#)) underpins the challenge facing community groups. However, forthcoming land reform legislation is anticipated to require pre-notification of land sales ([Scottish Government, 2022](#)) to support prospective community landowners, and consideration of the role of land in sustainable community development.

Indeed, this lack of strategic approach and the financial barriers described highlight one of the key contradictions within Scottish land reform and the mechanism of community ownership as the primary tool to facilitate land redistribution and diversity of ownership. At present, Scottish community ownership is defined within the realms of a private-centric property regime and where private property rights are strongly held and established in law and society. Where private land is bought by a community group, there is no reason why the landowner compensated to the agreed valuation by largely public funds cannot reinvest that in another landholding. The necessity to adhere to a property rights model and capitalist system that is dominated by private interests may be at the root of why communities struggle to be financially viable or even access land. Indeed, despite the importance of Scottish devolution to the advancement of land reform, both symbolically and practically, [MacLeod](#) calls for greater ‘political vision and substance to deliver the systemically transformative societal change implied by the political rhetoric surrounding it’ (2023: 4).

The truly radical reform that would lead to the postcapitalist transitions advocated throughout the chapters in this volume would be for land reform to embrace routes to ‘commoning’, which in Scotland may translate to alternative land tenure models (for example, communal land management;<sup>8</sup> cf. [Beingessner, 2023](#)), based on novel governance frameworks, and with alternative fiscal arrangements whereby land valuation is based on productive capacity and not ‘hope value’. Land reform campaigner and former Member of the Scottish Parliament (MSP)

Andy Wightman recommends that Scottish local authorities are granted new powers of intervention in the land market, to acquire land at ‘existing use value’ where necessary for social development, as well as provisions to restore common land that has been appropriated unlawfully (Wightman, 2023). The Scottish Land Commission is also exploring the potential of ‘layered commoning’ as a means to achieve multiple objectives from land and build more opportunities for collective decision-making, therefore ‘allowing a new range of possibilities that address the boundedness and exclusiveness of private ownership’ (Scottish Land Commission and Dark Matter Labs, 2023: 26).

Building on Ostrom’s theory of commons, Danson and Burnett describe the opportunity of the ‘landed commons’ through community ownership in Scotland as a route to achieve greater landownership equity, highlighting also the necessity of good governance, social capital and community resilience (Danson and Burnett, 2021; Ostrom, 1990). As Fiona Mackenzie describes in her seminal work on Scottish community landownership: ‘the complicated and contingent process of ‘commoning’ the land through community ownership troubles binaries – of public/private and nature/culture – and through these disruptions creates a space/place where neoliberalism’s normalising practices are countered’ (Mackenzie, 2013: 4). In this regard, the Scottish community ownership model has the potential to provide an example of the ‘emerging geography of postcapitalist transitions’ identified by Chatterton (2016) in relation to the urban commons. In a comparable way to the residents engaged in a community housing project in Chatterton’s study, Scotland’s community land and asset owners are also creating a commons wherein lie a ‘parallel set of social and spatial relations and values alongside traditional public and private ones’ (p. 404). However, Scottish communities are only able to imagine and enact these through the current, available mechanisms, that is, the routes to ownership explored in this chapter. They are still very much in the capitalist system, with success measured by increased income, jobs, homes and so on. When community owners are able to express their identities in new and less exclusionary ways (as advocated by Chatterton and Pickerill, 2010), the practice of community ownership will deepen and develop postcapitalist transitions.

It is important to note that there are ongoing reforms that seek to ensure progressive private property ownership, support future alternatives to the dominant model, and further empower communities in land use decision-making. For example, a ‘Community Land Accelerator’ is being developed in partnership by the Scottish Land Commission and Crown Estate Scotland<sup>9</sup> (Alexander, 2023). This would involve Crown

Estate Scotland buying land and other assets when they become available and, in the meantime, giving communities the chance to make strategic plans for their sustainable development, as well as to raise necessary funding, and build capacity and skills. Furthermore, the forthcoming land reform bill<sup>10</sup> includes provisions that ensure owners of land over certain thresholds engage communities in land management planning processes and adhere to the Scottish Government's Land Rights and Responsibilities Statement (Scottish Government, 2022).

Nonetheless, as the research presented in this chapter describes, there remain many challenges facing communities that are seeking landownership as a route to support community development. The research highlighted several key recommendations to policy and other relevant groups that would support and enable community ownership routes. Several recommendations are evident in policy guidance and development published since the original research (for example, Scottish Government, 2022). Key to these recommendations include that the Scottish Government should undertake measures to promote all routes to community ownership across Scotland, to normalise and mainstream these processes, and to reduce negative and adversarial perceptions. For example, there remains a need to develop overarching guidance covering all routes to community ownership (that is, highlighting routes to funding, advice and support<sup>11</sup>), and to support private landowners to engage in negotiated transfers (for example, through the provision of additional guidance and a neutral third party to assist in negotiations). Similarly, networking and knowledge-sharing between landowners and other relevant authorities should be supported (for example, by creating a forum for relevant authorities to discuss experiences of asset transfer), and between community bodies. The Scottish Government should also seek to further encourage the development of strategic thinking and visioning by communities, including in relation to asset acquisition, for example, the consideration of community assets should become a key component of Local Place Planning. Finally, it is clear that to achieve the postcapitalist transition outlined in this book, there is a need to review the broader fiscal and policy framework that maintains a private-centric landownership model and considers tax incentives and exemptions for landownership and use in relation to community asset acquisition, and to seek, where possible, to align these with furthering sustainable development.

## Notes

- 1 This research was commissioned by the Scottish Land Commission and is available online here: [https://www.landcommission.gov.scot/downloads/5dd698fa2e391\\_1-Community-Ownership-Mechanisms-SRUC-Final-Report-For-Publication.pdf](https://www.landcommission.gov.scot/downloads/5dd698fa2e391_1-Community-Ownership-Mechanisms-SRUC-Final-Report-For-Publication.pdf).
- 2 Highlands and Islands Enterprise is the economic and community development agency for the Highlands and Islands region of Scotland, which covers more than half of Scotland's land mass (HIE, 2024).
- 3 The Scottish Government reports that 'more than half of the area of land in community ownership is comprised of four assets, each greater than 20,000 hectares' (Scottish Government, 2023a: 8).
- 4 This scheme ran from 2005 to 2015 and represented the response of Forestry Commission Scotland (now Scottish Forestry) to the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003. It was a voluntary programme that proactively facilitated community acquisition of Forest Enterprise Scotland (now Forestry and Land Scotland) land.
- 5 As follows: four with experience of negotiated transfer/sale routes; 15 with Asset Transfer; 10 with CRtB; two with Transfer of Crofting Estates; and one with the Crofting Community Right to Buy. The proportion of interviews aligns with the proportion of use of the different routes to ownership.
- 6 A significant number of the successful CRtB cases having led to purchases of land and assets from public bodies.
- 7 In order to utilise a CRtB route to ownership, community bodies must register their interest in land, which lasts for five years from the date of approval by Scottish Ministers. Community bodies can re-register if they have not taken ownership in the intervening period and continue their registration at five-year intervals. The re-registration process includes an application and a new petition demonstrating community support (Scottish Government, 2023b).
- 8 To some extent, this is already in action through crofting tenure, although there are calls for crofting law reform (cf. Law Society of Scotland, 2020).
- 9 Crown Estate Scotland is a public corporation that owns a range of assets in Scotland, including 37,000 ha of rural estates. Its assets are owned by the Monarch 'in right of the Crown', with revenue profit going to the Scottish Consolidated Fund and then to Scottish Government. It is the responsibility of Scottish Ministers to decide how the revenue profit is used.
- 10 At the time of writing, it is anticipated that the new land reform bill will be introduced to the Scottish Parliament in spring 2024.
- 11 It is noted that the latest Community Right to Buy provision in Part 5 of the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2016, the 'right to buy for sustainable development', has not yet been utilised by community bodies, partly due to complexity (MacLeod, 2023).

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# 'Back to the land': evaluating One Planet Development as a planning mechanism for promoting alternative forms of rural living

Neil Harris

## Introduction

Planning – as a series of activities designed to regulate land use and the production of the built environment – has regularly been analysed in terms of its role in facilitating capitalist production and accumulation (Harvey, 1985; Fogelson, 1986). Many analyses focus on planning in its urban context, yet state regulation of land use in developed countries also typically extends to rural areas. Planners, and the policies they interpret in making decisions about new development in the countryside, are 'key agents in facilitating or obfuscating different rural land uses' (Halfacree, 2006: 328). This underlines the importance of understanding the role of the planning system in mediating transition and change in rural areas. This chapter therefore critically questions what a planning system can do, given its traditional alignment with the promotion and service of a system of capitalist production, to promote new and alternative conceptualisations of 'living on the land' within the context of a postcapitalist countryside. What, for example, are the challenges that arise when 'innovative' planning policies create opportunities to go 'back to the land'?

This introduction will first highlight the planning system's adoption of a preservationist rationality that restricts certain forms of development in the countryside, before briefly outlining the One Planet Development planning policy adopted in Wales that utilises this preservationist

rationality to leverage new forms of ecologically-sensitive living in the countryside. The introduction then highlights land and labour as the key elements analysed in the main sections of this chapter and provides a short statement on the research underpinning the chapter.

In her account of low impact developments in Wales, Forde (2015: 84) defines the British planning systems' approach to rural spaces as founded on 'a preservationist rationality, which contains underlying notions about an inherently valuable empty countryside'. This preservationist rationality is itself built upon the construction of a 'classificatory abstraction' that divides the urban from the rural, including the application of that classification to land and land uses (Murdoch and Lowe, 2003). This rationality, and the classification it stands on, manifests itself in planning policies in England and Wales that have restricted new residential development in the open countryside, with only certain forms of development seen as 'acceptable' in these locations. These restrictive policies have been criticised for disconnecting people from nature, producing a countryside dominated by intensive agricultural production, and preserving marginal land in underproductive conditions (see, for example, Wimbush, 2014). This chapter explores the Welsh Government's planning policy on One Planet Development in the open countryside – a policy that, at least in principle, has a capacity to challenge elements of this preservationist rationality and open up alternative relations between land, labour and capital in the countryside.

The Welsh Government's One Planet Development policy was introduced in Wales in 2010 to enable specific forms of low impact development in the open countryside. The policy – described as 'novel and complex' and 'bold and ambitious' (Sanders, 2023: 52–5) – has become one of the legitimate 'exceptions' in Wales to planning restrictions on building new dwellings in the open countryside. The reduced ecological footprint of residents, alongside site-based enhancements to biodiversity and nature, are core to the justification for exceptional permission to develop a new home in open countryside. In the language of Murdoch and Lowe (2003), One Planet Development can be read as an ecologically framed hybrid form that challenges some aspects of the classificatory distinction between the urban and the rural. The One Planet Development policy is evaluated in this chapter in terms of its place in a 'postcapitalist countryside'. The central argument is that while the policy has enabled experimentation with new forms of land-based enterprise and has facilitated low-impact development through living on the land – and therefore facilitates alternative conceptualisations of the relationship

between capital, land and labour – the policy and the developments it has enabled have been less radical in challenging mainstream concepts and practices than may have been possible.

This chapter contributes to a One Planet Development literature that addresses the mechanics and operational dimensions of the policy (Harris, 2019; One Planet Council, 2022; Sanders, 2022), as well as more critical and conceptually-driven explorations of the policy and its impacts (Forde, 2015). Forde's (2015, 2020) analyses of low impact development in Wales, including One Planet Developments, provide some of the most theoretically developed explorations, including the idea most closely related to one of the themes of this text of 'planning as a form or enclosure'. The chapter's contribution focuses on two important dimensions of One Planet Development linked to the theme of the postcapitalist countryside. The first is access to *land* – exploring the ways in which land is acquired or leased for One Planet Developments. Some of the debates on access to land for establishing a One Planet Development explore the continuing high cost of land in suitable locations. Some commentaries point to the declining availability of existing smallholdings in rural areas in Wales – which act as one of the potential sources of sites suitable for One Planet Development, with proposals in effect adding a residential component to suitable smallholdings. Some of these commentaries also note the challenges of more affluent 'downsizers' from wealthier locations both within but also beyond rural Wales that then price locals out of the new opportunities introduced by the One Planet Development policy. This raises the question of One Planet Development as a policy designed to promote lower environmental impacts alongside the regeneration of local, rural communities – and whether an appropriate balance is secured between social, economic and environmental objectives through the policy. The chapter will emphasise the continuing importance of freehold ownership of land in One Planet Developments and examine how occupants of OPD came to secure access to land through existing ownership, open market purchase and negotiation with owners of farms and other rural landowners.

The second dimension examined in this chapter is the operation of the land-based enterprise associated with One Planet Developments and the *labour* dimension of 'living on the land'. The chapter examines the role of land-based enterprise in supporting occupants and communities to reduce their ecological footprint, as well as their place within the local rural economy. The chapter focuses on the land-based enterprises that underpin the 'essential needs' of occupants of One Planet Developments – examining the range and nature of enterprises, how they operate, the

income they generate, and their connections to the local community and economy (for example, in terms of extending environmental and other benefits more widely to the local community). These are necessarily connected to 'land' – and act as a way of localising and re-establishing linkages between land and labour.

The Welsh Government One Planet Development policy is a mechanism for promoting living and working on the land in the countryside and so naturally invites some degree of comparison with historic and contemporary 'back to the land' experiments. The 'back to the land' movement is acknowledged as being 'a very diffusive concept' (Halfacree, 2007: 3). Halfacree (2006: 313) emphasises the characteristics of the 'back-to-the-land' movement in its radical politics, its philosophy of 'dropping-out' of the mainstream, its emphasis on communal living and its 'rejection of many other key features of our modern capitalist society'. He also references less radical elements of the back to the land movement in self-sufficiency, permaculture and low impact development in rural areas, which clearly resonate with the One Planet Development policy. The concluding section of the chapter will return to the merits of interpreting One Planet Development through the lens of the 'back to the land' movement and its successors.

This chapter's research comprises an analysis of management plans and other planning documentation for 20 One Planet Developments that secured planning permission between May 2019 and April 2023, either by approval of the local planning authority or at appeal. These permissions for One Planet Development represent a subset of low impact developments positioned at the opposite end of the spectrum to those 'hidden from planners' (Forde, 2015: 83) where occupants try to avoid any entanglement with the formalities of the planning system. The management plan submitted with a planning application for a One Planet Development is a critically important document and sets out information on land tenure, business planning, land management and environmental and community impacts. Additional planning documents analysed included planning application forms, planning committee reports, consultation responses by the public, planning decision notices and planning appeal decisions. Approved One Planet Developments were identified using information collated by One Planet Council, and supplemented by searches of selected local planning authority planning databases. This mapping of One Planet Development applicants' experience in navigating the planning system comes at a time when the Welsh Government policy has bedded in and experience has been shared more widely among applicants and planners. The policy itself, set out in

the next section, incorporates a series of tensions and conflicts (Forde, 2015: 82) and while the policy and its application have settled over the past decade, these tensions continue to surface in individual applications.

## The Welsh Government's One Planet Development policy

The Welsh Government introduced its One Planet Development policy in 2010. Planning Policy Wales states:

One Planet Development (OPD) is development that through its low impact either enhances or does not significantly diminish environmental quality. OPD may take a number of forms and can either be single homes, cooperative communities or larger settlements. They may be located within or adjacent to existing settlements, or be situated in the open countryside. (Welsh Government, 2021: 61)

One Planet Development is essentially a type of low-impact development (see Waghorn, 2016). The most common form of One Planet Development in Wales has been that in the open countryside – although the scope of the policy anticipates other forms and locations, including developments adjacent to or close to existing settlements. Practice guidance also identifies a series of different basic ‘types’ of countryside-based One Planet Development, ranging from single, self-sufficient households to land-based enterprises and small planned communities (Welsh Government, 2012: 5). One Planet Development in the open countryside, usually for a single household, has become the principal form that has been proposed and secured planning permission for a number of reasons, including the attraction of land-based living in the open countryside for some households, as well as the relative cost of purchasing land in different locations which favours sites in relatively remote locations. This analysis here focuses on One Planet Development in the open countryside with an emphasis on single dwellings and land-based enterprises.

One Planet Development is one of a series of ‘exceptions’ to the restrictions on new residential development in the open countryside, including rural exception sites for affordable housing (Stirling et al., 2023), each with their own ‘tests’ for evaluating whether there is justification for a residential property. Practice guidance sets out the essential characteristics of One Planet Development in the open countryside (Welsh Government, 2012: paragraphs 1.9–1.10). These



include low environmental impacts and the promotion of environmental enhancements, the staged progression towards a One Planet footprint and a foundation on land-based activities that can support residents' minimum needs. Planning policy sets out the key characteristic and the basis for this 'exception' to usual controls over new dwellings beyond settlement boundaries:

OPD located in the open countryside should provide for the minimum needs of the inhabitants in terms of income, food, energy and waste assimilation over a period of no more than five years from the commencement of work on the site' (Welsh Government, 2021: paragraph 4.2.39).

A One Planet Development in the open countryside is required to be the sole residence of the proposed occupants, and this is usually secured through planning permission and legal agreements. A management plan – including a business plan and a range of other information – is a critically important instrument both in applying for planning permission and for the ongoing management of approved development.

Planning Policy Wales is supported by technical advice and practice guidance, including guidance on calculating the ecological footprint of proposed and existing One Planet Developments (Welsh Government, 2012; see also One Planet Council, 2022: 5 for a summary of the evolution of the policy). The policy and the supporting guidance have provided stability over the past decade which has enabled applicants and consultants to learn to operate more effectively within the parameters of the policy. This is reflected in an evolution from some earlier approved OPDs being granted retrospectively, where development proceeded 'at risk' and in advance of securing planning permission, or at appeal following refusal of planning permission by a local planning authority – for example, Forde (2015) noted that most applications in the early 2010s were refused at local level – to recent applications typically being applied for prospectively in advance of development on-site, and approved by local planning authorities. The number of approved One Planet Developments in Wales remains relatively small – with around four to six new developments approved each year. The policy and the One Planet Developments on the ground consequently remain experimental and innovative – and therefore 'high-risk' for some (Delaney, 2020) – yet there is increasing evidence that the policy framework provides a clearer and more certain pathway for those wishing to build a land-based, one-planet livelihood in the countryside. This is not to say that there are no longer

‘people adopting alternative, marginal, and illicit dwelling practices, in preference to dealing with a repressive planning regime’ (Forde, 2015: 82) – with planning here potentially understood as repressive in restricting individuals’ freedoms and livelihoods, as well as the weight of its regulatory and bureaucratic processes. It is nevertheless clear that the One Planet Development policy is enabling of *a certain form* of low impact development for those with capacity and willingness to engage with the planning system.

A review of One Planet Development by One Planet Council (2022) conducted a decade after the policy’s introduction celebrates a series of successes, yet also identifies areas where the policy can be improved. The areas for improvement include making the policy clearer, making One Planet living more accessible to a wider range of people and reducing the regulatory burden on local planning authorities. Academic studies have also noted the positives in opening up a regulatory space for enabling low-impact development, but highlight the ‘stringency’ of the policy and its application resulting in a limited number of applications being made (Sanders, 2022). Sanders (2022: 173) also critiques the ‘bureaucratic and invasive’ monitoring framework for established One Planet Developments – something that Forde (2015) also identifies as resulting in some proponents of low impact development simply evading the planning system.

## Land: securing a site for One Planet Development

Practice guidance refers to One Planet Development as ‘a way of living differently where there is a symbiotic relationship between people and land, making a reduction in environmental impacts possible’ (Welsh Government, 2012: 2). This distinct relationship to land is evident in many of the management plans for proposals for One Planet Development and is addressed again in later sections of this chapter on land-based enterprises and residents meeting their minimum needs. Nevertheless, a key issue for anyone interested in developing a One Planet Development is identifying a suitable site and securing access to land by freehold, leasehold or other permissive and less formal arrangements. The ability to purchase or lease land has historically been one of the key barriers to the expansion of the number of low impact developments in the countryside. The One Planet Development policy in Wales has been key in helping intended occupants overcome ‘the primary hurdle for those seeking to develop a subsistence-based livelihood in what had previously been an

exclusionary space ... as agricultural land can now be legally developed for residential purposes, while being more affordable' (Sanders, 2022: 268–9). This 'legality' of One Planet Development, which differentiates it from other and predecessor pathways to low impact development in rural areas, has scope to alter land markets in rural areas and potentially accrue hope value to previously enclosed agricultural land.

### Land in rural Wales in historical context

The ability to secure a present-day site for a One Planet Development is shaped by longer-term patterns of land enclosure and ownership. Forde (2015) emphasises in her account of low impact development in Wales various historic processes and methods of enclosure of land, in which formerly common land was enclosed for private use and ownership, emphasising the extensive period of time over which different forms of enclosure have taken place. Williams (1970: 58 and Table 1) notes the higher prevalence of 'waste' land in Wales in terms of mechanisms of later enclosure in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, especially in central Wales, and the high proportion of waste land considered unimprovable and not suitable for cultivation. The early to mid-part of the eighteenth century nevertheless did see significant increases in agricultural rent per acre in the present-day areas of Carmarthenshire, Pembrokeshire and parts of Powys (Williams, 1970: Figure 5), areas that have become a focus in the past 50 years for both low impact developments generally and One Planet Developments in particular. Later phases of enclosure are more significant in a Welsh context than in an English context and with different outcomes in terms of smaller-scale enclosures (Chapman, 1927). Howell (1977: xii) also notes how landlord–tenant relations in many parts of Wales impinged on agricultural development leaving the sector as more 'backward' than its natural qualities offered. Howell (1977: xiii) compared Wales' farmers with those in parts of England, concluding that many were 'essentially peasant-tenants who practised semi-subsistence farming'. He also highlights a historic reluctance to invest capital in agriculture in Wales and attributes this to a 'peasant attitude' as much as tenure conditions. The 'isolation, backwardness and relative poverty of the region' (Howell, 1977: xiv) was also acknowledged as cultivating strong and localised community connections. This necessarily concise account of historic enclosure of land in Wales highlights a number of key issues of relevance to present-day One Planet Developments and the securing of land, including the prevalence of smaller-scale enclosures, a greater extent of under-improved land and a history of less-intensive and subsistence-oriented practices in farming.

## Land purchase and lease for One Planet Development

Historic processes and patterns of land management, enclosure and ownership shape the opportunities that exist for those seeking land for One Planet Development to purchase or lease. Management plans for One Planet Development are submitted as part of planning applications and usually include information on tenure as part of a baseline description of the site. In addition, planning applications include certification of the ownership of the land or identify any other persons with an interest in the land. The analysis of this documentation identifies that the majority of applicants for planning permission for One Planet Development certified themselves as the freehold owners of the land forming the site. This freehold character of these sites fits readily with traditional conceptions of a propertied landscape that finds easy acceptance within many planning systems, and in which individuals' relations to private property and parcels of land are clearly defined (Fawaz, 2016). There are private benefits and also degrees of certainty that arise from freehold ownership. Applicants had in most cases already secured freehold ownership of their land prior to applying for planning permission. Land was usually purchased some two to three years ahead of applying for or securing planning permission. The prior purchase of land potentially reflects a degree of confidence in bringing forward a successful One Planet Development and securing planning permission. Alternatively, many sites appear to have been purchased for horticultural use without the need for planning permission for any of the activities presently on site – either with a specific intention to bring forward a proposal for a One Planet Development at a later date or the active horticultural and permaculture use gradually evolving into the possibility of living on the site. In a small number of cases, prospective One Planet Development sites were being leased or otherwise worked with a landowner's permission, with an agreement in place for purchase subject to securing planning permission for One Planet Development.

The analysis of the sample of One Planet Developments identifies sites as typically varying between 3 and 15 acres – or between 1 and 6 hectares – of what is often former grazing land for sheep or cattle, often of lower agricultural land quality, and occasionally also woodland. The One Planet Council's review of One Planet Development in Wales noted the siting of developments on ecologically degraded land and the aim of restoration or enhancement of ecological habitats (2022: 4). The One Planet Council's own research on One Planet Developments noted sites ranging from 2 to 35 acres and a clear majority of sites being under 10 acres in size (2022: 12 and Figure 2.3). Some approved One

Planet Developments are on smaller sites and the limited scale is often acknowledged in the planning application and management plan. Smaller sites can invite scepticism during the planning application process about whether the site is of sufficient scale to provide for the occupants' minimum needs and the various other site-generated outputs, and the assimilation of wastes. The variation in extent of land forming the One Planet Development is commonly explained by the nature of the subsistence and land-based enterprise, ranging from more intensive horticultural activities to extensive silvicultural and woodland activities.

Sanders (2022: 180) notes that the One Planet Development pathway to living on the land in the countryside is for some people simply a more affordable option than purchasing an existing farm or smallholding, with the policy essentially opening up an alternative and more complicated route to a desired outcome of living on the land. Howlett (2017) estimated that a typical One Planet Development costs between £60,000 and £120,000 including both land purchase and build costs, although these vary depending principally on location, quality of land and the nature of the residential accommodation and any other buildings. This figure remains a good benchmark of the costs for establishing a One Planet Development in rural Wales with approximate land costs of £6,000–£10,000 per acre for pasture or arable land. The typical size of a One Planet Development alongside residential and other build costs – typically around £30,000–£40,000, depending on the scale and form of construction of the dwelling unit – means a comparatively affordable option for rural living. For some, One Planet Development offers a relatively affordable and low-cost homeownership pathway to those with the skills and abilities to engage in on-site food production, reduce their ecological footprint and successfully manage land-based enterprises.

Land for One Planet Development is occasionally marketed openly – including by property agencies as well as through the social media and other networks of low-impact living and permaculture communities. These can be well-networked communities with a strong sense of mutual support, learning and knowledge-exchange. The identification of land for purchase is also achieved through less formal approaches, with direct enquiries made to existing landowners, including owners of larger farms, woodlands and estates. A number of the reviewed One Planet Developments comprise parcels of grazing land purchased from farms prepared to sell two to four field parcels or those which were in a fuller process of farm sub-division to multiple parcels. Many of these parcels are delineated by field enclosure, often marked by hedges of the kind that Blomley (2007) highlights as having both material and symbolic

importance in the earlier enclosure of land and the making of property. The making of planning applications also calls for and reinforces the practice of clear delineation of the land that will form the One Planet Development through its ‘red-lining’ of the site to indicate the land any planning permission will relate to.

The clustering of One Planet Developments as a result of specific landowner practices is also noted in the One Planet Council review: ‘there is also an apparent clustering of OPDs around certain villages or council wards, for example in Llangolman (Pembrokeshire) where a retiring farming household has intentionally sold land to facilitate several new OPDs’ (2022: 12). This echoes pathways to securing land that supported other forms of counter-cultural migration to the countryside, including ‘back to the land’ movements (Halfacree, 2006: 320), where interested and supportive landowners facilitated alternative use of agricultural land. Several of the planning applications also note the proximity of the application site to other, approved One Planet Developments, suggesting a clustering of such developments where existing landowners are supportive of other sites coming forward. This clustering highlights the power and agency of existing landowners within a propertied rural landscape to facilitate – or inhibit – One Planet Developments and other forms of low impact development (see also Fawaz, 2016).

Management plans identify land for most One Planet Developments as having been acquired privately from landowners, including rural estates and farms, through negotiated sales agreements. There are occasional references in management plans to historic and predecessor landowners, and some of these refer to former ownership of farms and land by local authorities or religious institutions. This connects with more recent initiatives by Powys County Council and Bannau Brycheiniog National Park (formerly Brecon Beacons National Park) to explore its own county farms and landholdings as a way of promoting horticultural enterprises with opportunity to live on and work land for vegetable production. This initiative highlights the potential for other local authorities and other public sector landowners, working with third sector organisations and community land trusts, to extend their role in supporting forms of development similar to One Planet Development.

### Ownership and management, including trusts

The One Planet Developments that secured planning permission between May 2019 and April 2023 are typically single household units based on freehold ownership sites. Yet, as the Welsh Government practice guidance

notes, there are several different types of One Planet Development in the open countryside, including those that involve multiple households with varying degrees of co-operation and use of shared facilities (Welsh Government, 2012: 5). One Planet Developments of this type require a different approach to management, as set out in the technical advice on planning for rural communities:

Where One Planet Developments involve members of more than one family, the proposal should be managed and controlled by a trust, co-operative or other similar mechanism in which the occupiers have an interest (Welsh Assembly Government, 2010: 4.5.12).

The low-impact development and low-impact communities sector have strong traditions of cooperative and trust-based organisation and management, as evidenced by initiatives such as Lammas in Wales (Wimbush, 2012; see also Halfacree, 2006, 2007). There is also evidence of this in One Planet Developments in Wales with a small number of such developments organising via a shared or cooperative arrangement. *Rhiw Las* is the first multi-unit One Planet Development to secure planning permission and comprises four units and households. A private limited company, registered as a residents property management company, was established as a mechanism for managing aspects of the development and holds capital in shares. The *Coed Talyfan* development is organised as a cooperative company limited by guarantee and completed the purchase of land as a community land trust. In 2022, *Coed Talyfan* marketed the opportunity of investing in a One Planet Development plot in the form of a shared equity co-housing scheme, with the cost of the plot being £40,000 as a minimum stake in the housing cooperative. The community land trust arrangement is designed ‘to ensure that land will be held for the benefit and well-being of future generations’.

### Sale and value of established One Planet Developments

The postcapitalist framing of this edited collection invites a questioning of land and buildings as an individualised ‘asset’ that accrues value and can be exchanged as ‘property’. Established One Planet Developments are frequently the attainment of an individual’s, a household’s or a group’s longer-term ambition to live sustainably on the land. The management plans accompanying planning applications for One Planet Developments typically attest to the commitment, experience and skills of the applicants – and their longer-term aspirations and pathway towards low-impact

living. The intricate relationship between occupants and the land through the land-based enterprise and permaculture activities on-site also mean that the prospect of selling-on a One Planet Development is rare. A One Planet Development, despite its distinct characteristics, simultaneously performs the functions of a dwelling, a source of subsistence and an enterprise generating income for occupants. A One Planet Development is an investment and an asset – even if it has very many other significant qualities and meanings to owners. One Planet Developments may therefore be sold on to others. The One Planet Council issues practice guidance on the sale of One Planet Developments, advising that as with any other planning permission the permission ‘runs with the land’ and is not a ‘personal’ permission, with the effect that One Planet Developments can be sold privately through networks or on the open market (One Planet Council, 2021).

The One Planet Council (2021) acknowledges that the range of potential buyers capable of purchasing the land and adhering to the management plan will be limited. There is scope for purchasers to submit a new management plan for approval by the local planning authority to reflect the new occupants’ consumption, production and enterprise practices – and this is a requirement ‘where there is a change in ownership of the One Planet Development or any individual holding within larger schemes’ (Welsh Government, 2012: 4.23.1).

Valuation of One Planet Developments for council tax purposes is one way of trying to identify the financial or asset value of a One Planet Development. Payment of the council tax liabilities of the household are also one of the ‘minimum needs’ that the site needs to generate sufficient income for. The One Planet Council has issued practice guidance on valuation of properties for council tax purposes (One Planet Council, 2019). The practice guidance recognises the recent emergence of One Planet Development as a novel ‘type’ of property and one that differs from standard properties, or indeed other forms of restricted occupancy properties such as those tied by planning agreements to those working or last employed in agriculture.

The One Planet Council has a position statement on valuation of OPD plots for council tax purposes given the restrictive conditions. Other influences on the valuation could include the quality of any house, other infrastructure on site and of course the land-based enterprise, as well as all of the other usual factors influencing the price of any house or land (One Planet Council, 2021).

The guidance also notes the fact that no approved and built One Planet Development properties had been sold at the time of its



writing, making valuation even more difficult. The Council's position is that 'assessment of the current value of the dwelling in the absence of restrictions is the starting point' (One Planet Council, 2019: 2) and explores the discount applied to agricultural occupancy dwellings and due to the restriction as a basis for valuing One Planet Developments. It argues that the value of a One Planet Development should be 30–50 per cent lower than the property in the absence of restrictions. The management plan and associated documentation for the proposal at *Y Gaer Pencraig* reported that most properties at One Planet Developments are in council tax band A and therefore valued at April 2003 as less than £44,000 – although the valuation date of course precedes the introduction of the One Planet Development policy.

One Planet Developments have only very occasionally been promoted on the open market through real estate platforms. The asking price for one development in Pembrokeshire was set at £335,000 – a very significant price for anyone exploring access to an established One Planet Development and significantly higher than the initial land and establishment costs for a prospective development. Valuation of One Planet Developments is challenging due to the infrequency of sale and the unusual nature of the development and the sites they are located upon. Advice from One Planet Council (2021) is: 'Anyone considering purchasing an established OPD should weigh up the price in relation to the potential cost of purchasing agricultural land and setting up an OPD smallholding themselves.'

## Labour: income-generation and land-based enterprise

The second key theme examined in this chapter is the relationship between land and labour in One Planet Development, and focuses on the income-generation activities and land-based enterprises supporting those developments. Welsh Government planning policy requires that 'OPD located in the open countryside should *provide for the minimum needs of the inhabitants in terms of income, food, energy and waste assimilation*' and for this to be achieved within a timescale of five years from commencement of development (Welsh Government, 2021: 61, emphasis added). The ability of a site to support occupants' minimum food and income needs, in a way that enables occupants to reduce their environmental impacts, is noted as the principal justification for granting planning permission as an exception to policies restricting new residential development in the open countryside (Welsh Government, 2012: 21).

The Welsh Government's supporting technical advice refers to 'land based' One Planet Development in the open countryside (Welsh Government, 2010). Planning applications for One Planet Development must be accompanied by a management plan. This critical document has specified content, including a business and improvement plan, alongside a number of different analyses and assessments including transport and community impact. Legal agreements are used for successful planning applications to tie the management plan to the planning permission. Management plans are to be reviewed once every five years. The analysis below is based on an assessment of the initial management plans submitted with planning applications for One Planet Developments.

A key function of the management plan is that it 'must justify the need to live on the site and quantify how the inhabitants' requirements in terms of income, food, energy and waste assimilation *can be obtained directly from the site*' (Welsh Government, 2010: 25, emphasis added). The management plan is therefore a mechanism that links household production and consumption practices directly to the land and attempts to quantify these in financial and monetary terms. An important factor is the scale of household consumption practices and income needs, especially given that a significant component of food and other items for consumption are also generated from the site. This can mean that levels of household expenditure and therefore the level of income needing to be generated can be considerably below typical household expenditure and income. Indeed, Forde argues that One Planet Development is underpinned by 'a radical anti-consumerist bias' (2020: 43). Technical advice nevertheless requires that '[t]he land use activities proposed must be capable of supporting the needs of the occupants, even on a low income or subsistence basis' (Welsh Government, 2010: 25). Issues of 'basic needs' and income required to cover these, as well as subsistence living, are intricately linked to matters of 'lifestyle', with One Planet Development being acknowledged as 'way of life' (Welsh Government, 2012: 2). Sanders (2023) argues that planners have found it challenging to understand and evaluate this 'way of life' when dealing with applications for One Planet Development, given it can be new terrain for them and presents a very different way of living to their own experiences.

Some One Planet Developments are focused on subsistence approaches using permaculture, yet a core part of most One Planet Developments is that the development can support occupants' 'minimum needs'. The meeting of minimum needs for occupants of One Planet Development means that they can be considered 'broadly self-sufficient' (Welsh Government, 2012: 3). Practice guidance sets out these 'minimum

needs' – in relation to food, energy and waste assimilation on-site, and generation of an income that can pay for clothing, travel, council tax and IT and communications (Welsh Government, 2012: 3). These minimum needs are then articulated in individual management plans and vary according to household size, household life-stage and differences in patterns of consumption (for example, in travel to school, dietary preferences such as consumption of meat or vegetarianism and so on). Meeting 'minimum needs' is noted as having different meanings for the various categories of needs – food, income, energy and waste assimilation. Land-based enterprises are the mechanism for generating sufficient income to meet minimum needs – although practice guidance also refers to items secured through bartering as well as purchase. The categories of need of most significance in this analysis are food and income. In terms of food, minimum needs means 'most of the food needs' of residents are either grown on site or purchased with income from other site-grown products. This is quantified as the site producing 'at least 65% of basic food needs' (Welsh Government, 2012: 19). This is further refined in terms of food grown on site or 'purchased or bartered' using income or surplus produce grown or reared on site.

In terms of income then, sufficient income needs to be generated from the site to cover 'basic requirements' that the site cannot provide directly. Practice guidance defines some of these basic requirements to include clothes, travel, information technology and communications and other food needs. The Welsh Government practice guidance provides detailed information and recognises that land-based activities on site 'should generate a *modest* income for occupants' as a way of covering residents' minimum needs (Welsh Government, 2012: 18, emphasis added). The guidance also aims to establish a close linkage between occupants' needs and the scale of activity on site, stating it is

... necessary to identify a clear relationship between the use of the land and projects proposed and the number of occupants to be sustained on the site in terms of the need for them to work the land or ensure the smooth running of the venture and the return that is gained.

(Welsh Government, 2010: 25)

The practice guidance also goes on to stress the importance of the connection between occupants' own labours and the produce generated on site:

The produce grown and reared on the site (that meets the minimum food and basic income needs of the occupants) *must be the result of the labours of the occupants of the site* and not that of hired hands' (Welsh Government, 2012: 19, emphasis added).

The nature and scale of income-generating land-based enterprises

The income-generating activities on One Planet Development sites vary across a spectrum of different types and scales. Many of these activities are based on surplus food production through horticultural, agricultural or silvicultural practices on site, with an emphasis on production and sale of vegetables. They include keeping of livestock for production of milk and occasionally meat products, keeping of hens for sale or production of eggs, beekeeping and sale of related products such as honey and beeswax, and some 'value-adding' activities such as cheese production, fruit and vegetable juices, fermented foods, and the production of alcoholic and other fermented drinks from fruit grown or foraged on site. These 'value-added' activities occasionally require specific processing space and machinery on-site. There are also examples of plant and tree nurseries, seed production and sales, sale of fresh cut flowers, and selling of fruit, berries, nuts and fungi, with some of these products also being preserved both for personal consumption as well as for sale and income-generation. Howlett (2017: 31) reports that horticultural and related production practices on One Planet Developments are more productive than industrial farming methods if carefully planned and implemented. Some One Planet Developments emphasise other forms of production beyond food and drink such as production of craft products made from materials grown or cultivated on site, such as willow weaving and basket-making, plant and flower-based artworks, essential oils, as well as biomass products for energy use. There are also examples of proposals for One Planet Development founded more fully on specific rural enterprises, such as *Flatwood* in Cenarth, Carmarthenshire, as a forestry, felling and sawmilling enterprise organised around use of horses for extraction of felled timber and limited mechanical work.

The various markets or outlets for produce from One Planet Development include gate sale to the local community and passing customers, attendance at local farmers markets and craft fayres, and the direct supply of other local enterprises such as shops, cafes and restaurants. There are examples of One Planet Development produce being sold through occupants' other enterprises, as in the *Cwm Bach* One Planet Development linked to supplying zero-waste shops in local urban

centres. Some wider, networked initiatives have also developed out of the various One Planet Developments. The occupants of the *Coed Talyfan* One Planet Development previously established a social enterprise, *Hwb Bywd Tywi*, designed to connect and support local sustainable food producers with local markets and communities, and this has assisted with reaching local markets. In addition, One Planet Council has facilitated a ‘One Planet Produce’ certification for food and other products grown or made on One Planet Developments. In addition to sale of produce for generating income to meet basic and essential needs, several of the management plans refer to bartering and exchange of produce, sometimes between other local One Planet Developments.

The preceding paragraph noted the range of activities and produce underpinning income generation for One Planet Developments, and these are all ‘land-based’ in character. The character of ‘land-based enterprises’ has nevertheless been contested in one recent application for a One Planet Development. Many of the recent prospective applications for One Planet Development have been approved by local planning authorities, an effect of the increasing understanding of the policy and its administration since the policy was first introduced. However, the *Maes Digonedd* application in Carmarthenshire runs counter to this trend and was refused by the local planning authority, contrary to planning officer recommendation for approval, as the local planning authority contested whether beekeeping, hiking and music therapy sessions were ‘land-based activities’ that justified a One Planet Development in the open countryside. The development was allowed at appeal with the Planning Inspector clearly identifying beekeeping and honey production as a land-based activity, with practice guidance allowing for income streams from other subsidiary activities in consultancy or education.

Management plans submitted as part of planning applications for One Planet Development usually include detailed calculation of occupants’ minimum needs in terms of income, alongside detailed figures of planned income generation from land-based activities. The expected income generated from land-based activities inevitably varies with the size of household, linked both to production activity and the essential needs that have to be met, the period since commencement and establishment on site, and the type and scale of land-based activity associated with each One Planet Development. Income estimates in the management plans analysed, where available, range from around £5,000 to £18,000 per annum, with this typically being between two and four times the figure required to cover essential income requirements, which varied from under £3,000 to £6,000, with figures again depending on

household size and activity. This aligns closely with other studies that have identified for essential income requirements that ‘the average total was £5,164, varying between £2,568 (a single-person household) and £12,800 (a four-person household)’ (One Planet Council, 2022: 19). The policy is expressed in terms of meeting ‘minimum needs’ from land-based enterprise and does not restrict employment and other sources of wage-based income to support household expenditure. Many occupants are fully engaged on a full-time basis in on-site food production for household consumption and sale, alongside other land-based enterprises. Access to and ownership of land to establish a One Planet Development can enable occupants to switch from wage-based employment to a land-based enterprise and a primarily subsistence form of living. In a smaller number of cases, occupants of One Planet Developments continue to work part-time in off-site employment, with some applicants specifically noting employment in local health and education services. The ability of occupants to continue to work in off-site employment is one of the occasionally misunderstood aspects of the policy and practice guidance when planning applications are considered.

## **Community benefits: extending value to the community**

The regulatory requirements for planning applications for One Planet Development also include an assessment of impacts on the local community. There continues to be localised opposition to some proposals for One Planet Development in the open countryside, usually refracted through community councils in their consultation responses to planning applications. The basis of these concerns or objections, expressed for example in community council responses to the *Parc Calch* and *Trecastle Wood* One Planet Development proposals, includes the One Planet Development policy being a ‘backdoor way’ of securing accommodation in countryside locations, as well as questions about the forecasts of income generation from land-based activities. There are also regular examples of objections made on aesthetic grounds, focusing on structures such as polytunnels. A number of these concerns also reflect a misunderstanding of the scope and detail of policy and practice guidance on One Planet Development. These objections based on a misreading or misunderstanding, or indeed ignorance of the underpinning details of the policy, are readily set aside by reference to the practice guidance and therefore do not necessarily impact negatively on decisions by the local planning authority. There is also occasionally local political concern that

the One Planet Development privileges ‘incomers’ that secure planning permission when local needs housing has been refused planning permission, as in *Y Gaer Pencraig* development (see also Sanders, 2023). These objections are also readily addressed by reference to the details of the policy.

Despite occasional opposition at local level to proposals for One Planet Developments, there is also evidence of One Planet Development proposals being welcomed for the positive contributions that they can bring to local communities, either through the intended occupants’ direct contribution to community life, or in the advantages a development can bring to helping the wider community also move towards more sustainable consumption practices. The proposal for a One Planet Development at *Dôl-Wen* in Monmouthshire, for example, was supported by thirty neighbour and community letters of support with no objections made to the proposals. There is an emphasis in a number of One Planet Development management plans on engaging with the community through open days, educational visits for schools and other organisations, and festival events focused on food and drink. Events and activities of this kind reinforce the sharing of value generated by One Planet Developments and highlight the positive externalities that they can bring to local communities.

## **Conclusions: One Planet Development as postcapitalist rural living**

*Land* is an essential feature of One Planet Development in the open countryside – it is core to the relationship between occupants and their ambitions to live more sustainably; and it is the basis for meeting occupants’ minimum needs in terms of food and income, through land-based enterprise, and is therefore also fundamental to the character of occupants’ *labour*. This chapter set out to critically evaluate what a planning system can do, given its traditional alignment with the promotion and service of a system of capitalist production, to promote new and alternative conceptualisations of ‘living on the land’ within the context of a postcapitalist countryside. This final section therefore concludes with an evaluation of the One Planet Development policy in terms of both its practical outcomes and its capacity to challenge prevailing planning rationalities, and advances some reflections on the policy and the developments ‘on the ground’ through comparison with other ‘back to the land’ initiatives.

The Welsh Government's policy on One Planet Development has been in place for over a decade now – and in that time it has already evolved in its application 'on the ground', from a situation of retrospective planning applications refused locally and taking their chances at appeal, to a more assured pathway to successful securing of planning permission. The availability of land for One Planet Developments remains challenging, yet the 'bedding in' of the policy and the generation of knowledge through experience offers applicants greater confidence in buying sites on a freehold basis with a view to establishing a One Planet Development. Sub-division of farms and sale of field parcels forming parts of rural estates provide opportunities for the formation of new One Planet Developments. These sites, once established and progressed, become increasingly productive both for occupants, communities, and the wider rural economy – meeting occupants' needs but also generating products and services for sale, and providing opportunities for shared knowledge of land-based living and enterprise.

This is a timely moment to reflect on the One Planet Development policy in Wales both in terms of practice and in terms of the more significant concepts underpinning the policy. In practical terms, and highlighting the positive dimensions of the policy, Sanders (2022: 181) points to the scope and capacity for the One Planet Development policy to move beyond its 'pioneer' or 'exemplar' phase. The ability of One Planet Developments to 'throw into sharp relief failings in the mainstream' (Howlett, 2017: 31) and to generate lessons that are more widely applicable is one of its key opportunities. Wales' former Future Generations Commissioner has similarly focused on the positive and practical lessons highlighted by the operation of the policy, noting:

The One Planet Development (OPD) planning policy introduced by the Welsh Government in 2010 offers an opportunity for pioneers of sustainable living, but it would be a wasted opportunity if the lessons learned and best practice were not made available to others (Sophie Howe, cited in [One Planet Council, 2022](#): 4).

In addition to these positive lessons there are a series of practical criticisms of the policy too. The One Planet Council (2022: 5) argues that its review highlights 'the mismatch between [the One Planet Development] policy and a planning system which is based on minimising harms rather than maximising benefits' – a critique of the planning system failing to realise the full benefits of a more productive countryside in its attempts to control the aesthetic impacts of One Planet Developments. Similarly, collectivist



and shared approaches to low impact living have tended to progress outside of the formal arrangements of the One Planet Development policy. There are exceptions, yet the One Planet Development policy has tended to generate an increasingly 'standard' type of development focused around permaculture and horticultural practice and the single household. Sanders (2023: 51) echoes such a criticism and argues that the design and implementation of Welsh Government's One Planet Development policy has limited its appeal to a 'narrow demographic' and struggles to extend beyond a network of 'pioneers'.

The above critiques may gradually result in fine-tuning of the One Planet Development policy and enhanced outcomes 'on the ground'. There is also scope for more critical and conceptual reflection on the One Planet Development policy as an 'ecotopia' (Sanders, 2022) – a reference that invites comparison with early, utopian town planning ideas around the Garden City and its generation of a productive and lived-in rural estate (Howard, 1898; Hall and Ward, 1998). Yet even if interpreting One Planet Development as part of a spatial planning rationality affiliated to notions of 'sustainable development' (Forde, 2015: 84), there is a tendency for planning to produce incremental improvements in relation to sustainability rather than promote radical change (Owens and Cowell, 2011: 166). Similarly, Forde's (2015) critique of One Planet Development specifically, and planning rationalities more generally, suggest a need for a more critical take on the regressive and oppressive potentials of planning (see Yiftachel, 1998). The argument that One Planet Development is in itself essentially 'an enclosure regime' (Forde, 2015: 91) is an interesting one, with the policy seen as a variant and extension of past enclosure practices. Spatial planning practices continue to shape 'who' can access living on the land in terms seen as legitimate in planning policy. In relation to the idea of a postcapitalist rural, Sanders (2022: 175) provides a powerful extract from an interview with one resident of a One Planet Development, with the resident describing the offensive nature of having to justify their One Planet living 'to an entirely broken state in the service of corporate capitalism'. The interviewee's statement encapsulates one of the principal tensions in the One Planet Development policy between the 'freedom' to live on the land and the bureaucratic demands imposed by the planning system on those who wish to live more sustainably than the wider population.

The question of where One Planet Development sits in relation to other initiatives forming part of the 'back to the land' movement is a complex one. One Planet Development is arguably less radical in terms of counter-cultural politics than many of the other documented

back-to-the-land experiments and initiatives. The typical organisation as a single family household rather than on a communal basis, for example, sets it apart from earlier back to the land living. Nevertheless, One Planet Development is very closely aligned with Gray's (1998, cited in Halfacree, 2006: 313) concept of consubstantial living where lives are intricately connected to land and soil, and where self-sufficiency and permaculture are practised. So, while One Planet Developments may not be easily considered 'counter-cultural' in political terms, they may still be 'radical' in other ways. Indeed, the success of the overall One Planet Development policy depends on 'individual discipline' and 'clear intentionality' to deliver a 'radical' form of consubstantial living (Halfacree, 2006: 320). One Planet Development is more about connecting with the land, and limiting impacts on the planet, than it is 'dropping out' of society. It therefore aligns closely with the more individualised and politically eco-conscious 'millennial' back-to-the-land pathways described by Halfacree in which the 'core practice' of 'working the land' is centre-stage (2022: 53). So, while One Planet Development pushes towards some dimensions of a postcapitalist countryside – primarily in creating space for people to adopt more ecologically-sensitive practices, reduce consumption of resources and limit their ecological footprint, localise their everyday lives and recapture their labour through land-based enterprise – the largely individualised pattern of One Planet Development appears to deliver limited advancement of collective or commoning practices, or alternative forms of property relations.

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# Rural women's business-led commoning in Mexico and Japan: a transnational feminist analysis

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## Introduction

Historically, rural livelihoods have been sustained through multispecies commoning, by humans working together with more-than-human lifeworlds, such as land, plants, animals, insects, water and the atmosphere. However, in the last few decades the strengthening of neoliberal globalisation has led to the weakening of rural commoning in both the minority and the majority worlds. Men and youth have sought out distant alternative livelihoods, rural areas have depopulated and those remaining are older. Along with these processes, governments in both the minority and the majority worlds have conducted domestic reforms (aka 'structural adjustment programmes' in the majority worlds) that withdrew social safety nets in depopulating rural areas. These compounding processes have led to uneven development, diminishing rural vitality and the abandonment, the feminisation and the ageing of rural natural resource management. Simultaneously with the formal withdrawal of governments from these areas, programmes have been created to increase the self-sufficiency of remaining residents by strengthening their mutual socio-ecological ties. These back-fill rural revitalisation efforts responded well to the global agenda on women's empowerment set around and after the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing that have pushed the development apparatuses including governments and multilateral and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to encourage rural women's collective businesses.

Rural women, individually and collectively, were fundamental to food production and processing long before the celebratory trend of empowering women through business emerged in the late 1980s. Pushed by neoliberal globalisation, concerted efforts by governments, multilateral organisations – such as the World Bank – and NGOs to graft onto existing and create new women’s collective businesses further pulled rural women into business (Chant and Sweetman, 2012). In Mexico, for example, within the Compensation Plan introduced in 1988 (Barajas, 1997) *Women in Solidarity*, the first under the national solidarity programme (1988–94) (Mingo, 1997), offered seed money to women that enabled them to start collective local businesses (Angulo, 2000). Looking at the minority world, in Japan where ageing and depopulation have accelerated, in conjunction with the government-facilitated rural revitalisation policies, the Ministry of Agriculture Forestry and Fisheries’ (MAFF) mid-term vision action plan for rural women (1992–2001) was the first governmental intervention explicitly to promote rural women’s empowerment through local business. Countless rural women’s businesses across both the majority and the minority worlds proliferated for similar reasons. These rural women’s collective businesses are part of a shift in responsibility from the local government to local civil societies (for example, women’s business) that subsidises public administrative expenditures. These activities came to be represented as instruments for women’s empowerment, poverty reduction and back-fill for withdrawn social safety nets (Razavi and Miller, 1995).

Studies have critically investigated many dimensions of rural women’s collective business over the last few decades. They have pointed out that those celebratory narratives essentialise rural women’s needs (that is, income through business) (Pineda, Vizcarra and Lutz, 2006), and once they earn income they are constructed as empowered altruistic saviours who have the potential to contribute to diminished local economies and well-being (Buvinić, 1986; Moser, 1989; Akitsu, 2007; Iwashima, 2020). These representations have been critiqued for not taking into account structural constraints, such as the lack of resources, low levels of education and training, and inequality in market competition (Buendía et al., 2008), embodied, relational and dynamic aspects of rural women’s business (Akitsu, 2007), and women’s non- or lower-paid labour within situated everyday power dynamics in households and community life (Amano, 2001; Pineda et al., 2006; Riaño and Okali, 2008; Watanabe, 2009; Loza-Torres and Vizcarra-Bordi, 2014). These shortcomings have been identified as exacerbating existing unequal gendered dynamics, women’s time poverty (Nakamichi, 2001; Watanabe, 2009) and as

making women's business operation unsustainable in the long run (Chant, 1996), particularly after the termination of external funding (Angulo, 2000; Pérez et al., 2008).

The combination of the perspectives afforded by the use of feminist political ecology, community economies and transnational feminism makes visible several dimensions that are not recognised in existing critiques. Even though women's economic activities through interactions with more-than-human lifeworlds have been examined, studies are human-centred – that is, they rarely attend to multispecies interdependence in rural livelihood production (Gibson-Graham and Miller, 2015). Also, they tend to be class-blind where class is understood as processes of production, appropriation and distribution surplus – labour above what is necessary to reproduce the labourer (Resnick and Wolff, 1987; Gibson-Graham, Resnick and Wolff, 2000). Both anthropocentrism and insensitivity to class processes make it difficult to differentiate capitalist and more-than-capitalist, multispecies community economies in constituting women's collaborative efforts with more-than-human lifeworlds to sustain a rural community. Furthermore, existing studies rarely question women's context-specific agency. The combination of the perspectives used in this chapter allows us to see situated ethics of care that women enact in multispecies commoning. Lastly, existing studies on commoning enacted through rural women's businesses tend to focus on single cases (for example, Nakamura and Sato, 2023; Sato and Soto Alarcón, 2019). As suggested by Mohanty (2003), a transnational, comparative perspective enables us to identify common contexts of struggles among rural women who are geographically, historically, socio-culturally and ecologically distinct. This comparison improves our ability, as relatively privileged researchers, to see similarities in both the majority and the minority worlds that support solidarity across differences and historically developed power dynamics.

In this chapter we adopt a perspective that is informed by feminist political ecology, community economies (Gibson-Graham, 2006; Gibson-Graham, Cameron, and Healy, 2013) and transnational feminism (Mohanty, 2003; Sato, 2014). We compare two long-running cases of commoning surrounding women-led businesses – one in rural Mexico and the other in rural Japan. We discuss these two through five dimensions: commoning means of production, commoning socio-ecological reproduction, multispecies commoning, gendered postcapitalist transformations and ageing corporeality.

In the following, we first briefly introduce our theoretical approach followed by a short description of the methods used. Next, we describe

our rural commoning cases from Japan and Mexico and their background contexts. Then, we explore our two cases and conclude with discussion of the insights and practical contributions made possible through use of our transnational postcapitalist feminist political ecology approach. The insights provided by this lens, which are not visible through the frameworks most commonly used for similar purposes, are demonstrably relevant to policy.

## Transnational feminist approach and methods

Our approach is informed by community economies, feminist political ecology and transnational feminism. The community economies framework provides the notion of a common: a knowledge, a practice or a property that is collectively managed (Gibson-Graham, Cameron and Healy 2013, 2016). Commons are not an object or a place. Commoning is, rather, the practices or activities through which the places or objects normally called commons are continually produced (Linebaugh, 2009; Gibson-Graham, Cameron and Healy, 2016). The community economies approach to commoning enables us to see the production of community through perpetual practices of collective management constitutive of a commons. When starting with a knowledge, a practice or a property that is unmanaged or restricted, commoning is a process of making it more widely accessed and used and sharing its benefits, its care, responsibility for it and others so engaged more widely. If it is already collectively managed, commoning is a process of maintaining its access, use, benefits, care and responsibility. The collective management of a commons is constitutive of the collective so, by definition, it is a collective necessity and it is through commoning a community is produced (Gibson-Graham, Cameron, and Healy, 2016). Our approach, which draws on community economies, rejects capitalist-centred or capitalocentric thinking (Gibson-Graham, 1996). It examines more-than-capitalist economies that constitute rural livelihood production; thus, by definition, it is postcapitalist. Notably, the 'post' of postcapitalism within community economies does not indicate 'after' capitalism. It rejects capitalocentrism by deliberately recognising diverse more-than-capitalist class processes, within which class, understood as processes of surplus production, appropriation and distribution, concurrently being pushed and pulled in contradictory ways when livelihoods are produced and their fruit consumed (Resnick and Wolff, 1987; Gibson-Graham, 1996, 2006; Gibson-Graham, Resnick and Wolff, 2000). Thus, our postcapitalist approach differs from others'

in our recognition of commons not as collective ownership of means of production, for example, land (Gibson-Graham, Cameron and Healy, 2016; Sato and Soto Alarcón, 2019). It rejects the widely held assumption that collective ownership is as foundational to commons as private ownership is to capitalism.

The feminist political ecology informing our approach enables us to explore rural women, other human actors and more-than-human lifeworlds' interactions in the context of their own specific socio-ecological dynamics. Within feminist political ecology, intersectionality is used to examine shifting intersections between socially differentiated humans and more-than-human lifeworlds (Kimanthi, Hebinck and Sato, 2022). Combining this more-than-human intersectionality with postcapitalist community economies, our approach starts from the premise of interdependence between humans and more-than-human lifeworlds in the practice of commoning for purposes that go beyond the economic. In this combination of frameworks, humans, with a critical eye to differences, such as gender, age, corporeality, rurality and nation, shape both commoning practices themselves and pathways for their transformation. Our approach illuminates the more-than-capitalist and multispecies commoning by which rural women, through their businesses, collectively manage natural resources with diverse actors and more-than-human lifeworlds and in the processes collectively produce and distribute surplus, to meet needs beyond their own. Informed by postcapitalist community economies (Gibson-Graham, 2006; Gibson-Graham et al., 2013) and feminist ethics of care (Tronto, 2013; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017), identifying and responding to needs beyond their others, using the surplus, and ensuring the distribution of benefits widely are part of care and considered ethical (Jarosz, 2011; Dombroski, Healy and McKinnon, 2019; Sato and Soto Alarcón, 2019; Barca et al., 2023).

Our cross-case comparison draws on a transnational feminist comparative approach (Mohanty, 2003; Sato, 2014). This approach helps us not to perpetuate a universalist tendency to homogenise women's experiences and ignore their context-specific agency whose effect is the binary construction of more privileged feminists in the minority worlds (often the reader) as saviours and less privileged women in the majority worlds as those in need of saving. Instead of being a tourist or an explorer who sees no commonality between two geographically and socio-culturally distinct cases in the majority and the minority worlds, we adopt an approach that enables us to identify 'a common context of struggles' (Mohanty, 2003) that may unite diverse women across differences in time, space and history that critically recognises differences. While Mohanty (2003) identifies



global capitalism as the common context of struggle against which diverse women form a revolutionary vanguard, our postcapitalist approach offers a more nuanced understanding that still supports the construction of a common political imaginary through which readers can act to support rural women's struggles in their respective locations (Sato, 2014).

Data collection for the Mexican case was carried out by the third author, who is a Mexican female academic researcher, originally from the capital, with 20 years of experience with the Mexican case as a part-time staff member of an NGO, mainly between 2018 and 2019. Data collection for the Japanese case was undertaken by the second author, who is a Japanese female doctoral researcher, originally from the capital, between 2018 and 2022. For both cases, data collection involved informal conversations with case members and stakeholders and observation of case members' interactions with stakeholders and more-than-human lifeworlds, such as plants, farmlands and the regional climate. It also included focus discussion groups with case members – five for the Mexican case and 10 for the Japanese case. Additionally, 13 semi-structured interviews were conducted for the Japanese case. Fieldwork was complemented by review of relevant grey literature such as minutes of meetings, newspaper articles and the production registry to triangulate accounts obtained from the aforementioned interviews and informal talks and observed information. Data were collected and transcribed in local languages (dialects of Spanish for the Mexican and Japanese for the Japanese cases). Transcribed data were initially coded by the second and third co-authors using our postcapitalist feminist political ecology's approach in the source languages. Coded data were then partially translated into English as necessary to support collaboration between the authors in analysis and reporting. The first author, a Japanese female researcher, who visited both field sites, introduced and supported consistent use of the transnational feminist perspective for the conceptual framework and the analyses conducted in both cases. The decision to have researchers who are competent in the local languages and cultures take part in all aspects of research reflects our recognition of incommensurabilities between those who are researched and researchers that are created by linguistic and cultural differences that are part of asymmetrical transnational comparative analysis (Schutte, 1998). Our analysis aims not at 'perfect translation'. Rather, as also suggested by rural studies scholars (Gkartzios, Toishi and Woods, 2020), we structured our work so that we were constantly reminded of the politics of language and the partiality of translation.

Having described our approach and methods, we now introduce our cases and their background contexts.

## Case profiles and background contexts

In this section, we introduce our two cases and briefly describe how they engage in commoning. The selection of our cases is based on their profile as women-led local businesses, their long-standing commitment to meet local socio-ecological needs, their engagement with land, natural resources and governments, their durability and their disparate geographical and historical locations (that is, the majority and the minority worlds).

Our case in the majority worlds is *The Unión de Mujeres San Jose de las Manzanas* (the women's cooperative of Saint Apples) (hereafter *Manzanas*), a women's producer cooperative that engages in care commoning via producing natural medicine, such as syrup, ointments and soaps (see Figure 10.1), set up in 1997 in Las Manzanas, Tlahuiltepa Hidalgo, central Mexico (Gil and Sánchez, 2013; see also Soto Alarcón and Sato, 2019; Soto Alarcón et al., 2020). The implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and structural adjustment programmes reduced public funding, including healthcare, for rural areas (Arriagada, Aranda and Miranda, 2005). To meet the care needs of their families and community, which presented through problems such as children's malnutrition, sickness and alcoholism, in 1995 15 peasant mothers in their 30s and 40s together with peers from a neighbouring community organised themselves to work with a Mexico



**Figure 10.1** *Manzanas* women packaging soaps and ointments.  
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City-based NGO that arranged for women to learn to recover local natural medicinal knowledges and practices from local older women, such as their grandmothers. Since 2000, *Manzanas* has run a baking facility using the surplus from the sale of their natural medicines in which they bake and sell culturally valued fresh breads that are hard to find, twice a month and for special communal celebrations for local consumption. Currently, seven original members (in their 50s and 60s) run *Manzanas* (as of December 2023).

After having gained some local knowledge and practices about natural medicines, *Manzanas* members started producing natural medicines at a local school with limited financial means and access to raw materials (that is, medicinal plants). Both the legal systems and the customary system assume that men have a better ability to make profit from resources (Vázquez-García, 2008), so both privilege men's ownership of Indigenous collective (*ejido*) as well as non-Indigenous communal lands. This discrimination has prevented women from purchasing or inheriting land (Almeida, 2012a). For example, even though the 2018 amendment to the Agrarian Law recognises men and women as having equal rights and encourages community-based collective businesses to use *ejido* (Indigenous collective land often used for agriculture) and natural resources from *ejido* (Ley Agraria, 2018), the customary system tends to see women as only temporary guardians and makes it difficult for women to access *ejido* and take part in the decision-making process over *ejido* (Almeida, 2012b; Vázquez-García, 2008). While the population of Las Manzanas is non-Indigenous peasants, so there is no *ejido* in Las Manzanas, there are hilly and other open access lands collectively managed by the local communal assembly. *Manzanas* members, who own no land and lack substantial financial means, collectively negotiated the access to and the use of private and communal lands with their husbands and communal authorities to set up their production facility, which includes green houses, and they have secured access to and the use of the majority of the raw materials needed for their commodity production. The NGO just mentioned and several branches of government have also irregularly provided financial and technical support, including the marketing of the commodities in Mexico City. The benefits yielded by this commoning are distributed beyond Las Manzanas. *Manzanas* members' continuous production of natural medicines by caring for plants, their own members, their families and their community members and local biodiversity together with diverse humans in their more-than-humans lifeworlds for more than 20 years reflect how they constituted and enacted their responsibility for their commons.

Las Manzanitas is located between the mountains of the eastern Sierra Madre in a temperate climate. However, in recent years, the climate has been getting drier and it is experiencing more frequent forest fires. The population of Las Manzanitas (2,500 habitants) has a higher percentage of people aged over 50 years old (27.45 per cent) than the national average (22 per cent) in 2020 (Gobierno de México, nd). Peasants cultivate maize, beans and squash for subsistence and male peasants cultivate oregano and other aromatic plants for sale in nearby markets. There are a few general stores and a school up to the sixth grade. The road to the nearby city is ill-maintained or unpaved in the majority of the mountain section and access by public transportation is very limited, both of which limit tourism. Labour migration to the US, mainly by adult men but also some women including several original *Manzanitas* members, is a widely practised household livelihood strategy (Rivera, 2006) that supports left-behind families with irregular remittances.

Our case in the minority worlds is *Kunma Suisha-no-Sato* (the water-wheel village of *Kunma*) (hereafter *Suisha*), an award-winning rural women-led food business established in 1987 in Kuma, Hamamatsu city, Shizuoka, Japan (see also Dupuis and Nakamura, 2023; Nakamura and Sato, 2023). *Suisha* runs a restaurant, where handmade *soba* (buckwheat) noodles are its signature product (see Figure 10.2). It was



**Figure 10.2** *Suisha* women making miso (one of the food commodities they sell at their shop). © Authors.

started by 28 women and one man aged between 40 and 80 from better-off forestry and farm households to meet collective needs: community revitalisation and well-being, in particular elderly care. Before forming the collective, *Suisha* women participated in existing food processing and *seikatsu-kaizen* (life improvement) groups that were formed in the early 1950s in part in response to governmental programmes. *Suisha* women assumed the gendered responsibilities to ensure that there were no bedridden older people in their community and set up a non-profit organisation (NPO) in 2000 for that purpose. The set-up of an NPO was a critical shift for *Suisha* women as it permitted them to distribute surplus generated by their food business (a restaurant and a shop that sells local and regional food products as well as non-food souvenirs) to non-profit activities, such as elderly care and ecotourism, which contribute to community revitalisation and ecological restoration. Currently *Suisha* is composed of 21 members aged between 40 and 80 (as of January 2022).

At the start, *Suisha* women had knowledge and skills relevant to food processing but they did not have either the financial means or physical facilities required to make use of that knowledge. *Suisha* received financial and material support from a publicly co-funded local community revitalisation project and the local (prefectural and municipal) governments, which afforded them access to private and communal lands and food processing facilities. *Suisha*'s access to land and productive resources were made possible partly by national, prefectural and municipal governmental policies. Intense political interventions in rice farming in the post-war period (Kuroda, 2016) secured profits for rice farmers and simultaneously facilitated an increase in rice production that was made excessive by a concurrent shift in Japanese diets away from near-exclusive consumption of rice. To solve the problem created by excessive production from a diversity of often small and inefficient farms, the national government implemented the Agricultural Basic Act in 1961 that favoured large-scale rice farming by providing investment in infrastructure, energy and labour for cost-effective resource use and management. This trend, coupled with migration of working-age and younger rural residents to cities for work resulted in rural depopulation and the abandonment of rice fields that are either marginal or impossible to consolidate. The combination of these two trends destabilised longstanding socio-ecological relationships, which produced biodiversity loss, landscape changes and pollution (Takeuchi et al., 2003; Takeuchi, 2010; Morimoto, 2011). Both national and regional schemes associated with rice farming promoted the use of abandoned rice fields and supported existing rice farming practices through local officers. These

officers encouraged *Suisha's* business including *soba* self-cultivation. While *Suisha* stopped growing their own *soba* by the end of the second year, due mainly to the combination of gender, ageing bodies, labour intensity and climatic events, it continues to take care of *soba* commoning by purchasing domestic *soba*, with a preference for purchasing from domestic, if not nearby, farmers who are more expensive, and organising *soba* farming and cooking workshops together with old and new actors (for example, semi-retired members and domestic *soba* growers and urban tourists respectively) and old and new more-than-humans (for example, the *soba* processing facilities and domestically grown purchased *soba*). These shifting commoning practices around *soba*, which include attempts to keep the access, use and benefits of the *soba* commons, reflect how they continuously assume responsibility for the commons with diverse actors and more-than-human lifeworlds.

Kuma is located in the semi-mountainous Tenryu district with an oceanic highland climate. The area is nationally known for high-quality timber and tea. Fifty-six per cent of the population (334 habitants in 2018) is above age 65 (Hamamatsu-city, 2021), which is double the national average (28.4 per cent), and four times the national threshold for an ageing society (14 per cent) (Cabinet Office Japan, 2020). The majority of the households engage in part-time farming and have adult members, often men, working in a nearby city. There is a school up to the sixth grade and a few small stores besides *Suisha*. Despite limited public transportation, *Suisha* benefits from its location and the relatively well-maintained road on the route to a tourist destination from the nearby urban areas. These conditions make it possible for Kuma residents to commute for work and school in nearby towns and cities and to attract tourists to stop by and rest at *Suisha*.

Having briefly introduced our two cases we now delineate their common contexts of struggles through the comparison using a transnational postcapitalist feminist political ecology perspective.

## **A transnational postcapitalist feminist comparative analysis of two rural commoning cases**

*Manzanas* and *Suisha*, our two rural women's business-led commoning cases in the majority and the minority worlds, have differences and similarities. To arrest the epistemic injustice of the naturalised hierarchical binary construction of us (the minority world as superior) and them (the majority world as inferior), our transnational feminist



analysis starts from identifying ‘common contexts of struggles’ based on recognition of differences (Mohanty, 2003). One clear difference between our cases is their class structures: *Manzanas* as a small producer cooperative organised within communal class structure, where all members are direct labourers who collectively produce, appropriate and distribute surplus. On the other hand, *Suisha*, as part of an NPO since 2000, is a social enterprise with three sections (that is, food processing, sales, non-profit), organised within alternative, non-profit, capitalist class structure, where some surplus producing direct labourers as well as non-surplus producing non-direct labourers, make decisions about their enterprise and production and distribution of surplus within it. Furthermore, the size and scale of their enterprises and their historical, social, economic, cultural, material and ecological contexts are different. For example, the location and accessibility of *Suisha* make it possible for them to develop a wider range of activities to attract tourists whereas *Manzanas* does not have that possibility, but they are able to market products directly in nearby cities and the capital through their family members and supporting NGOs.

Turning to similarities, both are rural-women, collectively run enterprises, based on their collectively identified care needs, which make good use of existing gendered knowledges and practices (for example, farming, cooking and/or natural medicines) using locally available natural resources and strategically collaborating with male family members, communal authorities and governmental policies. In both cases, women chose to stay in their locality and (willingly) assumed their gendered care responsibilities within their households and the community. They have attempted to generate livelihoods in their local collectives to meet the jointly identified and assumed needs for care (for example, children’s malnutrition, community healthcare, elderly care) even though labour out-migration (*Manzanas*) or commuting to a nearby city (*Suisha*) is a common household livelihood strategy most often enacted by working-age men.

Below, our cross-case comparison from a transnational postcapitalist feminist political ecology perspective focuses on five dimensions to their common contexts of struggles: (1) commoning means of production; (2) commoning socio-ecological reproduction; (3) multispecies commoning; (4) gendered postcapitalist transformations; and (5) ageing corporeality.

The first dimension is collectively managing the access, use, benefits, care and responsibility for means of production, such as private and communal lands. A common context of struggles is that, even though the class structures of two enterprises are different, one

communal (*Manzanas*) and another alternative capitalist (*Suisha*), and their differently historically developed legal and social structures that govern the access and use, in both cases in practice, women were not the owners of land and other financial means and had no easy access to land to start their businesses. One struggle they share as non-landowner women who lack material resources is access to and use of privately owned and communal lands (Nakamura and Sato, 2023; Soto Alarcón et al., 2020). In both cases, women exercised agency to negotiate with their male family members for use of their private household plots if they live together and with male communal authorities, through the men they know well, to access and use the communal lands to produce raw materials for their commodity production. In the case of *Suisha*, the contingent articulation of governmental policies around the use of unused rice fields, the rural revitalisation and women's empowerment in the massive depopulation and ageing rural contexts enabled *Suisha* women to access and use abandoned private rice fields and set up necessary facilities with financial, material and/or technical supports from the local communal authorities and government (Nakamura and Sato, 2023). In leftist capitalocentric scholarship, private ownership of the means of production is most often seen as foundational to the identity of capitalism (Gibson-Graham, Cameron and Healy, 2016). This basic choice then leads these leftist critics to argue that transition to the collective ownership of means of production is necessary for more just class processes. Contrary to these accepted assumptions, what we see in these cases is that the ownership of means of production determines neither the class identity (either communal or capitalist) of enterprise nor the possibility of commoning. Commoning is not necessarily tied to collective ownership. The enabling conditions for commoning in these cases are: social and material support from structurally advantaged agents, in these cases male family members, recognition of communal authority by governing authorities, such as governmental actors, and presence of these actors as part of commoning processes.

The second dimension is commoning socio-ecological reproduction. In both cases, what is commoned is not only means of production, *soba* or healthcare, and not only biophysical, knowledge, cultural or social, or combinations of these, but also the socio-ecological reproduction these all support itself. Despite differences made visible when they are examined through the lens of class, women have made collective decisions about the production and distribution of surplus yielded from their primary commodity production (that is, natural medicines for *Manzanas* and *soba* noodles for *Suisha*). Women did not accumulate that



surplus. They, together, chose to distribute it to for collectively identified needs through organising non-profit activities, such as baking breads, reforestation and preservation of biodiversity (*Manzanas*), elderly care and the restoration of terraced rice fields and firefly habitats (*Suisha*). What we learn from these cases is that their commoning focuses on neither women's empowerment nor maximising profits but on jointly determined objectives, a healthy community (*Manzanas*) and community revitalisation and well-being (*Suisha*), both of which touch on socio-ecological reproduction whose benefits are more widely distributed. In both cases women had to work to realise support from male family members and community authorities. Their continuous decisions – decisions which produced them as particular kinds of ethical subjects – to distribute surplus to support their communities produced the conditions in which it was easier for structurally advantaged actors, male family members and community authorities who also share women's business objectives to support women's efforts. These women's commoning practices define productivity, not only as producing more profit on the model of capitalocentric thinking but as contributing to shared communal objectives, regardless of their different class structures. These practices, and their results, resignify what counts as productive in postcapitalist thinking (Barca et al., 2023).

The third dimension is multispecies commoning. In both cases, women engage in commoning the means of production and social reproduction together with more-than-humans, such as soil, plants, water and regional atmosphere. While their commoning practices, such as caring for plants and biodiversity via conscious observation, restricted consumption and reforestation (*Manzanas*) and widening a *soba* commons by increasing involvements of urban consumers in ecological restoration via organising farming workshops and ecotourism and by purchasing from producers whose practice produce aligned effects (*Suisha*), their livelihood production intersects with more-than-human species economies, such as plant economies and birds economies, seen from a non-anthropocentric, more-than-human perspective (Gibson-Graham and Miller, 2015). In anthropocentric thinking non-humans are most often denied agency and legitimate interests. These approaches are criticised for their facilitation of forms of epistemic injustice that encourage a binary hierarchy in which humans see ourselves as distinct from and superior to a nature that we are justified in exploiting for our own purposes, be that the advance of civilisation through industrial exploitation or, more recently, conservation. The postcapitalist and more-than-human ethics of care that informs our perspective makes

visible women's livelihood production as multispecies efforts, more-than-humans as carers, allies and commoners in surviving well together and humans as not only offering care but also as receiving care from more-than-human lifeworlds (Barca et al., 2023).

The fourth dimension is gendered postcapitalist transformations. All aforementioned dimensions are deeply gendered. In both cases, a common context is that women's commoning practices are driven by how women assume gendered care responsibilities in the embedded socio-ecological dynamics. From a lens provided by postcapitalist and more-than-human ethics of care (Roelvink and Gibson-Graham, 2009; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017; Dombroski, Healy and McKinnon, 2019; Barca et al., 2023), women's business practices exhibit their ethics of care. In both of our cases women identified needs of others, both humans (for example, children and older people) and more-than-humans (for example, herbal plants, biodiversity, fireflies and terraced rice fields), as their own needs. They respond to these jointly identified collective needs through collaborative strategies (that is, the production of surplus via profit-making commodity production) to meet the collective needs. They also ensure that they develop the necessary knowledge, skills and attitudes by working with actors such as NGOs, governmental officers and more-than-humans while observing responses from those who receive their care and participate in the commoning efforts. These women's commoning efforts do make use of and perpetuate existing representations of women/mothers as caring and altruistic (Akitsu, 2007; Beşpinar, 2010; Iwashima, 2020). When we learn to closely look at their femininity as enacted and interpreted in their local contexts, it becomes possible to see transformation. Caring and altruism are attached to rural femininity, and new identities, such as workers, agents of community revitalisation, negotiating between for-profit and non-profit values as well as navigating tensions produced by conflict between normatively dictated household tasks and emerging work requirements, working towards collective well-being with diverse actors and more-than-humans, all contribute to the transformation of their own contextually specific rural femininities. From our postcapitalist feminist perspective, rural femininity and postcapitalist transformations are co-constitutive and contextually specific. Women are not (solely) victims of neoliberal capitalist globalisation but (also) agents of postcapitalist transformations. They collaborate with other actors and more-than-human lifeworlds in ways that are locally significant even while they simultaneously reproduce women as caring and altruistic (Nakamura and Sato, 2023; Soto Alarcón and Sato, 2019).

The last dimension is women's ageing bodies in the context of the continuous physical and emotional toils involved in depopulating and ageing rural life. The weakening of rural commoning practices has been facilitated not only by the strengthening of neoliberal globalisation but also by the weakening of women's corporeal bodies, due to ageing, over time without natural replacement provided by upcoming generations. In both cases, after a few decades of their operation, women are older. Their ageing bodies are less able to sustain the same levels of physical and emotional toil while dealing with time poverty and juggling their responsibilities for households, work and community. They have been addressing the challenges of ageing with a diversity of strategies which permitted them to continue commoning, such as reducing their labour time and decreasing the scale of and adapting the content of their activities. Furthermore, in both cases, women struggle to recruit younger generations to take over their responsibilities for work and community. Even when daughters live nearby, some women have no strong wish to have their daughters take over their responsibilities. In comparison with *Manzanas*, where only original founding members have remained, *Suisha* women have done slightly better at recruiting younger generations of women with elementary school-age children and one man to take part; however, their continued employment is unknown due partly to the absence of local schools for children above sixth grade. *Suisha* women organise seasonal events and create opportunities for people from outside (for example, tourists) to pay short and longer-term visits to get to know their community in the hope of their permanent settlement. Their efforts reflect their recognition that rural revitalisation cannot be accomplished only by focusing on the present and the near future. It requires younger generations to continue their community. The local government also supports efforts for social reproduction by creating conditions, such as offering some employment opportunities and accommodation, to attract young families from outside. However, larger socio-ecological issues, such as labour out-migration, ageing population, depopulation, the lack of publicly supported social safety nets, including schools for older children, the deterioration of natural resources management, all of which intersect with their ageing bodies, remain beyond their scope for action despite their continuous commoning efforts.

## Conclusion

The perspective afforded by our transnational postcapitalist feminist political ecology does not simply present an essentialised global capitalism that negatively affects rural women in both the majority and the minority worlds as a common context. Our analysis suggests neither that rural women across substantial differences share nothing, that rural women in the minority worlds have less struggles or do better, nor that they, despite substantial differences, have a possibility of exercising oppositional agency and uniting themselves against one common object of struggles. Rather, our analysis critically recognises differences and women's context-specific agency, and based on that recognition, highlights their common contexts of struggles without suggesting a hierarchical binary construction of us versus them. It pays attention to not reproducing imperialist feminist attitudes in which saving less privileged women becomes natural but supports a self-reflexivity that facilitates identification of commonalities across differences and historically developed power dynamics among readers in their respective locations (Mohanty, 2003; Sato, 2014).

Our analysis illuminates gendered, postcapitalist, multispecies and corporeal dimensions as part of common contexts of struggles for these two groups of business women who work together towards collectively identified socio-ecological care needs. Women's commoning efforts, together with other actors and more-than-human lifeworlds, facilitate postcapitalist transformations (Sato and Soto Alarcón, 2019; Nakamura and Sato, 2023). Commoning was found through our analysis both inside and outside communal class structures. Commoning, contrary to normative expectations, was found in interaction with capitalist class structures. Even though *Manzanas* does, there is no necessity that the surplus created through commoning is distributed for communal needs. The framework we used made it possible to recognise in our cases that neither private nor collective ownership of the means of production defines the class structure of an enterprise or determines the possibility of commoning. It presents rural livelihood production as nesting on and within multispecies economies (Gibson-Graham and Miller, 2015; Barca et al., 2023). Our approach suggests us to move away from capitalocentric and anthropocentric thinking and see gender and other social differences, such as age and rurality, as processes without ignoring embodied physical and emotional experiences. This perspective allows us to see everyday gender and class transformations that are contingently pushed and pulled by myriads of processes that constitute dynamic rural transformations simultaneously without losing a critical eye to corporeality and structural transformations.

Informed by discussions of practical gender needs and strategic gender interests among feminist development scholars (Molyneux, 1985; Moser, 1993), we suggest two simultaneous projects: one more short-term project to meet practical, in our case ‘collective’, needs and another more long-term project to meet strategic ‘collective’ interests. Practically, our analysis suggests the importance of supporting women with commoning means of production. For this, assisting women to interact with structurally advantaged agents, such as male family members and community authorities, NGOs and governments, may be crucial in permissive contexts while it may remain impossible in others that are more polarised or actively discriminatory, as may be found in cases such as Indigenous land rights struggles. To gather necessary support, our analysis points to the importance of facilitating ethical negotiation among multiple actors and more-than-human lifeworlds for articulating a common objective that supports respectful co-reproduction. Strategically, our analysis calls for supporting contextually sensitive community efforts to recruit younger generations to take part in rural commoning to keep diverse humans and more-than-human lifeworlds as commoners for collective survival.

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# From land reparations to land justice: reframing relationships to place using Indigenous Australians' wisdom

Ed Wensing and Bhiamie Williamson

*Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are advised that this chapter contains the names of deceased persons (<https://aiatsis.gov.au/cultural-sensitivity>).*

## Introduction

When the British claimed Australia in 1788, they failed to acknowledge and respect the fact that Australia was already occupied and that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples<sup>1</sup> have laws and customs that tie them to their lands and waters. Consequently, the depth of trauma and loss that Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have experienced through dispossession, dislocation and severance of their cultural ties to their ancestral lands and waters should not be underestimated.

The premise of this chapter is that genuine structural change in governance and land/resource ownership is required if Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are going to achieve better outcomes in a postcapitalist future. The critical starting point for any reparations with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples lies in acknowledging that sovereignty was never ceded and that they still have 'sovereign obligations for the entirety of their country<sup>2</sup> today, regardless of the development or impact' since 1788 (Rigney et al., 2021: 124).

This chapter begins by considering the history of Indigenous struggle for land-restitution. It describes some important legal and political milestones that have provided a basis for the return of land to Indigenous Australians. It explains the key governance systems and structures arising from these reforms, revealing a dynamic sector that continues to navigate a path through larger political struggles that are yet to be resolved. Building on the knowledge of land and rights restitution and the distinct governance arrangements these rights have given rise to, the focus shifts to further land and governance reforms as a basis for meaningful Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nationhood in a postcapitalist environment.

Options for moving beyond mere recognition of statutory land rights, native title rights and interests and co-management arrangements in their current forms are explored. Moving towards a 'just' (Fraser, 2009: 13) view of the world, the two culturally distinct systems of law and custom relating to lands and waters<sup>3</sup> are viewed as being on a level playing field, interacting with each other on matters of mutual concern with relatively equal autonomy through dialogue and agreement-making. The chapter explores approaches to reconciling Indigenous Australians' land rights and interests with the Crown's land interests whereby recompense for lands taken could comprise a leasehold system with the payment of land rent, not as compensation for damages but rather as recognition of ongoing use and access to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' lands and waters with their free, prior and informed consent (UN, 2007, Articles 10, 19(2) and 32(2)).

## **Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and Australia**

Australia is a vast continent with massive geographical diversity. From Island atolls in the Torres Strait, rainforests in North Queensland, savannah landscapes and deserts, to the lush plains of the Murray–Darling Basin, alpine regions and temperate rainforests of Tasmania, Australia is not one kind of place but many. Indigenous groups that occupy these lands and waters are concomitantly diverse. Yet, across this diversity there are important commonalities shared between and across groups.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are recognised as being among the oldest human civilisations on Earth with the longest living memory of humankind (Flood, 2006: 133; Tobler, 2017; Perkins

and Langton, 2008). For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, the lands, waters and skies are products of a period called the Dreaming (Stanner, 1953), the time before human occupation where great beings lived on and shaped all that exists. In scientific terms, they have owned, occupied, and enjoyed these lands for over 65,000 years (Yunupingu, 1997: 1). The Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS) explains:

The Dreaming refers to the creation period (a time beyond human memory) when ancestral beings are said to have spread across the continent, creating human society and its rules for living, language and customs and laws as they went. Great magicians, huge and beautiful (many having both human and animal qualities simultaneously), turned a flat, featureless plain into the wonderful and varied topography we admire today. Tired by all the endeavours, they eventually 'died' as bodies, but their spiritual essence remains, in the landscape, the heavens, the waters. We believe that their life-giving and life-sustaining powers exist at important places to this day. Our culture is based on a kind of contract: that we must follow the ancestral dictates (we use the English word 'Law' to mean this entire cultural inheritance, its injunctions and taboos and rules for life) in order to stimulate and guarantee the continued flow of fertility and power from the spiritual realm. Our great ancestral beings are still 'out there', not interfering directly, but ever watchful. (AIATSIS, 2018: 12)

Among the inheritance passed from the Dreaming to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are titles to lands and waters, and the obligation to protect and care for these places, which was done for millennia. These religious and spiritual attachments are deep Indigenous concepts, but they have precedent in Western formations of property and land. We draw attention to Henry George's argument that 'there is in nature no such thing as fee simple in land' and 'no power on earth which can rightfully make a grant of exclusive ownership in land' (Book VII, Chapter 1: 300). In Book VII, George develops his case for treating land as common property and argues that because land is the creation of God, there is 'a natural and inalienable right to the equal use and enjoyment of land' (Peddle and Peirce, 2017: 306) and that all people will remain equal if rents are paid to the community (Peirce, 2017: 17). But while the concepts of creation and divine attachment may not be foreign to Western civilisations, it appears that these understandings did not extend

to Indigenous peoples. The landing of the First Fleet at Botany Bay and the subsequent establishment of the first British colony in Australia began a process of radical transformation from this context.

Foucault (1978) explored the intersections of discourse and power. He identifies how discourses shape our patterns of thought, and the words we use to communicate these patterns are processes in building, legitimising and transmitting conceptions about the world. In the context of this chapter, Western discourses of land titles and land use reinforce existing power structures while delegitimising other, alternate ways of engaging with, and existing in, the world. This immovability of larger social, political, legal and economic systems continues to resist the deeper transformations of settler systems. What is needed then is a more radical view of the future where we begin to move away from land restitution within a settler-colonial framework of property rights, to a radical transformation of relationships to place. It is about moving beyond land-restitution and towards land-justice.

We cannot help but wonder what would have been if at the time of contact, the British colonists had established a meaningful discourse with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, if they had sat and listened and negotiated in good faith, arrangements capable of supporting both societies of people. What would Australia look like today? While the ships of history have sailed, the thought remains just as important. This chapter is perhaps best thought of then as a creative imagining, where we seek to explore a postcapitalist future embedded in a postcolonial countryside. Perhaps it is not too late to ask – how can we, Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, come to an arrangement founded in some sense of justice of past wrongs, yet rooted in our contemporary reality for parity between essentially different cultures? It is this question and the need to apply political imagination and the freedom to rethink our social order (Graeber and Wengrow, 2022) that guides our thinking.

## **The impacts of colonisation: denial, dispossession and deprivation**

In order to understand the history we have to today, we have to understand the assumptions the colonists brought with them (Wensing, 2019: 45). As Pascoe (2014: 13) asserts, the colonists were not here 'to marvel at a new civilisation; they were here to replace it'. The logic of settler colonialism in Australia was premised on displacing Indigenous Australians from their ancestral lands – a project that Altman (2022:

142) describes was 'completed very effectively'. From 1788, British law conferred on Aboriginal people the *privilege* of being a British subject, but at the same time it deprived them of their land and destroyed their cultural connection to their country and their traditions. Later, the law confined Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to reserves or missions to which many of them often had no cultural connection, deprived them of their civil rights and justified their inferiority and which explicitly denied them the opportunity to participate in Australian society at-large (Cranston, 1974: 60).

To paint a simple picture, prior to English intrusion in 1788, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples owned, possessed and enjoyed *all* of Australia including its adjacent islands and waters. By 1965, they owned none of it and were excluded from most of it. During this period Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations were decimated. What were healthy populations spanning many thousands were reduced to mere hundreds, or less. In Tasmania and southern Victoria, Aboriginal groups were reduced to only a handful of survivors (Attwood, 2009; Boyce, 2013; Lawson, 2014; Brodie, 2017). This erasure of Aboriginal populations on the mainland of Australia enabled the radical transformation of Australia's land and waterscapes. What were sacred bonds handed down from the time of creation to care for and protect Country were replaced by English land-use patterns rooted in Locke's philosophies of the creation of private property through labour (Tully, 1980). This is observed in the land titles handed to early colonists whose responsibility it was to clear and toil the land. These ideas ignored and disregarded Aboriginal land-use patterns that supported thriving ecosystems capable of sustaining substantial human populations. Whether the land-use patterns of Aboriginal peoples could be described as agricultural, as put forward by Pascoe (2014) and Gammage (2011), continues to be debated (see Sutton and Walshe, 2021). The depth of trauma and loss that Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have experienced through dispossession, dislocation and severance of their cultural ties to their ancestral lands and waters should not be underestimated. As Steve Goldsmith, a Kurna Miyurna man from South Australia, so astutely observed in a major exhibition at the National Museum of Australia, titled 'Encounters' in 2015:

They talk about a civilised world coming to the untamed world, but I think it is the other way around. It was the barbarians that came to our civilised world.  
(Goldsmith, 2015)

As the Aboriginal populations began to recover from the impacts of colonisation, so did their calls for land and social justice become louder (Attwood and Markus, 1999; Curthoys et al., 2008). Histories of Aboriginal resistance and protest dot Australian history (Attwood and Foster, 2003). Many of these early protest efforts resulted in the landmark referendum in 1967 to amend Australia's Constitution to extend the powers of the federal Parliament to make laws relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and to include them in the numbers of people in the Commonwealth of Australia or in a State (Expert Panel, 2012: 31). Prior to this amendment, only the States had the power to make laws relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and they were excluded from being counted in the official population of Australia. These changes to Australia's Constitution opened new opportunities for targeted political and legal movements which have invariably centred around restoring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander relationships with Country.

The critical starting point for any reparations with Indigenous Australians must lie in acknowledging that sovereignty was never ceded, and that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people still have 'sovereign obligations for the entirety of their country today, regardless of the development or impact' since 1788 (Rigney et al., 2021: 124).

## Recognition and land reclamation

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are slowly but surely repossessing their ancestral lands and waters. In response to rolling Aboriginal land rights campaigns in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s (Foley and Anderson, 2006), several State Governments and the Australian Government enacted statutory Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander land rights schemes. There are currently 24 such statutes operating across Australia.

In conceptual terms there are two types of schemes. First, general land legislation that allows governments to create reserves, freehold title or leases for the specific use and benefit of Aboriginal people. Second, land rights grants or transfers which generally grant land to traditional owners, who, in this context are identified in accordance with traditional laws and customs and are communal landholders and/or Aboriginal residents of an Aboriginal community (ATSISJC, 2005: 81). The form of titles under these schemes are generally inalienable freehold or leasehold

titles, noting that there are significant differences within and between jurisdictions (Wensing, 2016).

The various schemes are acts of 'grace or favour' (Wensing and Porter, 2016: 4) by the state because in most cases the state was grasping for a quick and easy solution to a complex problem for not having recognised the pre-existing land rights and interests of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples at the time of colonisation. The success of these schemes is highly debatable. The essential problem is that they are unable to 'fix and stabilise' (Porter and Barry, 2016: 23) the claims that Aboriginal peoples are making on the Settler state. The schemes fall well short of recognising the sovereignty and prior ownership of Australia by its Aboriginal peoples (McNeil, 2013: 145) and the state is 'largely unable to deal with the inter-connected nature of the demands for cultural recognition and economic redistribution' (Porter and Barry, 2016: 23).

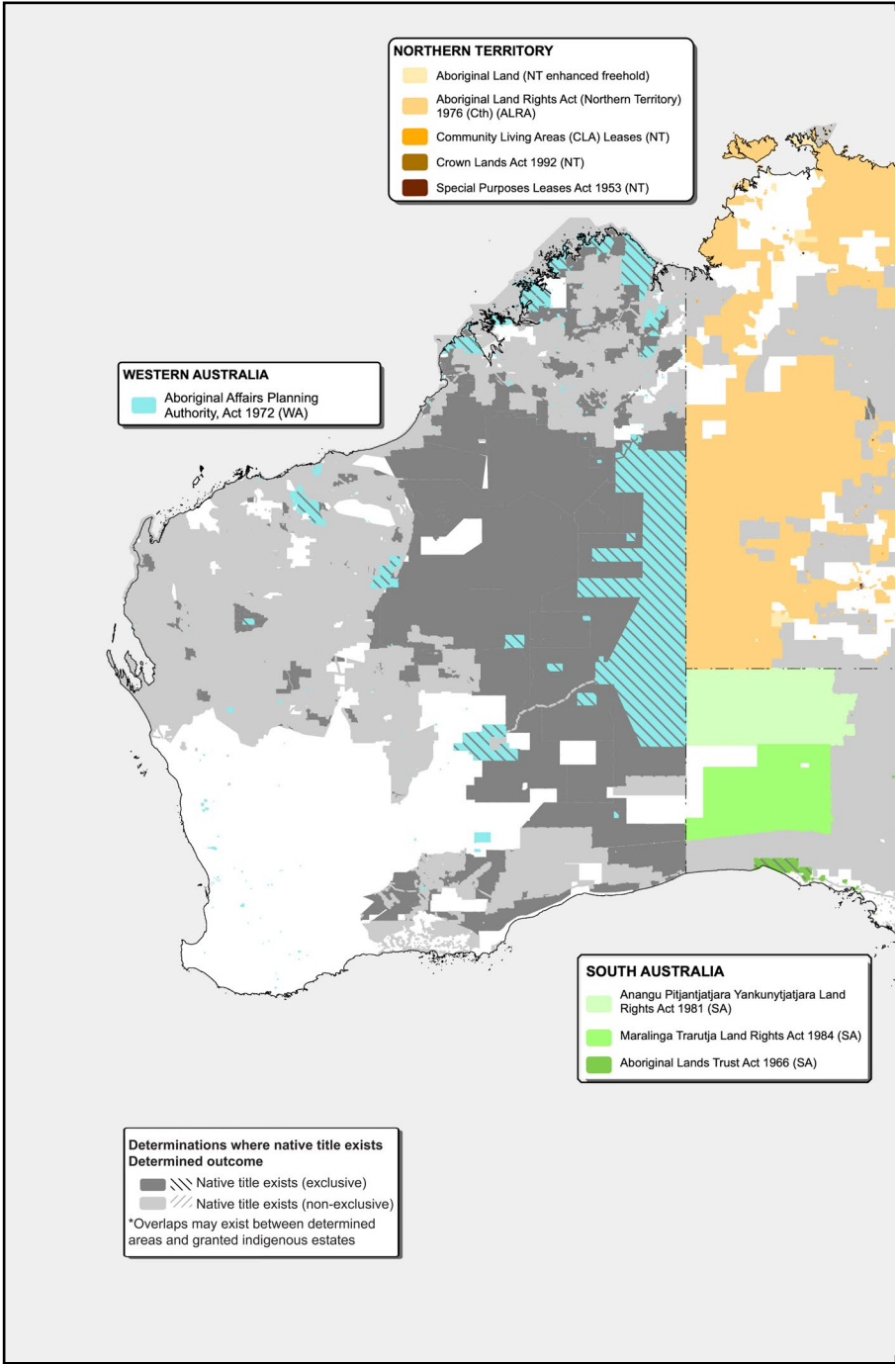
In 1992 in a landmark judgement in *Mabo v State of Queensland (No. 2)*, the High Court of Australia dispensed with the myth of *terra nullius* as the basis for establishing Australia's sovereignty and set the ground rules for the legal recognition of the pre-existing land rights of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of Australia under their system of law and custom, which the High Court termed 'native title' (Wensing, 1999).

The term *terra nullius* means 'land belonging to no one' which refers to the legal thought which British authorities later relied upon for the dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their ancestral lands (Scott, 1940; Knapman, 2023). The British presumed the Indigenous peoples of Australia were 'so devoid of government and laws that they were deemed 'inferior' to establish a territory with the Crown' (Langton and Corn, 2023: 11).

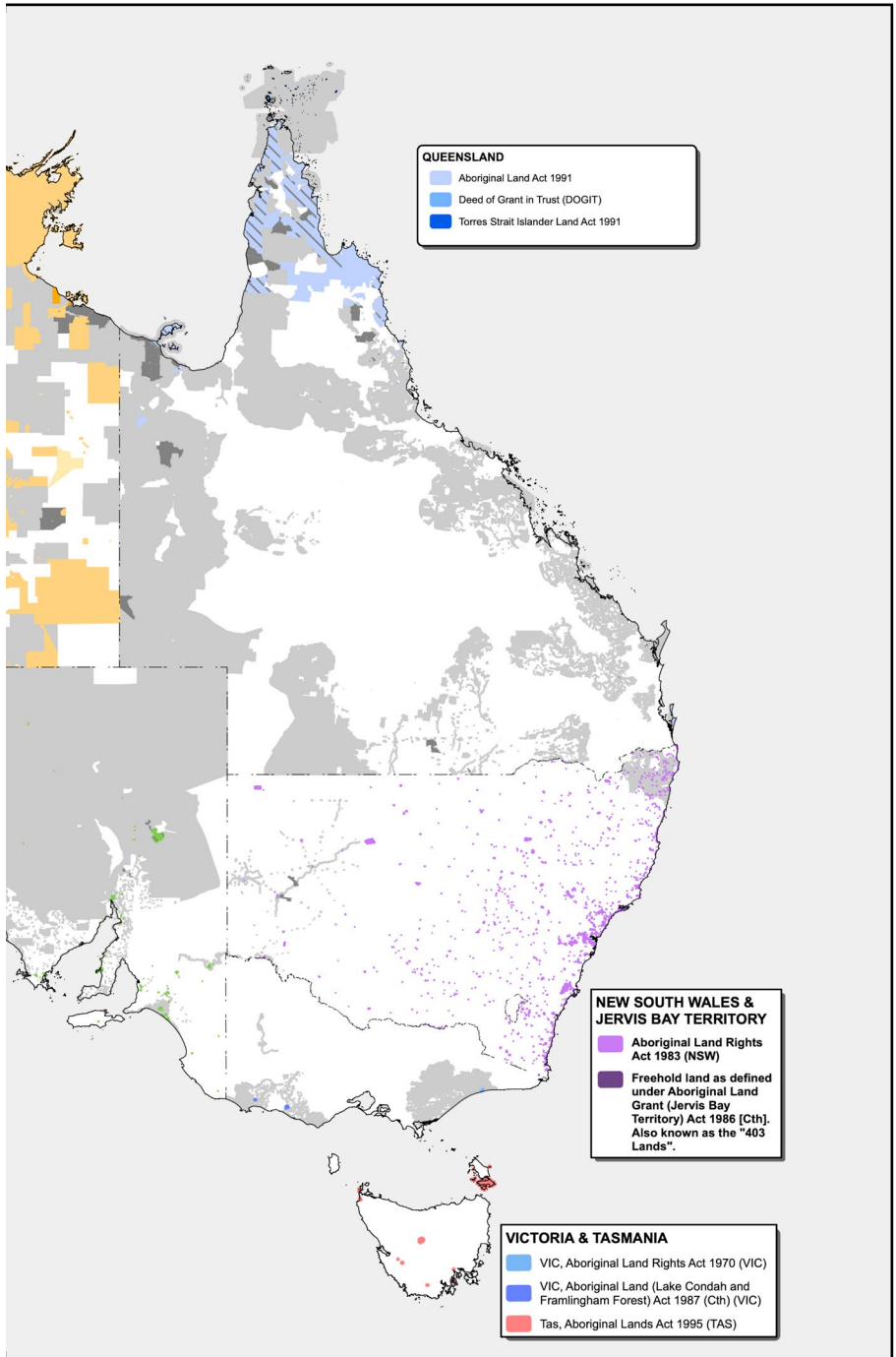
The High Court's decision in *Mabo (No. 2)* irrevocably changed the relationships between Indigenous people and other Australians (Langton and Corn, 2023: 11). The Australian Government negotiated and enacted the *Native Title Act 1993* (Cth) to provide for the recognition and protection of common law native title and recognising the communal, group or individual rights and interests of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples under their traditional laws and customs in relation to specific land or waters. Every positive determination of native title under the *Native Title Act 1993* (Cth) is, therefore, an affirmation of Aboriginal law and custom and their sovereignty that was present prior to 1788.

The native title system is also complex. It had to deal with over 230 years of failing to recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander law and custom and their ongoing connections to and responsibilities for Country, as well as create a system for working with native title rights and interests





**Figure 11.1** The Indigenous Estate in Australia (as at 1 July 2023). © Geospatial Services, National Native Title Tribunal, 6 September 2023.



into the future. In many respects, it is an act of ‘statecraft’ (Scott, 1998: 77) because it operates in such a way that native title claims can only be made over territory with which there is an unbroken connection from the time of first colonial settlement. As Moreton-Robinson (2015: 16) has observed, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples ‘don’t belong anywhere unless they can prove their title according to criteria established by the state’ (Moreton-Robinson, 2015: 16). O’Sullivan (2021: 40) argues that the *Native Title Act 1993* (Cth) is ‘a profound Act of misrecognition’ because the ‘broken connection is not an Indigenous choice’.

The way in which the *Native Title Act 1993* (Cth) is currently being applied and interpreted means that ‘native title interests remain subordinate to those of white Australians’ and can only be recognised ‘if it does not alter the shape of the common law’ (Dorsett, 1998: 280, 293). Indeed, ‘the placement of native title outside (and beneath) the range of European property concepts is racist’ (Hunter, 1993: 499) and the extinguishing provisions in the Act arguably reproduce the conditions for ongoing dispossession that were deeply embedded in the notion of *terra nullius*. Smith (2001: 2) argues that ‘the historical fiction of *terra nullius*’ was replaced with ‘the legal fiction of extinguishment’ and the state continues to hold the upper hand through the power of compulsory acquisition should a better land or resource use come along (Wensing, 2019: 69–70).

Under the various statutory land rights schemes, the native title system, and through various co-management arrangements over national parks and conservation reserves, Indigenous Australians are slowly but surely repossessing their ancestral lands and waters. Over half the continent of Australia is under some form of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander ownership, management or control (Altman, 2022). This includes land granted or transferred under various statutory land rights schemes under State/Territory laws and native title determinations by the Federal Court of Australia under the *Native Title Act 1993* (Cth) that native title exists (exclusively or non-exclusively) in an area (see Figure 11.1).

Although welcome, ongoing efforts to restore lands and waters to Indigenous peoples throughout Australia are insufficient to address the ongoing cultural, social, economic and ecological violence experienced. Approaches to land-restitution have largely continued along their original trajectories of dispossession and a continuing denial of an influential and self-determining role in decision-making about land and sea Country (Wensing, 2016, 2023). As shown above, they seek to fit Indigenous peoples within a pre-existing framework of rights and ownership of

land that fundamentally abuts Indigenous notions of connection, and divine rights as determined by and through the Dreaming. These various schemes do not constitute recognition of the Indigenous peoples' sovereign obligations to their ancestral lands and waters.

As political agreements made between sovereign entities, treaties present an opportunity to address past grievances and reset relationships. Increasingly, many Indigenous Australians are seeing these developments as opportunities for sovereign nation rebuilding. In recent years, several sub-national jurisdictions within Australia are progressing with preliminary treaty discussions with Indigenous Australians (Hobbs, 2023). Some jurisdictions have made commitments to pursuing truth-telling and treaty negotiations, while others have made slow but steady progress towards building the institutions necessary to conduct equitable negotiations. While treaties are accepted around the world as a way of resolving differences between Indigenous peoples and those who colonised their lands, Australia 'is an outlier' (Hobbs, 2023: 2), and it is too early to tell at this stage whether these processes will indeed provide opportunities for recognition of Indigenous peoples' sovereign obligations for their Country (Rigney et al., 2021: 124) and for land restitution.

## The problem with land-restitution alone

Foucault (1972) identifies that discourses influence, if not define, our perceptions of the world including how we relate to it. The development and transmission of these various patterns of thought provide a basis to understand what is real and what is possible. There is some resonance here in the work of Ngūgĩ wa Thiong'o (1998) who identified the importance of reclaiming Indigenous languages as necessary to reclaiming Indigenous perceptions and conceptions about the world. The ability to speak in ones' native tongue, Ngūgĩ says, creates an ability to comprehend the world around us according to the values, philosophies and epistemologies of ones' native peoples.

It is true that Indigenous Australians have been dispossessed of their Country and returning that Country to these various groups is a necessary precondition in reconciling the past with present circumstances and for a better future. However, simply returning lands and waters to Indigenous Australians while failing to address the underlying systems of land title and use may disfigure Indigenous perceptions that centre connection and belonging.

The various arrangements for transferring or recognising some kind of land title to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples still have a long way to go in so far as restitution is concerned. Invariably, they are still and will always be committed to removing Indigenous peoples from their lands (Williamson, 2021: 337) or will almost always constrain Indigenous Australians from using their hard-won land titles to participate in the nation's economy at their choosing and on their terms (Wensing, 2019).

Our general understanding of Western notions of 'property' is that it implies ownership and control over a thing. More recent interpretations embrace the idea that 'property' is about the relationship we have with things and the power we have over things, including land. For example, Blackburn J (at 272) in *Milirrpum* said that 'property, in its many forms, generally implies the right to use or enjoy, the right to exclude others, and the right to alienate'.

There are several elements about property in land and the way we organise our relations with land that provide a 'taken for granted background' as Harris (1996: 63) notes:

When people confront the world with their claims, desires, projects and plans, the world they perceive does not consist of a mass of value-free (brute) facts. We all begin situated within a network of social relations and interactions. Our perceptions are coloured by a host of value-laden assumptions. Some of these assumptions are local and passing, others are more pervasive and permanent facets of human association. Any of them may, one way or another, be raised to the level of conscious apprehension and then, perhaps, challenged. The bulk of them, however, provide a taken-for-granted background for all that we think and say. The latter are the organising ideas of daily life.

The point here is not to argue the concepts but rather to unpack and unsettle the things we take for granted and lay the foundations for a better future (Wensing, 2019: 113). As Wensing (2019: 4) asserts, colonisation was not about the survival of the fittest but rather about settler society assuming and asserting superiority and inferiority over others, and the failure of colonising societies 'to implement their own purported ethical codes' (Howitt, 2020: 5).

Indigenous peoples around the world have very different conceptions of 'property' that do not necessarily align with Western concepts. For example, Aboriginal peoples tend to view land or waters

not as individual 'property' but rather as part of an ethical, spiritual and legal matrix of rights, obligations and community relationships with and for their ancestral Country (Small and Sheehan, 2008: 106). Indigenous Australians also place much greater emphasis on origins and obligations of property within an understanding of community (Small and Sheehan, 2005: 1) over time and through generations. As Neale (2021: 5) puts it:

For us it is not land, but Country. Country is a worldview that encompasses our relationship to the physical, ancestral and spiritual dimensions, and involves the kind of intimacy evident in the oft-quoted expression 'The Country is our Mother. We belong to the country; it does not belong to us.' Indigenous people think of Country as they would a family member. We worry about Country and sing to Country. We care for Country. The rape and pillage of this continent is as abhorrent to us as if it had been done to one's own mother, just to drive home the unsavoury point. It is furthermore immoral to repay the personage who nourishes and nurtures you, who gives you life, with exploitation for greed and short-term gain.

The differences between cultures affects the way we look at ourselves and our relationships with land. Physically, 'land is ever present', but culturally, land is always 'subject to considerable adaptation' (Fisher, 2016: 214). The differing conceptions about land as something 'worth holding' (Fisher, 2016: 214) requires thinking simultaneously about the physical and cultural dimensions of land (Bakker and Bridge, 2006: 8), as well as through space and time (Fisher, 2016: 217). In Australia, ever since *Mabo (No. 2)* there are two systems of law and custom relating to land operating in Australia, each emanating from different cultures. As Rudyard Kipling observed so astutely in 1892 when comparing different customs in Africa, 'Every single one of them is right' (Kipling, 1892, cited in Linklater, 2015: 5). If Australia is to 'avoid repeating or perpetuating the pattern of dispossession of its Indigenous peoples' (Bright and Dewar, 1998: 8), then new understandings of property in Australia are necessary to accommodate those distinctly different cultures.

Indigenous Australians' relationship with their land and waters is rooted in their beliefs regarding their origin as peoples, and the origin of their lands and waters. For many, these are one and the same. A common theme in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander law and custom is the inalienability of the group's land. The group is usually understood to comprise all members, past, present and future, and that the 'land rights belong equally to all of them' (Small and Sheehan, 2008: 107).

Parity between the two systems of law and custom relating to land and waters is what Indigenous Australians want, as evidenced by the following statement by David Mowaljarlai, an Elder of the Ngarinyin peoples in Western Australia:

There are two laws. Our covenant and white man's covenant, and we want these two to be recognised ... We are saying that we want them to be equal<sup>4</sup> (Wensing, 2019: 1).

This is but one of many such statements by Indigenous Australians.

## A postcapitalist future?

Western patterns of land-use arising from Western patterns of thought are not immovable. The first step to transforming these modes of governing land and water is a shift in our patterns of thought and how we conceive of relationships with place.

The following is drawn from a conference presentation by Wensing and Small to the 10th International Urban Planning and Environment Association Symposium at the University of Sydney in July 2012 (Wensing and Small, 2012).

A strategy for the just integration of Indigenous peoples' customary rights in land use planning systems can be developed from the fundamentals of the rights relationships. As the primary and complete owners of the land of Australia, Indigenous Australians have the primary right of control of land use. Their laws and customs include some land use elements that deserve respect due primarily to their primacy.

Western law exists below customary law and must respect it, except in cases where it might cause significant conflicts with the Western evaluation of the common good. Those conflicts can be interpreted quite widely to include the national economic good as an aspect of the common good but with a prudential limit as to how far land use control can intrude on customary law priorities. The further the limit is pushed by Western planners, the less defensible it becomes. What this means in practice is that where customary ownership is established, there should be minimal intrusion by Western planners.

In the case of land where customary title is considered to have been extinguished by sovereign acts, such as the grant of freehold title, there is a strong argument for the recognition of a residual customary right pertaining to land-use planning. This follows from the conceptualisation of planning in positive terms as the granting of land use rights that were

previously withheld from freehold and were therefore the reason that freeholders were not able to exercise the usual right of ownership, which is the power to choose the highest and best use as they might perceive it to be.

Where freehold has extinguished most customary rights, the right to grant the highest and best land use that has been withheld via the mechanism of land use planning and should be conferred on the customary owners. Given the role of the state in regulating for the common good, this would suggest a dual right of regulation, split between the customary owners and the state represented by planners from various levels of government. Land use planning is exercised in practice, as the power of restraint applied to lesser title holders; it acts as a right of veto exercised by the state against lesser title holders, that is, freeholders. Wensing and Small (2012: 11) argue that it is possible to include customary owners in this framework and to extend to them a comparable right of veto.

The right to refuse an innovation in land use to a freehold title holder would take nothing from that landholder that is currently privately owned. A freehold landholder possesses a bundle of rights to land that includes a certain regime of land use rights that is set via particular planning and environmental management controls that apply or are in effect at a particular point in time. Changes in circumstances, say by population growth or infrastructure development, may suggest a higher potential use, but until that is permitted by the planning system, such a higher use is merely a potential possibility and not part of the bundle of rights enjoyed by the freehold landholder. Hence, there is no obligation for permission to be forthcoming, nor can any harm result unless it can be shown that a particular landholder has been treated inconsistently compared to others. Zoning regimes routinely bind land to lower uses than the landholders may have anticipated and consist of no more than the decision by the state not to gratuitously transmit to particular landholders additional rights pertaining to land use. For these reasons, the inclusion of customary owners into land use planning and decision-making processes is consistent with the operation of the planning system as well as an expression of the natural relationship between customary and Western law (Spiller, 2022).

The significance of including customary owners in this way would be considerable. It would respect their inalienable connection to the land in a meaningful way by returning to them one of the natural rights of genuine ownership – that is, the right to determine the use of a thing. It would fit well into the hierarchy of land rights first identified in *Mabo*



(No. 2) while not disturbing the rights of existing freehold landholders. The practice of undisturbed exclusive occupation that is more focal to Western people would not be threatened, along with the convention of freehold title itself.

Wensing and Small (2012: 12) conclude that by allowing Indigenous Australians (as the traditional owners of the land) to have the right of veto in land use planning, no right is being removed from Western freehold landholders. Indigenous Australians have a considerable tradition of caring for the land with a long-term view and a long history as prudent stewards of their land and waters, which suggests that their exercise of such powers would be prudent and in the interests of the community, especially in the longer term (Wensing and Small, 2012: 12). Their perspectives can only add to the quality of planning decisions.

Land tenure and value capture is another space where relations between Indigenous Australians as the traditional owners of their Country, the state and third parties also need renegotiating.

Under current statutes and case law following *Mabo (No. 2)*, traditional owners and native title holders are unable to use their property rights to participate in the economy in the same way as other property holders are able to. Governments are requiring native title holders to surrender and permanently extinguish their native title rights and interests in exchange for absolute fee simple (freehold) where there is an intention that the new form of title is for the exclusive possession of the new title holder.

It is uncontentional that ownership of land generally infers the right of the owner to lend a possession to another for a fee. If native title rights and interests are no lesser a form of landownership than any other form of landownership, then the fundamental innovation required is to enable the native title holders to lease their land directly to the Crown and/or to other third-party interests, for a fee and not for free (Wensing, 2019: 339).

Leasehold tenure systems offer the greatest potential for meeting the needs of Aboriginal land interests (Small and Sheehan, 2008; Wensing and Small, 2012; Wensing, 2019). The essential elements of an Aboriginal leasehold system are articulated in [Box 11.1](#).

**Box 11.1: Leasehold tenure on Aboriginal and native title lands**

(Source: Wensing, 2019: 341)

Leasehold is an ideal tool for managing other interests in land. It can serve two primary functions: estate management, and land use and planning. These two functions are closely related but are also quite distinct. The

estate management function seeks to maximise the long-term benefits to the community and for future generations from the entire estate. The land use and planning function is to protect amenity and facilitate the use of land that is both sustainable and enhances quality of life for both present and future generations. These two functions both make use of a very important instrument – the lease conditions. The lease conditions will define the use and development rights via a lease purpose(s) clause and other lease conditions. In the great majority of cases an enlightened estate manager and an enlightened planning authority will agree on the appropriate lease conditions. But they can also come into conflict. How such conflicts are resolved is a measure of the integrity of the system to deliver the best possible long-term outcomes from the estate for present and future generations.

Leasehold on Aboriginal lands could therefore have three strands:

- The regulation of land/resource use through lease conditions (including a lease purpose(s) clause) to achieve cultural, social, environmental and economic objectives based on Aboriginal land use and occupancy planning.
- A land rent that reflects the land's value, discourages lessees from keeping the land idle once a lease arrangement has been entered into, and periodic reviews to capture unearned increases in value arising from external factors, including, for example, regulatory changes, population growth and economic development.
- The allocation of land on concessional conditions for essentially public purposes, such as health and education facilities.

Its essential characteristics would include:

- Land subject to native title rights and interests remains as such in perpetuity;
- A lease would be subject to payment of rent, subject to regular re-appraisal;
- Revenue raised will be used for the benefit of the native title holders and where relevant the wider Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander community;
- A lease will include a lease purpose(s) clause and other relevant lease conditions;
- A lease would be for a fixed term related to its purpose(s) but for no more than 99 years;
- A lease will include binding covenants and conditions with which the lessee is required to comply;

- The lease title can be used as collateral for finance;
- Lessees would own all the buildings and improvements they undertake;
- Lessees would have the use and quiet enjoyment of the land on the terms and conditions of the lease contract; and
- The land and all buildings and improvements revert to the native title holders when the lease expires or is terminated earlier.

As Wensing and Taylor (2012: 39) have argued:

... leasehold systems have the capacity to respect Aboriginal peoples' rights and interests in land because the land is never alienated from the Aboriginal owners. If Aboriginal landowners were given the tools to act as landlords, their land could be opened up for optimum economic use in ways consistent with local aspirations, by Aboriginal people, by third parties or by government, without the need to relinquish Aboriginal control or to forfeit their native title rights and interests.

Western forms of instrumentation, such as the Torrens land titling system, were used to block out the history of Aboriginal landownership. The creation of a leasehold system on traditional owner lands and land subject to native title rights and interests is the best available mechanism for enabling the traditional owners or native title holders to continue holding onto their underlying ancestral land rights and interests and to control how others use and access their lands. The intent is that the traditional owners or native title holders exercise the right to lease their land on their terms and at their choosing. Any revenues generated by doing so are returned to them, not as recompense for the damages inflicted upon them without their consent but rather as recognition of ongoing use and access to their traditional lands with their free, prior and informed consent, consistent with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UN, 2007).

## Conclusion

A postcapitalist future for Australia must start by acknowledging that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of Australia never ceded their sovereignty (Wensing, 2019: 2), that Western and Indigenous conceptions of property are very different from each other (Small and Sheehan, 2008; Bhandar, 2018), and that the Indigenous peoples of Australia still have 'sovereign obligations for the entirety of their country

today, regardless of the development or impact' since 1788 (Rigney et al., 2021: 124). Reparations and land equity must be integral to any solution, as Obeng-Odoom (2021: 1) asserts.

We are not the first to put forward radical reconstructions of how Indigenous Australians sit in and perceive the world. Rigney et al. (2015: 345) explore this in relation to modern Indigenous nation rebuilding: 'The innovative Indigenous modernities we observe emerging as a consequence of revitalising constructions of Indigenous nationhood, clearly dispel the colonial notion that Indigeneity is archaic and irrelevant in the modern world.'

As Weir (2021: 173) suggests, we need to re-think our approaches and shift the frame by identifying and overturning core assumptions to find new ways of including Indigenous Australians' land rights and interests into our landownership and land use planning praxis. In particular, Weir (2021: 173) reflects:

In studying Indigenous water rights with Indigenous leaders, they helped me to re-think 'water' and its 'management' to understand: first, that there are no rights—economic, Indigenous, domestic or otherwise—from a dead river; and, second, that water is inseparable from our histories, geographies, economies and more (Weir, 2009). This involved making two significant reframing moves: placing humans within nature; and, nature within cultural and ethical domains.

Clearly, Indigenous and allied scholars have been seeking deeper understandings of the institutions of our society – governance, management, protected areas, and more – through reflexivity on deep Indigenous philosophies and cosmologies. We are urging a similar journey for reframing how we understand land 'title', 'ownership' and 'use' (Wensing, 2019: 309).

In conclusion, we have argued the impacts of colonisation should not be underestimated and that there is a need to move beyond mere recognition through 'acts of grace or favour' (Wensing and Porter, 2016) by the state or through acts of 'statecraft' (Scott, 1998) if we are to achieve a more just world where two culturally different approaches to landownership and use are viewed with parity based on mutual respect for each other's existence. The alienation of Indigenous rights and interests in land is far less necessary than it first appears. Through careful design, a leasehold arrangement with the payment of land rent for new land uses, not as compensation but as recognition of ongoing use and

access to Indigenous peoples' lands and waters with their free, prior and informed consent (UN, 2007; Wensing, 2019: 334) would be a significant step towards a more just arrangement.

The recognition of Indigenous Australians' underlying ownership of Australia under their law and custom is not intended to supplant or eliminate the state, but rather to reinstate the right of Indigenous Australians to determine what happens on their ancestral lands and to share in its productive benefits.

## Notes

- 1 The authors acknowledge that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have both a collective and individual dimension to their lives, as affirmed by the United Nations *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (UN, 2007), and that individuals and communities self-identify using a variety of terms. We use the terms Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and Indigenous Australians interchangeably, but we do not intend to simplify, reduce or imply homogeneity among the hundreds of distinct Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nations, languages and cultures that comprise the lands known as 'Australia'. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are also referred to as traditional owners of their Country.
- 2 The term 'Country' refers to 'the collective identity shared by a group of people, their land (and sea)' (Palmer, 2001) and includes all the 'values, places, resources, stories, and cultural obligations' (Smyth, 1994) associated with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' ancestral lands and waters. Rose (1996: 10) in her ground-breaking work for the former Australian Heritage Commission, also found that 'Country' 'is synonymous with life' and that 'life for Aboriginal people needs no justification'. That Aboriginal peoples' conception of country is 'multi-dimensional' consisting of "all people, animals, plants, Dreamings, underground, earth, soils, minerals and waters, surface water, and air; that it has origins and a future; and that it exists both in and through time'. All of these are identified by Aboriginal people as being integral parts of their particular country, and each country is surrounded by other unique and inviolable whole countries, ensuring that no country is isolated and 'together they make up some larger whole', each not knowing the full extent because 'knowledge is, of necessity, local' (Rose, 1996: 9, 12, 13).
- 3 The two distinct systems of law and custom in Australia are those of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and that brought to Australia by the British colonisers in 1788 (Reynolds, 1992: 7; Wensing and Sheehan, 1997:1), and on any measure of justice, they should be seen as being at least equal in status and value. It is acknowledged that neither of the two systems of laws and customs are of a unitary nature. There are many clans, tribes or groups or nations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia, each with their own distinct laws and customs. The Australian nation is a federation of six States and two Territories, each with their own distinct laws and customs, and peculiarities (Wensing, 2019: 1).
- 4 The authors are indebted to Kado Muir, a Ngalia traditional owner from the deserts of Western Australia, for drawing this statement to our attention.

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12

## Land art as commoning and resistance: aesthetics, ecology and community

Emily Brady

### Introduction

This chapter develops a theory of ‘postcapitalist aesthetics’ in a rural context and shows how creative interventions function to support ‘postcapitalist detours’ in the countryside. To provide a theoretical foundation, the first section outlines postcapitalist aesthetics by bringing a relational and pluralistic environmental aesthetics into conversation with various concepts: ‘postpastoral’, ‘socio-natures’ and ‘commoning’. In the second section, this approach is used to explore case studies from land art, or artworks which take place outside of gallery or museum settings and often engage with ecological practices. Through a discussion of Patricia Johanson’s ‘Ellis Creek Water Recycling Facility’ (2001–5), Collins and Goto Studio’s ‘Future Forest: The Black Wood of Rannoch’ (2013–17), and Jorge Menna Barreto’s ‘Voicescapes of the Landless’ (2022), I show how some art practices support human–ecological relationships of care and resistance. Taking direction from Menna Barreto’s work, the conclusion scales up postcapitalist aesthetics through ‘planetary commoning’ and the more expansive context of intergenerational and geopolitical concerns. The chapter’s methodological approach is conceptual and interdisciplinary, drawing on ideas from environmental philosophy, critical human geography, and art theory.

## Postcapitalist aesthetics

'Postcapitalist aesthetics' serves as an alternative to and critique of capitalist aesthetics in so far as it embodies a pluralistic and relational rather than elitist and individualist aesthetics. It is situated within a broader framework of (critical) aesthetic pluralism. This pluralism operates at various levels of experience and is theorised as multisensory, immersive, affective, imaginative, relational and participatory. Within a rural context, postcapitalist aesthetics is postpastoral, place-based and interprets relationality through the value-space of interdependent, meaningful relations rather than isolated subjects or valuers (Holland, 2012). Let me explain further, starting with the broad framework of this approach.

### Aesthetics as relational and pluralistic

What is a relational and pluralistic aesthetic theory?<sup>1</sup> I have argued elsewhere that aesthetic experience and the meanings and values which flow from it are relational in some fundamental ways (Brady, 2023). To summarise, the key points are that the subject or community is situated aesthetically through a variety of relations:

- *Perceptual relations.* Aesthetic qualities are response-dependent and emerge from a perceptual relationship between subject and world. That relationship can also be multi-sensory and multi-layered as emotional, imaginative and knowledge-based engagement become active.
- *Sensitive relations.* Being open and receptive to the world grounds the sensitive attention, which enables the discovery of aesthetic qualities and creates opportunities for interaction and participation.
- *Meaningful relations:* Aesthetic experiences give rise to a plurality of values rather than the common association of aesthetic value only with pleasure. Both positive and negative interactions give meaning and value to human lives (Brady, 2022).
- *Temporal relations:* Aesthetic experiences occur in both space and time. Temporality is captured through the evolution of aesthetic relations, as both appreciators and aesthetic phenomena change over time. In the environmental context, prominent causes of change to aesthetic phenomena are biophysical processes, atmospheric conditions, and seasons.

This list is not intended to be exhaustive, and these relations share features with other aesthetic theories, especially those found in the areas of everyday and environmental aesthetics (see, for example, [Saito, 2022](#)). Aesthetic relations can be shallow or deep, depending upon the effort of the subject and the extent to which aesthetic phenomena draw in the perceiver. Relations may be sustained or come and go, be short or long-lived, deep or shallow. The character of these relations will reflect the diversity, particularity and freedom inherent to so many aesthetic experiences, both as theorised and on the ground. Just what makes up any relationship – its parts and how it unfolds – will also be relevant to understanding its contours. There could be individual-to-individual relationships, such as a person contemplating the fragrance of wild mint or community to place relationships as in farmers' relationships to the land which they cultivate together.

Furthermore, let me clarify my understanding of aesthetic value. When aesthetic value, worth or good is placed on something, this will depend upon the conditions of perception and the situation of the appreciator. This is illustrated by the broad range of what philosophers call 'aesthetic experience': tending to a garden, hiking up a mountain, swimming in a lake, planting a field, beholding a cathedral, choosing something to wear for a night out, preparing dinner, watching a film, creating a sculpture, reading a poem, composing music and so on. In this respect, my approach also follows the pluralism inherent in philosophical approaches which explore everyday and environmental contexts, not only the arts ([Dewey, 1980](#); [Brady, 2003](#); [Saito, 2019](#)). I also acknowledge that in a pluralistic and relational approach, appreciators and creators come to any aesthetic experience or creative practice with their particular values, beliefs, background, heritages and are situated within particular appreciative contexts and communities.

### Place-based relationships

There is much literature on the concept of place, with some of the most influential work coming from cultural geography ([Massey, 2005](#); [Cresswell, 2014](#)). Key points we learn from this work are: (1) Places are not merely described through their physical geography, they are also constructed through human–city, human–nature, human–rural (and so on) interactions. As such, social, political and economic conditions shape the relationships which exist in them. (2) Places are dynamic. They change, evolve and are more like processes than static or unchanging entities. Places are spaces with meaning and have histories and narratives.

(3) Some relationships and narratives are not necessarily desirable; some narratives may be intentionally kept alive, while others will be critiqued or consigned to the past. A critical approach necessitates a dynamic concept of place and one that is not susceptible to problematic kinds of nostalgia or romanticising (Palmer, 2011).

As environmental philosophers give recognition to place narratives in discussions of conservation, place-based relationships have garnered more attention. Postcapitalist aesthetics articulates values through temporal and particular lived relations and, in this way, aligns with narrative-based and pragmatic approaches to environmental ethics. O'Neill, Holland and Light (2008) argue effectively that environmental and cultural meanings and values are irreplaceable. These values are constitutive because they contribute to human flourishing and may ground forms of ecological concern. The meanings and values of a place are dependent upon the kinds of relationships and particular interactions which happen there across time. Why? Although not every person will form attachments to where they live or visit, in many cases, a person's identity is wrapped up in a place and its dynamic character. It is this entanglement of identity and place from which values and meanings emerge and the constitutive value that contributes to human flourishing (James, 2022: 92).

### Postpastoralism

Within a rural context, postcapitalist aesthetics is postpastoral (Gifford, 2019), which is to say that it critiques the historical category of the pastoral and its contemporary expressions by contesting romantic characterisations of rurality and revealing the complexities of siconatures within rural settings. The postpastoral rejects the pastoral because it cannot capture the relational and ecological aesthetic perspective due to anthropocentric and privatised framings of place.

Pastoralism defines literary styles, some of which began in ancient history, while postpastoralism defines an approach in contemporary ecocriticism (Gifford, 2019). The pastoral style can be found in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European enthusiasm for the aesthetic category of the picturesque, the popular poems of Wordsworth, the work of Henry David Thoreau, the music of pastoral symphonies and the visual arts. Interpreted as a landscape aesthetic category, 'pastoral' suggests the gentle beauty of fields, streams and small woodlands, exemplified by many of the rural landscapes found in Europe and North America. Anti-pastoralist critics have argued that it romanticises and

idealises rural life because living in the so-called 'rural idyll' often means a life of economic hardship and gruelling labour (Williams, 1973; Gifford, 2019; Smith, 2023).

In response to the ways in which pastoralism distorts and sentimentalises rural life, Terry Gifford proposes postpastoralism, which adopts a critical approach to understanding the particular meanings, qualities and lived experiences of rural places, and, also, how these experiences are represented in literature and the arts. In the context of reading literature, he sets out various features of postpastoralism:

[A]we leading to humility in the face of the creative-destructive forces of nature; awareness of the culturally loaded language we use about the country; accepting responsibility for our relationship with nature and its dilemmas; recognition that the exploitation of nature is often accompanied by the exploitation of the less powerful people who work with it, visit it or less obviously depend upon its resources. (Gifford, 2012: 45)

Gifford suggests that the postpastoral can be brought into a range of contexts, not only ecocriticism. A contemporary postpastoral account of the aesthetic values of rural landscapes situates them within egalitarian, relational and ecological frameworks. In this vein, postcapitalist aesthetics resists the assumption that rural beauty is only for wealthy landowners, out of reach for people working in the land, and embraces a democracy of aesthetic values across socio-economic classes and class boundaries. That both marvellous and dreary aesthetic moments occur in working contexts, as well as during times of leisure or breaks from farming work, is a central feature of the postpastoral approach. The inequalities of labour across the world do not preclude meaningful aesthetic relationships between people and the land. Included here are farmers (von Bonsdorff, 2005; Benson, 2008), workers who enable estates to function and thrive (Smith, 2023), people enjoying the beauty of national parks and seasonal residents.

The aesthetic values emerging from these contexts will be as diverse as the people and their particular relationships to the land and depend upon the situations of appreciators and their human-nature communities. Such values range from visual and scenic, to more deeply multisensory, environmental, and place-based (Chapman and Deplazes-Zemp, 2023: 154), to all kinds of ways in which emotions, imagination and knowledge shape aesthetic judgements of beauty, dreariness, awe, wonder and so on. Pluralism is built into the concept of the postpastoral as it seeks to

uncover, also, the range of practices through which immersed aesthetic engagement occurs, from farming practices to land art (Brady, Brook and Prior, 2018).

Although visual and scenic values are a significant part of how many people enjoy the countryside, lack of biodiversity is often hidden by aesthetic expressions of green pasturelands stretching far into the distance, dotted by sheep. George Monbiot (2014: 70) remarks on the ‘sheepwrecked’ places of many upland landscapes in the UK, in which ‘[sheep] rapidly deplete nutritious and palatable plants, leaving behind a remarkably impoverished flora: little beside moss, moorgrass and tormentil in many places’. When only surface beauty is perceived in landscapes, there may be the false assumption that beauty goes hand-in-hand with ecosystem health. Much beauty hides dysfunctional human-nature relationships and non-ecological flourishing. Furthermore, such perceptions can also support the false assumption that sheep or hill farming is as idyllic as the expression of beauty perceived in the land. Here, postpastoralism disrupts aestheticisation and encourages contextualised attention to how aesthetic qualities are present, valued or disvalued within human–nature livelihoods.

### Commoning

When the concept of commoning is understood as a practice or performance (Nightingale, 2019), it can enrich postcapitalist aesthetics by creating a space for collective relations with more-than-humans in both daily encounters and extraordinary moments. Rather than being concerned only with scenic views and visual qualities of landscape, an aesthetic approach supported by commoning connects to social movements which support circular economies, grass roots transitions and the need for social and environmental limits on continuing increasing consumption. Market economies drive constant and unsustainable material growth, a source of many environmental problems. I agree with critics of growth who argue, generally, that there should be social and environmental limits on continuing increasing consumption. Thus, I use ‘postcapitalist’ in a weaker sense, that is, it is a ‘market-skeptical’ (O’Neill, 1998) approach and critical of some of the ways in which aesthetics is implicated in commodification. Capitalist aesthetics is implicated when aesthetic values support environmental and other injustices, for example, as we find in manicured green lawns which consume vast amounts of water and are dependent upon harmful pesticides (Lintott, 2006). Although sensory aesthetic qualities are a central part of aesthetic experiences

and judgements of value, capitalist aesthetics has a tendency to settle on shallow appearances and take a stance to the world that aestheticises and commodifies, rather than finding meaningful inherent values.

The 'commons' approach presents an alternative to neoliberal individualism by working against privatisation of land and towards community ownership, as we find in practices such as reclaiming brownfield or post-industrial sites, urban gardens or allotments (Menatti, 2017), and community ownership of land and islands. Recent work on commoning theorises it as an activity which is performed through community actions that are situated within socionatural understandings of place: 'Commons are a site for coming together of the creative energies of humans and more-than-humans that foster affective socio-nature relations and subjectivities of "being-in-common" with others' (Nightingale, 2019: 24). In this respect, the commons is not conceived of as a resource or a physical place but rather understood through a relational ontology, or as Andrea Nightingale puts it, 'a set of more than human, contingent relations-in-the-making that result in collective practices of production, exchange and living with the world' (2019: 18).

The socionatural understanding that is brought to commoning reveals place-based relationships and entanglements between people and nature within a range of settings, from urban natures to rural land to wilder, sparsely populated places. It is important to emphasise this range, since it can be argued that the practice of rewilding may reproduce forms of historical enclosure in places like the Lake District in England (Olwig, 2016). People are situated within ecologies rather than as separate from, or over and above, them. The idea of socionatures grounds a non-anthropocentric conception of relationality and points to everyday interactions and mutual shaping of each part of human–nature relationships (Nightingale, 2019: 22).

The aim of the first section of this chapter has been to develop a new theoretical approach and show the potential of a critical, relational, pluralist aesthetics for postcapitalist transitions. Postcapitalist aesthetics has the advantage of filling a gap, too, in philosophical environmental aesthetics literature by offering a model that is more sensitive to socio-economic and political concerns. In the next section, postcapitalist aesthetics is brought into conversation with land art to explore the extent to which some artworks in rural situations support socionatural relationships of commoning and resistance.



## Land art and postcapitalist aesthetics

Artists, art critics and art theorists have discussed land art, an umbrella term for earth, ecological and environmental art, at least since the 1960s. Motivated by increasing environmental concern, climate change and new trends in the artworld, land art has received more attention recently, as evidenced by new art practices, major exhibitions and academic research (Spaid, 2002). Land art is best known for being site-specific and in the land, place, or environment itself – that is, outdoors and often within more natural settings rather than in galleries or museums. Although sculptors and other artists use natural materials all the time, land artists often use nature as material, subject and setting (Brady, 2007: 288). Alongside new land art movements, ecologically informed art histories and theories explore non-anthropocentric art-making practices, the significance of place and the local, and how artist and nature co-create through relational and interactive activities (Lippard, 2007; Brady, Brook and Prior, 2018; Patrizio, 2019).

### Collaborative art-making

How should we conceive of the role played by the arts in co-creating solidarity and community-based actions with the land? Grant Kester's (2004, 2011) concept of 'dialogical art' or 'dialogical practice' provides an especially relevant starting point. The concept describes collaborative and collective modes of artistic production which embody sustained interactions and the sharing of labour. This approach presumes the capacity of art and aesthetic experience to 'transform our perceptions of difference and to open space for forms of knowledge that challenge cognitive, social, and political conventions' (Kester, 2011: 11). In contrast to artistic practices which centre on the creation and viewing of art objects, the dialogical practice engages dialogical processes and participatory methods with the artwork taking shape through collective actions that may or may not involve physical objects. It is used in a range of artistic practices, ranging from socially engaged artworks within urban communities to many ecologically informed practices classified under land art.

Postcapitalist aesthetics can be explored through three cases of artworks which adopt a dialogical method and embody forms of socionatural care and resistance in the countryside: Patricia Johanson's 'Ellis Creek Water Recycling Facility' (2001–5), Collins and Goto Studio's 'Future Forest, The Black Wood of Rannoch' (2013–17) and Jorge Menna

Barreto's 'Voicescapes of the Landless' (2022). The ordering of the cases is intentional and chronological. I begin with Johanson, an artist who emerged in the early period of land art and whose work continues today with new commissions. In contrast to the more sparsely populated rural areas of the other two artworks, 'Ellis Creek' is situated at the edge of the small city of Petaluma, in California, and serves communities in both the city and rural Sonoma County (*City of Petaluma, 2004*: 1). Although Collins and Goto have also been working as artists for some time, 'Future Forest' presents an alternative ecological context and rural setting in Scotland. Their work stands out for creating solidarity between the differing perspectives of scientists and participants living in the village of Kinlochranoch, as well as raising questions of intergenerational justice. The third case, 'Voicescapes of the Landless' offers a global and planetary perspective through Menna Barreto's concern for food insecurity and the rights of the rural landless in Brazil. The artist is also influenced by a dialogical process, and his practice provides a very recent reference point in the history of land art.

#### 'Ellis Creek Water Recycling Facility' (2001–5)

Johanson has been among the first women land artists to practise ecological art and develop collaborative works that are now described as dialogical. As artworks that are also civic projects, engaging local governments, ecologists, engineers and the public, the aim is to recover and remediate ecologies through a creative process. Sculptural forms, landscape design, colours and the creation of beauty work in tandem with ecological and technological knowledge to enable significant outcomes which support harmonious human–nature relationships. Johanson is interested in restoring places that bring people and nature together, rather than projects that would seek to exclude people in the name of preserving remote wild areas.

Artistic and aesthetic qualities create interest and bring people into Petaluma Wetlands Park, which is part of the Ellis Creek Water Recycling Facility site (2001–5). The 272-acre site recycles water through treatment wetlands that remove pollutants and provide water for irrigation, support water conservation and protect wetland ecologies (*Kelley, 2006*: 94). The work begins from a perspective that is deeply socionatural, in which the creative–remediative activity is characterised by ecological invitation and humility, 'The most important aspect of my art is in the parts I do not design' (*Kelley, 2006*: 19). Johanson writes that the project creates 'a diversity of ecosystems tidal sloughs, brackish marsh, mudflats, riparian



**Figure 12.1** Aerial view of the Ellis Creek Water Treatment Facility in Petaluma, CA, 31 January 2013. © Photo by Tim Williamsen. CC BY-SA 3.0. <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>

corridor, and uplands – combined with positive human interventions: agricultural fields, freshwater ponds, and storm water purification’ (Johanson, 2023). New habitats now support over 200 species of birds, fish, amphibians, insects and plants (Petaluma Wetlands Alliance, 2023). Aesthetic experience is integrated through natural and design qualities and can be experienced through four miles of walking trails through the site. Aerial views (see Figure 12.1) show how Johanson used the Salt Marsh Harvest Mouse, a local endangered species, to inspire the forms of the marsh.

Johanson was commissioned by the city of Petaluma and worked as part of the Carollo Engineers design team. Walking on part of the site while trying to uncover its sense of place motivated her suggestion to the city to purchase an adjoining area, a tidal mudflat that could become functional as a polishing wetland (Kelley, 2006: 95). ‘Ellis Creek’ is deeply inclusive of people and nature as shown by its diverse benefits, which range from water provision for agriculture, vineyards, parks and golf courses, to recreation, conservation and environmental education. The collaborative effort to design an imaginative alternative to resource extraction and provision shows a form of resistance which supports actions to address water and food insecurity. Wetlands are, historically, places associated with the non-pretty (Callicott, 2003). Resistance to a

pastoral approach is evident in the design's combination of technology and wetland, which create a more holistic, ecological beauty in contrast to scenic views.

Furthermore, the site is notable for its continuing role in supporting socionatural commoning in which multiple agents – water, plants, animals, people and technology – create common 'wealth' (Chatterton, Featherstone, and Routledge, 2013: 611). The creative venture of conserving water resources through recycling, while also integrating a wetland park, meets diverse human and non-human needs and generates solidarity. That solidarity continues through the wetlands as a focal point for ongoing community conservation efforts and environmental education for school children (Petaluma Wetlands Alliance, 2023). Although the City of Petaluma owns the site, Johanson's creative process clearly shows how '[m]obilising around the common are productive moments that build communities, group identity, shared understandings, and repertoires of tactics' (Chatterton, Featherstone, and Routledge, 2013: 611). Looking into the future, there are plans to expand the facility's capacity for water recycling and provision given recent historic drought conditions in California.

#### 'Future Forest: The Black Wood of Rannoch' (2013–17)

The Collins and Goto Studio is a research-led, socially engaged art practice. The artists' methodology involves collaboration with 'a range of disciplines, communities and other living things' (Collins and Goto Studio, 2023). Inspired by Kester's work, they explore how 'art and imagination contribute to practical wisdom and democratic discourse about ethics and human values' and work mainly with 'natural public places and everyday experience of environmental commons' (Collins and Goto Studio, 2023). Their recent projects are principally guided by an ecosystemic approach to collaborative art-making in which the process unfolds through dialogue, human–nature interactions, and relational and empathetic understandings of the natural world.

The artists describe 'Future Forest' as 'a sustained creative enquiry into the ecological and cultural meanings and values associated with the Black Wood of Rannoch in Highland Perthshire' (Collins and Goto Studio, 2023). The history of land art includes many works with trees which provided historical context for the artists, for example, The Harrison Studio's 'Serpentine Lattice' (1993), an installation of drawing, maps, text, audio and visual elements which present a plan for reclamation of the Pacific North West Temperate Coastal Rain Forest, an old growth



**Figure 12.2** Gunnar’s Tree with the community, 23 November 2013. The tree is named after the Forestry Commission Conservator, Gunnar Godwin, who established the Black Wood as a forest reserve. © Photo courtesy of Collins and Goto Studio.

forest in the United States ([The Harrison Studio, 2023](#)). Their interest in trees, combined with the methods of dialogical art and social sculpture, inspired them to embark on the project. As a site-oriented work, Collins and Goto began with coming to know the Black Wood through repeated visits, as well as the use of video and time-lapse photography ([Collins, Goto, and Edwards, 2017: 200](#)).

Caledonian pine forests are uncommon and fragmented in Scotland and, with many ancient Scots’ pines, they have special biodiversity value. The Black Wood ([Figure 12.2](#) and [12.3](#)) is a 1,100-ha woodland adjacent to the village of Kinloch Rannoch in Perthshire and is especially notable for its ecological health and diversity, as well as several ‘granny pines’ which are 200–300 years old ([Collins, Goto, and Edwards, 2017: 202](#)). Collaborations were initiated by contacting environmental and social scientists at Forest Research (the research arm of the Forestry Commission) and were developed with various project partners, including participants from Rannoch and Tummel Tourist Association, Rannoch Paths Group, Perth and Kinshire Countryside Trust, and Perth and Kinross Council ([Collins, Goto and Edwards, 2015: 38–9](#)). Their creative inquiry involved





**Figure 12.3** Participants exploring the understory in the Black Wood, 2013. © Photo courtesy of Collins and Goto Studio.

interdisciplinary research and archive work, coupled with residencies and a penultimate workshop which ‘created a space for participants to reflect on their own current experiences of the forest and imagine alternative futures that protect the ecological value of the forest, while exploring a more robust cultural relationship’ (Collins and Goto Studio, 2023). Through these methods, they sought to create art *with* a forest rather than in a forest (Collins, Goto, and Edwards, 2017: 200).

Beginning from aesthetic, historical and ecological knowledge, Collins and Goto sought to understand the forest as a place of ecological and cultural interplay. Their interdisciplinary interests shaped discussions and a workshop which included ecologists, forest managers, the local community and relevant local governments and NGOs. This activity, coupled with walks through the forest, provided an opportunity to build solidarities for the sake of the Black Wood and its human–ecological

community. Solidarities are not without their rhythms of conflict and harmony. Their practice embraces ‘conflict as a tool’ (Collins quoted in Spaid, 2002: 138). It became clear early on that there were tensions between protecting the forest and discouraging people from exploring it and the community’s desire for more access.

A non-anthropocentric conception of intergenerational justice was a driving force of ‘Future Forest’, with their interest in the place generating temporal concerns. With its history of Jacobite rebellions, landed estates, Highland Clearances, and enclosures, they learnt how the Rannoch Valley had been a site of political and social conflict. This history is deeply entwined in the ecology and evolution of the forest, with overgrazing and enclosure for deer hunting shaping some of the aesthetic qualities of the forest (Collins, Goto and Edwards, 2017: 203–4), as conveyed by one of the community participants,

It is important to remember that the solitude and silence up today, is very recent. In history the Black Wood was full of humans as they were felling trees, grazing animals. It must have been a rather noisy place. We have to honor the past, but remember it honestly (Collins, Goto and Edwards, 2015: 25).

Later, owned by the Forestry Commission, thousands of trees were harvested until the Black Wood became a Forest Nature Preserve and Site of Special Scientific Interest in 1974 (Collins, Goto and Edwards, 2017: 203–4).

The artists wanted to better understand conservation and community concerns into the future, with the ultimate aim being the protection and potential expansion of the Black Wood. Another community participant commented, ‘Can you imagine Rannoch in one hundred years ... with both sides of the Loch covered in Caledonian Pine!’ (Collins, Goto and Edwards, 2015: 7). What is the common ‘wealth’ produced through creative inquiry here? It is deeply intergenerational in character, with many concerns coming together to imagine collective futures. As the workshop unfolded, participants considered the social values associated with the Black Wood, and a set of recommendations were produced which considered ways to integrate cultural activities, such as a network of paths, while also supporting biodiversity values (Collins, Goto, and Edwards, 2017: 208). The artists produced a video artwork, ‘The Forest is Moving – Tha a’ Choille a’ Gluasad’ (2013), which ultimately asks, ‘What might it take to deliver a future Black Wood that takes more than a day to walk through, and repays time and attention

with special experience and knowledge that fires the cultural imagination for generations to come?’ (Collins, Goto and Edwards, 2017: 202). A later collaborative video work, ‘Decoy: the Passage of Time in a Caledonian Pine Forest’ (2017), brings to life the history of the forest and its human–nature entanglements (Collins and Goto Studio, 2023). Both the artworks and multisensory, in-situ explorations reveal aesthetic experience as embedded in the cultural ecology, with an immersive, environmental aesthetics leading to the discovery of values in this forest’s birds, insects, trees, plants, mosses, deer, geologies, atmospheres and seasonal change.

### ‘Voicescapes of the Landless’ (2022)

Jorge Menna Barreto is a Brazilian land artist and professor of art who creates site-specific works which engage with the consequences of global food production. His most well-known work to date is ‘Restauro’ [Restoration] (2016). In partnership with a chef, a nutritionist, and organic and agroforestry farmers, Menna Barreto transformed the 32nd São Paulo Biennial’s restaurant into an ‘environmental sculpture’ that ‘raises questions about the development of eating habits and their relationship with the environment, landscape, climate and life on earth’ (Menna Barreto, 2023). The work intertwines global food-based activism with land art and, through sound recordings played in the restaurant, creates a relationship between the diner and the forests in which the food is produced (Milonopoulos, et al., 2019: 2). Through his interest in ecological restoration, Menna Barreto brings to the surface – through the act of eating – the consequences of land enclosure from crop and livestock farming and alternative ways of nourishing oneself.

‘Voicescapes of the Landless’ (2022) combines the methods of oral history, sound recordings, and video with dialogical and collaborative land art practices. Rather than *recovering* the cultural ecology of the forest as we saw in ‘Future Forest’, ‘Voicescapes’ collaborates with people and nature to *create* multispecies voicescapes by recording agroforestry workers. Menna Barreto worked with the artist and photographer Pedro Leal to generate not only sound recordings but also photos and interviews from meetings with the workers (Menna Barreto, 2023). The farmers are part of the Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra or Movement of Landless Rural Workers (MST, a well-known, long-standing social movement in Brazil which has made a significant impact on land reform through land occupation of landed estates, or ‘latifundios’ (MST, 2023). ‘Voicescapes’ captures rural ecologies and the solidarities that have formed there, as the voices are ‘embedded in the soundscapes of





**Figure 12.4** The artist interviewing a community member. ‘Voicescapes of the Landless’ (2022). © Photo courtesy of Jorge Menna Barreto.

the food forests they cultivate’ (Menna Barreto, 2023). The work, so far, has been sited in Terra Vista, in the municipality of Arataca, in Bahia. The Terra Vista settlement illustrates how the MST not only works for land rights by challenging agribusiness and the state’s policies on land use but also points up the interdependent cultural and ecological values of rural places to unsettle the urban–rural hierarchy.

In addition to photographs from the artwork, here, on the artist’s website, one can watch and listen to a 10-minute video soundscape (see Menna Barreto, 2023). (Figure 12.4.) The video begins with a live image of lush forest plants recorded from a distance of a few metres from the camera. We hear mostly wild birds singing and calling but closer aural attention brings to the surface a bottom layer of higher-pitched insects, like a *continuo* in music. Every now and then the call of a red jungle fowl, an introduced and domesticated species, punctuates the soundscape. From time to time, a person’s steps are heard coming and going as they walk upon a soil or gravel surface. As the video progresses, we hear the sounds of passing cars and trucks in the distance, and other unidentified anthropogenic sounds. The camera pulls back, the anthropogenic sounds increase, and the forest becomes framed on each side by a doorway. At this point, what was recorded as a seemingly natural environment becomes one of cultural and ecological interplay. As I interpret the artwork, the aesthetic experience underlines the values of the rural: the forest is not



**Figure 12.5** ‘Voicescapes of the Landless’ (2022). © Photo courtesy of Jorge Menna Barreto.

pristine and uninhabited; rather, it is a place of human–nature interaction and production. The work embodies a multispecies and multisensory collaborative approach, which nicely illustrates relational aesthetics. In the video, there are no human voices or stories of struggle, but we do hear the forest and its various human and non-human residents. Both forest and sound provide alternatives to features of the pastoral, fields and scenic views, respectively. Hearing rather than seeing enlarges the scope for aesthetically knowing the forest, too. In other work on the project, ‘stories of struggle and resistance of the settlers are narrated, along with soundscapes (Figure 12.5), in which the voices of the forest and the sounds of cultivation are mixed’ (Menna Barreto, 2023). There are plans to bring the recordings into Terra Vista’s schools for learning purposes. Placing forms of political and ecological resistance front and centre, ‘Voicescapes’ taps into aesthetic meanings and values and supports a creative resource for building both rural communities and alternatives to industrial farming.

## **Postcapitalist aesthetics and planetary commoning**

Through dialogical art which engages the global concerns of resources and the landless, Menna Barreto’s practice connects to new conceptions

of the commons as *planetary*. Writing in the context of climate justice, Chatterton, Featherstone and Routledge argue that the common ought to be conceived ‘as a central demand/practice of translocal political networks, rather than as something which is necessarily bounded or particular’ (2013: 611). They envision commoning as a geopolitical and intergenerational activity which strengthens grassroots movements by connecting them at a planetary scale. Based on my discussion in this chapter, I would like to suggest a concept of planetary commoning that draws on their idea and, also, is grounded in the ontology of socionatures and relationality (Nightingale, 2019), and shows concern for non-anthropocentric, intergenerational environmental justice.

What do aesthetics and the arts look like within planetary commoning? Nicola Triscott (2017: 377) proposes that planetary commons can provide a guide for engaging the arts with wider-than-local contexts and places. Art practices should be ‘free to explore a range of ideas, forms and subjects, are underpinned by a long-term investigation into the interrelationships between planetary imaginaries, political thought, artistic agency and environmentalism’ (2017: 376). Including ecologies from the Earth’s atmosphere to tropical rainforests, for example, challenges both theory and practice to consider how meaningful aesthetic–ethical relations shape planetary care in response to the effects of rapid environmental change and loss. Furthermore, conceiving of the commons at a planetary scale helps to resist the idealisation of the local that may be a feature of some site-specific artworks, while also recognising the importance of attachments to particular places and their communities (Kwon, 2002: 159).

The role of land artists in planetary commoning extends from the value that creativity can bring to generating new solidarities, as Johanson conveys: ‘Artists have always changed the way we see. Now we need to change the way we act’ (quoted in Kelley, 2006: 99). Such solidarities may be built through the practice of ‘ecological citizenship’, which stresses the positive relationships with environment which develop through opportunities to engage with natural processes in urban and rural places. As a political concept developed by the environmental philosopher, Andrew Light (2001, 2003), such citizenship can remediate environmental injustices by restoring ecologies, repair broken human–nature relationships and foster an inclusive ecological community. As an environmental pragmatist, Light critiques approaches which seek to preserve wild places, and he adopts a pluralist environmental ethics. The places where humans and nature meet – community gardens and parks, land lying on the urban fringe – have great potential for revealing harms to nature, and how challenging it can be to restore the damage

done. Elsewhere, I have argued for how a relational and pluralist ‘intergenerational eco-aesthetics’ can support ecological citizenship (Brady, 2022).

The critical approach taken in socially engaged art practices is paramount for preserving the value of creativity and collective imagining. Julie Crawshaw and Menelaos Gkartzios argue, in the context of art within rural development practices, that ‘We don’t see art as a panacea to community tension ... Instead, we argue that art has the capacity to reveal community relations’ (2016: 143). The case studies discussed in the chapter show how creative processes themselves ‘reveal community relations’ in their exploration of aesthetic, cultural and ecological dimensions of place. They also illustrate something like the aesthetic principles of a postcapitalist aesthetics, placing the artist’s valuable skills at the centre of opening up dialogue, as ‘an independent citizen-professional – a generalist with training in the techniques and concepts of creative inquiry, social-systems intervention, and discursive democracy’ (Collins quoted in Spaid, 2002: 138). In these ways, various dimensions of the aesthetic perspective can work together to configure planetary common ‘wealth’.

## Note

- 1 My approach to relational aesthetics differs from other relational approaches, although it may share some features with them (for example, see Saito, 2022). It emerges mainly from debates in philosophical environmental aesthetics rather than art theory. Thus, it is differently situated than work on relational aesthetics by the curator Nicolas Bourriaud (2002) and his critics. One point in common, however, is an interest in participatory forms of creative expression and aesthetic experience.

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Part III

**De-commoditised collective assets  
and community infrastructure**





## Rural social enterprises as vehicles for postcapitalism

Nikolaos Apostolopoulos and  
Sotiris Apostolopoulos

### Introduction

Economic, social and especially environmental impacts have created such a critical challenge that it is difficult for the capitalist system to adapt to the new conditions, turn the situation around, and emerge empowered and transformed as it did in the past (Mason, 2015; Blühdorn, 2017). The emerging sense, awakening realisation, and research evidence, is that the capitalist system is facing an impasse that may lead to its collapse (Streeck, 2014; Mason, 2016). This awakening has prompted the search for a new ‘postcapitalist’ model of production and consumption, where nature and humans coexist with a far greater degree of harmony (Arias-Maldonado, 2013): a model of sustainable production and consumption beyond the neoliberal market ideology (Dermody et al., 2021). Alongside this broader peril, ‘eco-politics’ and the broader paradigm of sustainability (see Blühdorn and Welsh, 2007) are also in jeopardy, and now considered, by some researchers, to be exhausted (Blühdorn, 2017). Particularly in the area of rural production and food supply chains, the situation is critical. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goal of eradicating hunger and poverty is unlikely to be achieved; in fact, the progress achieved to date is being reversed with hunger, food insecurity and poverty all now climbing (United Nations, 2020). This was the situation before the COVID-19 pandemic; today, the energy and food crisis triggered by the War in Ukraine has further consolidated this critical challenge.

Similarly negative trajectories have been revealed in the UN report on sustainable production and consumption (United Nations, 2020). Between December 2019 and May 2022, fertiliser prices increased by 207 per cent, exacerbating fragilities in the food security system (EESC, 2021). Food prices rose, in 2020–21, to their highest level since 2011 (FAO, 2022). The UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) predicts additional risks to food security from new threats such as extreme weather events, diseases and pandemics (FAO, 2021). In 2020, hunger affected an estimated 811 million people and nearly 2.37 billion people lacked access to adequate food; and the latter figure is now increasing by 320 million per year (FAO, 2021). These statistics point to the impasse reached by the capitalist system and the urgent need to transition to an alternative model (Walsh, 2018; Swilling, 2020; Dermody et al., 2021). The self-regulating market has capitalised and industrialised rural production, alienating it from the consumer, and this, according to Trauger and Passidomo (2012), is a fundamental cause of unsustainability and hunger. The control of the supply chain from farmer to consumer has been passed to large multinational corporations, resulting in higher production costs and many farmers being forced to abandon rural production altogether (Nestle, 2003). Therefore, according to Gibson-Graham (2006), agriculture will need to be redesigned and placed on a new economic footing in order to achieve a cooperative, integrated and interdependent food production economy.

To this end, some researchers find promising examples of future organisation in cooperatives and social enterprises, recognising also the benefits of peer-to-peer engagements that support commons-oriented production (Bauwens et al., 2019; Robra et al., 2021).

The aim of this chapter is to investigate the drivers of, and influences behind, the formation of rural social enterprises and to consider whether such enterprises comprise an effective vehicle for postcapitalism. The discussion offered is built progressively upon three interacting layers. The first layer explores the relationship between the social economy (that is, an economy prioritising human well-being and broader social objectives) and its actors, such as social enterprises (targeting social and environmental well-being) and the capitalist system. It depicts the longitudinal conflict between two opposing views – the social economy as a form of incidental *healing* or a form of systemic *subversion* – through a retrospective look at the ideological currents and political ideas that shaped social enterprises. The second layer explores the role of rural social enterprises within the capitalist system. At the third layer, and in conclusion, the view is reached that the principles and values underlying

social enterprises align with the broader postcapitalist aspiration and that while the early years of the social economy may have been dedicated to healing, the social and solidarity economy is now mounting a more concerted and widespread systemic challenge. In sum, this multilayer analysis reveals that rural social enterprises play an important role in tackling social problems caused by the capitalist system and in crafting an alternative mode of rural development. Thus, rural social enterprises are, in some circumstances, important vehicles for postcapitalism.

## The conflict between two views of social enterprise: ‘healing’ or ‘subversion’?

There are two conflicting views on the relationship between the social economy and its actors, such as rural social enterprises, and the capitalist system. The first view picks up the thread from the positions of the ‘father’ of the social economy Charles Dunoyer and claims that his *New Treaty on the Social Economy*, published in Paris in 1830 – in which a more ethical approach to the economy is presented as a reaction to the unjust practices of the industrial age (Caeiro, 2008) – was nothing but a manoeuvre of the system itself: a manoeuvre to avoid rebellions, disobedience and unrest and to find a compromise between private and public interest (Apostolopoulos et al., 2019a). This view proposes that the social economy and its actors are in perfect harmony with the state and the market, which is why the liberal approach considers the social economy to be an extension of classical political economy (Apostolopoulos et al., 2019a). This is confirmed by Leon Walras, who integrated the idea of the social economy into mainstream economics, viewing cooperatives and mutual associations as extensions of public finance (Apostolopoulos et al., 2019a). Linking Buchez’s struggle for a ‘Bank of the Poor’ (Buchez, 1866), and his thinking on cooperatives, to the views of Nobel laureate Muhammed Yunus and the Grameen Bank Credit Institution (Jain, 1996; Yunus, 1999), it is possible to see the social economy as a means of mitigating economic and social inequalities rather than overthrowing the current economic system. The social economy, of which social enterprise is a part, therefore functions to heal rather than subvert.

John Stuart Mill’s utilitarian approach and his advocacy of joint employer–worker cooperatives to meet the interests of labour and capital (Mill, 1873) confirms the service to capital provided by ‘healing’. More recently, Dees and Anderson (2006) have drawn attention to this same service in the modern economy in the US, where social enterprises are

in perfect harmony with the free market and where their goal is often to augment that economy – as in the case of the global network Ashoka (ASHOKA, 2016), created by William Drayton in the US with the aim of bringing together social entrepreneurs (Karkabi, 1996; Barnes, 2002) for the incubation of an entrepreneurial economy. Particularly in the period of neoliberal globalisation, there has been a surge in the creation of social economy actors (Williams, 2014) including rural social enterprises. These are seen, by those who ascribe to the view that such enterprises achieve limited healing, as having a mitigating role that operates under the veil of capitalism and that bind citizens to a neoliberal logic (Satgar, 2014; Williams, 2014; Kennedy, 2017). The function of social enterprises is not oriented towards challenging the forces of power responsible for the spread of poverty and is, rather, limited to therapeutic measures within an ethical framework of solidarity and mutualism (Kennedy, 2017).

The second view holds that a broader matrix of ideas gave birth to the social economy and its goals are more pervasive. An alternative framework for production and work are rooted in the Christian Socialist tradition and in the ideological current of cooperativism, which challenges, at a fundamental level, classical political economy. At its heart is the idea that the self-regulating market must be replaced by social provisioning (Demoustier and Rousselière, 2004). It was upon these foundations that Utopian Socialists, such as Robert Owen (1857), built their own cooperative apparatus. Marxists have expressed ambivalent views on cooperatives, sometimes considering them exemplars of postcapitalist economic organisation but then deriding them as illusionary presentations of evolutionary socialism in symbiosis with the market (Sharzer, 2017). In the mid-nineteenth century, the social economy as a solution to the impasse generated by capitalism (in Henry George's terms, the juxtaposition of material progress with abject poverty) took shape and its various forms were introduced in international exhibitions by Frederic Le Play (Le Play, 1877).

This period of development saw the International Co-operative Alliance, led by Greening and Neale, created to promote solidarity (Neale, 1892). Cooperative credit was formed on the basis of the ideas of Herman Schulze and Friedrich Wilhelm (Schwinn, 1963; Taylor, 1974; da Silva and da Costa, 2010) as well as mutual credit societies and mutual insurance institutions (Apostolopoulos et al., 2019a). The capitalist movement may have wanted to incorporate or encapsulate social economy actors, but they have always gone their own way. As an example, this view draws on the role of the solidarity economy in Latin America, which emerged as a reaction to globalisation and the

entry of multinational corporations towards the end of the twentieth century. It was there that the Latin American and Solidarity Economy Network/REDLAES was formed to address the poverty, social exclusion and marginalisation created by the expanding capitalist system (Miller, 2010; Saguier and Brent, 2017). Proponents of the second view hold that social economy *actors* operate beyond the neoliberal market ideology and their path is intertwined with the human and ecological utopia of a world pursuing social justice. Moreover, social enterprises can also lead the way in the new system of sustainable production and consumption because they embody an ethics of care alongside values such as responsibility, equality, solidarity, mutualism and service to social and environmental goals. Laville (2010) considers that in the era of capitalist crises, solidarity economy movements present a persuasive alternative and therefore the solidarity economy cannot be ignored in the search for a new socio-economic model. This view has won broad support among those groups opposing neoliberal capitalism, individualism and the advance of a highly commodified society. The solidarity economy is seen as an escape route (Ould Ahmed, 2015).

## Rural social enterprises and their role within the capitalist system

Social enterprises as agents of the social economy have also been subjected to the clash of the two aforementioned views on the wider social economy.

The first view sees rural social enterprises as an evolution of rural cooperatives and focuses criticism on the role of cooperatives within the capitalist system. It also examines rural social enterprises in the broader context of social enterprise, shaped in particular by the American entrepreneurial approach advanced by William Drayton (Banks, 1972; Emerson, 2006; Defourny and Nyssens, 2009). The proponents of this view consider that even the first food and land cooperatives created at the time when feudalism was dismantled and the rural population was starving (see the early land struggles noted in Chapter 1, this volume) were aimed at supporting (or healing) the rural population rather than shaping a new socio-economic reality. Indeed, the Rochdale Equitable Pioneers Society and Westerwald cooperative, established to prevent rural populations from starving, are seen as typical examples of a relatively superficial response to capitalism's injustices (Doyle, 1972; Peal, 1988; Fairbairn, 1994). It is argued that cooperatives, with their diversity and

differing ideological and philosophical underpinnings, have in fact been integrated into the capitalist system, which is why they are not treated as separate entities in the legal frameworks of many states (Apostolopoulos et al., 2019a).

Variation in how cooperatives operate, and how they recycle and share surpluses, is perhaps central to the cooperative dilemma (Briscoe, 1971). Challenges around financial stability, with many rural cooperatives failing and facing bankruptcy, has added to the uncertainty around their ability to contribute solutions to critical injustices (Apostolopoulos et al., 2019b). Perhaps more importantly, their focus on the stresses of certain groups adversely affected by 'the system' further suggests that they exist as highly focused healing mechanisms which have emerged directly from the centres of capitalism in the US and Europe, again existing to support capitalism rather resist the status quo – including through the remedial social entrepreneurialism inspired by William Drayton. While social entrepreneurialism can seek to liberate people and societies (Rindova et al., 2009; Goss et al., 2011) and create social value alongside economic value (Yunus, 2008), it always does so in alignment with capitalism (Dey et al., 2016).

The belief that Porter and Kramer (2011) extol, that social enterprises can contribute to a more humane society, may be seen therefore as a utopian and naïve view of social change that treats capitalism as benign (Jones and Murtola, 2012). The lack of capital often faced by social enterprises, including rural social enterprises, forces them to seek government funding or private investment – which directly reconnects them to an extractive banking system (Kennedy, 2017) via debt and therefore subservience to capital.

The second view, however, focuses on the core of rural social enterprises and the framework of ideas and principles that underpin them. Their alternative modes of rural production and work (see Chapter 14, this volume), together with the moral code they formulate for social justice, equity, responsibility and respect for social and environmental goals, form a framework that lends greater potential. Indeed, as presented in a recent report from Social Enterprise UK (2019), which analysed the role of social enterprises during a period of acute economic crisis, there are a great many places where rural social enterprises are thriving and impacting positively on communities and the lives of vulnerable people.

Moreover, alternative forms of organisation based on the 'commons' mount a serious challenge to capitalism and propose new forms of coexistence (Schismenos et al., 2020). It is clear, for example, that alternative forms of agriculture bring consumers closer to rural

production, create shortcuts in the supply chain by challenging control over the sector by multinationals, and result in greater transparency and trust in food production (Trauger and Passidomo, 2012). This orientation challenges the global food system rooted in the principles of industrial agriculture (Renting et al., 2003). In this way, social enterprises, with their radically different value sets, deliver positive impacts beyond capitalist convention (Bauwens et al., 2019). They help create 'ethical markets' while caring for ecosystems, shaping a commons-oriented society, and directing the *market-oriented state* to become a partner in supporting the interests of the commons (Bauwens et al., 2019).

Proponents of this view hold that social economy actors, who refuse to prioritise profit above all other considerations, have no incentive to violate either human rights or leave a negative environmental footprint (Gradin, 2015). They hold the capitalist system to account and, collectively, promote ideas and pursue prefigurative actions that contribute to the emergence of a postcapitalist mode of production. For these leading actors, social equity must be built on a model of rural production that provides necessities to all citizens regardless of socio-economic status and place of residence (Allen and Sachs, 1993; Feenstra, 2002). The extant capitalist system is clearly incapable of delivering such welfare, leaving billions of people without access to food and clean water (FAO, 2021).

The narrative of failed and ineffective cooperatives (whose impact is superficial and confined to incidental healing) is therefore fabricated and imposed to marginalise local initiative, knowledge and experience (Cima, 2021). Rural cooperatives address the challenges of the existing system, promoting decentralisation but also helping small producers to access markets (Deininger, 1995; Abele and Frohberg, 2003; Lerman, 2013). The seriousness of their challenge to the status quo, and the potential they possess, is evidenced, claims Cima (2021), in sponsored critiques that deride collective actions in support of alternative rural production.

## Conclusion

What can social enterprise achieve in rural areas, and what part can it play in transitions towards a postcapitalist countryside? Social entrepreneurialism and enterprise will, through local actions and growing solidarity, bring incremental changes (Harvey, 2010; Vail, 2010; Dey et al., 2016) that have the potential to *spread dynamically*. The manufacturing sector of the capitalist system spread in this manner into rural production and replaced pre-capitalist with industrial agriculture



(Heino, 2016). This industrialisation of agriculture ultimately seeded alienation and widened income inequalities (Boehlje, 1996; Nelson, 2020; Rauf et al., 2021). There is hope that social enterprise can help reverse these tendencies through, for example, fair trade networks that attempt to reconnect rural production with consumers on an ethical basis, resisting the disconnections and alienation of industrial agriculture (Roelvink, 2008). More broadly, rural cooperatives, rural social enterprises and other forms of collective action in rural production, which operate on an ethical basis, have a propensity (rooted in their underlying rationales) to address inequalities and become important actors in the drive towards rural futures that are against or beyond capitalism (Kay et al., 2012; Bauwens et al., 2019).

There are many promising examples (Kay et al., 2012; Bauwens et al., 2019), with rural enterprises evolving new ethical frameworks for connecting consumers and producers and for navigating the challenges of the liberal market (van Twuijver et al., 2020). They frequently contribute to sustainable rural development (Kim and Lim, 2017; Steiner and Teasdale, 2019) and display collective and collaborative characteristics in their governance (De Bruin et al., 2017), supporting the development of inclusive and sustainable rural places (Gupta et al., 2015). They are equipped with a value system that is, in any case, compatible with the common and de-commodified ideals of postcapitalism.

They are, more particularly, part of a postcapitalist framework that can, for example, transform the agricultural sector, freeing it from the dominant commodity and capital mindset, and inspiring a re-evaluation of human responsibilities and human agency in rural production (Paxson, 2012; Jones, 2019). They can encapsulate collaborative understanding of rural production by spearheading new modes of sustainable farming (Myers, 2017), and they have a role to play in actively resisting the planet's destruction by capitalist extraction (Jones, 2019). Postcapitalism, with its ecological goals and ethics of care (Bauwens and Ramos, 2018; Swilling, 2020; Walsh, 2020) frames an important role for cooperatives and social enterprises (Bauwens et al., 2019; Dermody et al., 2021). These have arguably become more important in the 'modern economy', prioritising fundamental subversion over healing, in the context of de-growth and post-capitalist aspiration. In short, the remedial aspirations that were characteristic of the nineteenth-century cooperative movement have given way to something more joined-up, targeting the bigger prize of a socio-economic reset over the more immediate act of healing.

Social enterprise brings a new ethics of care to rural production, challenging the orthodoxies of enclosure and extraction. The principles

of solidarity and mutualism are fundamental to more sustainable development models, placing social enterprise at the heart of a postcapitalist countryside in which the processes of commoning and de-commoditisation deliver a fundamental departure from the existing mode of rural production. These enterprises can be considered a primary vehicle for that departure, although they face key challenges, particularly around resourcing and capacity and the need to achieve independence from national governments, and pan-national groups, that remain committed, fundamentally, to neo-liberal ideals and the power of private capital.

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# Rural enterprise hubs as bridges for postcapitalism

Ian Merrell

## Introduction

Capitalism has neglected rural areas, and instead focused its developmental attention on cities (Glaeser, 2011; Shearmur, 2012) as places of knowledge (Van Winden et al., 2007) and innovation (Feldman and Audretsch, 1999). This ‘uneven development’ is a firmly established concept in geography (Smith, 2010; Pike et al., 2012). Considered ‘left behind’ (Ulrich-Schad and Duncan, 2018) by capitalism, rural areas are often seen as peripheral or even actively exploited for the gain of the city.

Following a neo-liberal capitalist logic, it makes little sense to establish a business in the countryside as there are fewer consumers or employees, and limited access to international markets. This logic is also followed when it comes to rural development more widely – why provide a bus service to fewer rural residents when an urban route would be more profitable and well-used? Adherence to this logic has gradually stripped rural areas of important community services (including healthcare provision, public transport, library services and so on), creating a self-reinforcing cycle of neglect and out-migration of young people, who leave to seek education and job opportunities in urban areas.

The regeneration of rural areas requires critical actors to work against a purely capitalist logic: opportunities for work need to be provided; and there needs to be a strategy for, and focus on, the relocation of new economic activities. This chapter will present community-owned ‘rural enterprise hubs’ as ‘bridging’ social enterprises that help foster new opportunities and support the creation of more meaningful forms

of work. Hubs can be viewed as anchors or bridges for a postcapitalist transition, supporting a range of benefits for communities and incubating further postcapitalist modes of production.

To explore these issues, the following section introduces the isolating and alienating nature of work and jobs under capitalism. The case is then made that rural areas can, first, be more desirable places in which to work, and secondly, may offer contexts in which to experiment with postcapitalist forms of organisation that deliver more meaningful and rewarding jobs. Following on from these broader observations, three case studies of community-owned rural enterprise hubs in Britain are used to showcase the practices and opportunities these places present.

It is important to dispel the misconception from the outset that agriculture is the only sector in a rural economy. Although rural areas are still the primary location of food production, rural economies in the Global North are now much more diverse than they once were (OECD, 2012). There are many jobs in rural areas that are outside the traditional land-based sectors of agriculture, forestry and mining. In rural England, for example, roughly half a million businesses (often comprising micro-businesses and sole traders: Phillipson et al., 2011) employ over 3.5 million people (Phillipson et al., 2019). It has been demonstrated that rural business owners are at least as entrepreneurial or innovative as their urban counterparts, although they face the challenge of geographical isolation and disconnection (Ozusaglam and Roper, 2021).

## Work in capitalism

Work, as a concept, has historically been a divisive topic, with some philosophies, cultures or religions considering it burdensome (or even pointless), while others see it as meaningful, virtuous or emancipating (Komlosy, 2018). In early history, the primary focus of work was subsistence (that is, hunting, gathering, housework or agriculture). As populations and societies stabilised and became sedentary, new jobs were created that served cultural purposes (for example, constructing religious buildings or creating works of art) and 'guilds' were formed as corporations of 'master craftspeople' (Epstein, 2008), often restricting the numbers of people who might practice particular trades and professions.

Adam Smith noted that labour specialisation was an evolving characteristic of the 'age of commerce', marked by the division of workers into production chains. Workers were becoming skilled in one small aspect of a larger production process (Smith gave the example of pin-making),

which eroded the artisanal tradition of craft-based occupations (marked by the fulfilment that came from the craftsmanship of shaping an entire product). Jobs refocused on the minutiae of capitalist production, becoming mundane and repetitive (Komlosy, 2018). The early industrial era witnessed the transformation of work noted by Smith, but also gave birth to trade unionism and a stronger sense of occupational communities (Howell, 2005).

In the Global North, the later decline of some industrial activities was paralleled by the rise of the 'knowledge economy' (Teece, 1998). Under this new developmental paradigm, knowledge became the key economic asset, harnessed via new innovations and patents that, in turn, propelled economic growth. The factory-based jobs of the past were replaced by computer-based jobs in offices and call centres.

Work in late-capitalism is widely considered alienating (Komlosy, 2018), perhaps more so than during late-stage industrialisation and labour specialisation. This is first because the worker is *isolated from the product*, fulfilling a role of little apparent purpose (Shantz et al., 2014), for a company from which they feel detached. Second, workers are *socially alienated*, based within closed-plan offices and in departmental structures that keep people apart (Muzaffar et al., 2020). The trend towards homeworking accentuates alienation. Working in isolation is often associated with poor mental health outcomes, as documented during the 'teleworking' phase of the 1990s and 2000s (Bailey and Kurland, 2002) and more recently during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic (Kniffin et al., 2021; Wood et al., 2021; Wood et al., 2022).

The postcapitalist perspective on all of this is that some jobs now exist merely to perpetuate capitalism itself (Srnicek and Williams, 2015) and its pursuit of unsustainable economic growth that involves no addition of value (Martínez-Alier et al., 2010). They deliver no service or product and fit into Graeber's (2018) categories of 'duct-tapers' (those employed to fix issues caused by other employees or broken systems), 'box-tickers' (those employed to merely serve bureaucracy), 'flunkies' (those employed to make someone else look more important) and 'taskmasters' (those employed in places of power to merely create work for other people). Put bluntly, we live in a world of 'shit jobs' (Graeber, 2018).

In short, the capitalist model seeds isolating and alienating jobs that have little meaning or purpose. Is there a postcapitalist opportunity to situate more enjoyable and meaningful jobs in rural areas? Is there a means of benefiting workers that also helps to rejuvenate and serve communities through social enterprise?



## The postcapitalist opportunity

The work of Wright (2020) and Chatterton and Pusey (2020) illustrates that postcapitalism provides alternatives to capitalism's three most prominent dynamics – its 'three terrains of transformation'. First, capitalism decrees a constant move towards *enclosure*. For example, the enclosing of public or wild land has been occurring for centuries (Shoard, 1987), with 'the clearances' in the Highlands of Scotland being a well-documented example (Prebble, 1969; Wightman, 2013). Following the capitalist logic, every inch of land must become productive in some way. Second, capitalism pursues *commodification*. Examples include the commodification of public goods such as nature (Liverman, 2004; Smessaert et al., 2020) or the privatisation of public services such as bus routes (Huws, 2019). Third, and as noted earlier in this chapter, capitalism seeks and produces ever-increasing degrees of *alienation* within the workforce and society more widely (Øversveen, 2022).

Postcapitalism challenges the transformation of these three terrains. First, commoning provides an alternative to enclosure, assigning ownership and governance of land, infrastructure and services back to the communities that use them (Maher, 2016). Holding assets in common implies that democratic decisions are made on how best to manage or use these resources and encompasses ideas such as the (genuine) 'sharing economy' (Celata and Stabrowski, 2022).

Second, commodification is overcome through a prioritisation of goods and services that are primarily created to advance community rather than private wealth. The concept of 'post-consumerism' (Blühdorn, 2017) rejects the belief that personal happiness is achievable through the accumulation of private consumer goods. Moreover, the 'right to repair' movement and the 'circular economy' concept (Cole and Gnanapragasam, 2017) seek to reduce the ecological costs of the 'throw away' society, encouraging repair, reuse and recycling.

Third, alienation is overcome through the promotion of more inclusive and community-driven forms of work and governance. Bringing people into decision-making processes is one means of overcoming isolation or disenfranchisement, through the practices of participatory planning and governance (Bell et al., 2008; Juarez and Brown, 2008). Finding greater meaning from work is perhaps a more challenging undertaking, but jobs that link in some way to the practices of commoning and decommodification – that have a social rather than an extractive logic – may offer the sort of fulfilment that many workers are now seeking.

Therefore, 'to qualify as post-capitalist, practices need to somehow play out on the three terrains [of] building the common, socially useful production, and doing' (Chatterton and Pusey, 2020: 41). Community-owned rural enterprise hubs provide contexts for all three of these terrains, anchoring a new model of economic activity in the countryside. But why are rural areas potentially fertile arenas for such new models?

First, it was noted at the beginning of this chapter that rural areas have been largely ignored by capitalism and left to develop their own solutions to pressing social and economic challenges. This has prompted many rural communities to take 'self-help' actions (Akpomuvie, 2010; Cheshire, 2016) and pursue bottom-up development strategies. A well-known example of this is the LEADER approach of the European Union (Dargan and Shucksmith, 2008; Marquardt et al., 2012; Esparcia et al., 2015). Bottom-up or endogenous approaches to development involve grassroots organising and an expanded role for non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and third/voluntary sector actors. Implementation is often achieved through social enterprises: businesses that operate under a not-for-profit model (and which are sometimes community-owned) and are guided by defined social objectives (Defourny and Nyssens, 2006). Where communities are willing and able to take ownership of their local economies, services and infrastructures, so-called 'community economies' (Gibson-Graham, 2006) or 'community-based economies' (Perkins, 2003) take root. Rural social enterprises are critically important in supplying community services to rural places affected by public sector cuts, or by a lack of private investment (Steiner et al., 2019). Operating or working for a social enterprise helps provide a useful and needed service, making work more meaningful and enjoyable.

Second, besides this sense of neglect and self-help, rural areas are increasingly viewed, by broader society, as desirable places in which to work. Working in the countryside has been shown to increase well-being and quality of life (Russell and Grant, 2020; Merrell et al., 2022a). Where jobs and homes are co-located, rural working may help avoid a lengthy and costly commute to the city, thereby improving workers' work-life balances and reducing their carbon footprints (ONS, 2022). The COVID-19 pandemic spurred radical changes to people's working patterns (Kniffin et al., 2021). Because many middle-class people were able to work from home (this rarely applied to lower-paid and foundational economy workers), and because urban homes frequently lacked the space to support comfortable home-working, some families joined an 'urban exodus' (Whitaker, 2021), searching for different lifestyles supported by working from home (Åberg and Tondelli, 2021; Roper, 2021).

More generally, relocating businesses may share the views of relocating workers but will also be attracted by lower rents for office accommodation (or workspace) in rural areas. However, the quality and quantum of rentable workspace is often limited outside of towns and cities. It is often confined to shabby and cramped accommodation above shops or restaurants in towns or larger villages. On the one hand, both workers and businesses share a desire to relocate; but on the other, relocation options are limited by existing workspace provision. Therefore, either homeworking (which does nothing to contribute to a thriving business environment) or commuting (which leaves a negative footprint, on the environment and communities) remain the norm.

Another barrier confronting rural businesses is poor digital connectivity (Salemink et al., 2017; Kelly and Hynes, 2018). However, this situation is now improving, with satellite and 5G services today providing internet to previously less accessible places. Increased broadband speeds facilitate rural businesses, because of greater connectivity and the potential to incorporate digital solutions or e-commerce into rural business models (Tiwasing et al., 2022).

The context for enterprise hubs is a fertile one in rural areas: hubs key into the established tradition of self-help and bottom-up development; they potentially support the relocation of workers and businesses; and they are greatly aided by the extension of digital connectivity witnessed in recent years. Beyond these contextual supports, hubs also offer something new: a co-location of jobs and of doing that supports community development in meaningful ways. They support a variety of forms of social enterprise. In the next section, the nature of rural enterprise hubs, and the support they provide for new modes of doing, is introduced and detailed.

## Making the case for rural enterprise hubs

Rural enterprise hubs are defined as ‘physical infrastructure that provides workspaces to multiple tenant businesses, with additional services such as shared equipment, meeting rooms, co-working spaces, and business advice or support’ (Merrell et al., 2022b: 81). They vary considerably in scale: the smallest may have just a few tenants (typically 4 to 6) while the largest have in excess of 40. The scale of hubs depends on the size of the community and hinterland they serve and their proximity to larger towns and cities. Hubs locate in village centres or are more isolated, perhaps making use of re-purposed farm buildings.

Some hubs will be privately owned while others have public, third-sector or community owners (Merrell, 2019). Private hubs tend to locate in accessible and affluent rural areas. Public ones are a form of state intervention, often locating in the most deprived areas. Community-owned hubs tend to be associated with remoter locations and smaller communities, where they form part of a wider self-help strategy (Bosworth et al., 2023). The examples provided below fall into this last category.

As suggested above, enterprise hubs help compensate for the lack of good quality workspace in rural areas. They therefore help more people to work from rural areas by providing vibrant business environments, with spaces available on short or flexible lets. Where those hubs are under *community ownership*, the ethos is often to support the provision of community services by hosting (and incubating) other social enterprises (McShane and Coffey, 2022). There is a rich literature on enterprise hubs: some focus on providing fast internet and digital services for otherwise poorly-served hinterlands (Rundel et al., 2020). Elsewhere, hubs may prioritise the creative sector, providing a space for local arts and crafts. These may fall into the sub-group of ‘rural creative hubs’ (Hill et al., 2021; Merrell et al., 2021; Velez-Ospina et al., 2023) whose focus may be on promoting place-based and culture-based value-added.

In the next section, three vignette examples of community-owned and managed rural enterprise hubs in very remote rural areas of the northeast of England and the Shetland Islands in Scotland are presented. These are areas that have often been overlooked by national and regional economic development policies, and which have therefore been slowly stripped of important community services, including healthcare, public transport, library services and, importantly for this chapter, workspace provision. All the communities in which these hubs are located have long traditions of self-help and have experimented, for example, with community-run or cooperative bus services, renewable energy schemes, community-led affordable housing and supports for business start-ups.

These vignettes draw on a small number of interviews with hub managers (four in total), hub tenants (10), and periods of participatory observation and desk-research. The vignettes illustrate different management models, the range of services offered (to businesses and the wider community) and other critical aspects of rural enterprise hubs. Following on from the presentation of vignettes, I discuss the ways in which hubs are instrumental to advancing an alternative production model in the countryside.

*The Cheviot Centre in Wooler (Northumberland, England)* is community-owned and located more than 45 miles from the nearest city. Wooler is home to a successful not-for-profit Development Trust (the 'Glendale Gateway Trust') which has been actively promoting community interests for more than 20 years. The Cheviot Centre was designed, from the outset, to support local businesses and deliver community benefit. Its establishment was prompted by research that underscored the importance of micro-businesses to the local economy and the need for direct action in support of weakening community services. The hub's ethos is inclusive: it aims to provide business and community services for all.

To that end, the building hosts key community services including the local library, which offers a variety of training courses (for example, focused on IT skills and language learning). The hub is also a point of tourist information, which is seen as a 'business support' (directing visitors to local businesses) and a means of growing local incomes. Glendale Gateway Trust is based in the Cheviot Centre and is seen as a key service provider, funding small community projects that aim to foster community cohesion and celebrate local heritage. The Trust also offers tailored business support, runs a calendar of community events, and hosts a 'share space': a 'library of things' comprising donations from the community of unused tools and objects that it hopes can be repaired and recycled.

The Cheviot Centre has four conventional office spaces available to local businesses and three 'pods' on the grounds which provide 'micro-offices' to start-up businesses. One of the conventional spaces is rented to a very successful social enterprise, which provides training to young people in the area. The hub also has several other large spaces and catering facilities, which are used to host community events and build community cohesion: meals and social activities are provided to pensioners, local organising meetings are held and a variety of interest groups come together at the hub.

Community ownership is fundamental to the pattern of use and activity described above. Overcoming the isolation of businesses and community members is a central goal of the hub. Because Wooler is a small community, with just over 4,000 residents at the 2011 Census, almost everyone is aware of the hub's activities. It is well-embedded into the community: its spaces are fully occupied and its services well-used.

*Allendale Forge Studios* are located in a village approximately 35 miles to the west of Newcastle upon Tyne, in the North Pennines National Landscape. The village once supported the local mining industries, but with the cessation of mining it has become reasonably

attractive to relocating households. However, it endures fairly standard rural development challenges: population sparsity, poor transport infrastructure and declining local services. The hub is in the heart of the village and is run by volunteers. It is a community-owned social enterprise whose strategic direction and management is the responsibility of a small board, comprising five members.

The original goal of the hub was to provide work space for local artists and to become a destination in its own right – a gallery space for local art. However, there has been some deviation away from this goal as the hub responded to a broader demand for community services and enquiries from other enterprises wishing to base their activities at Allendale Forge Studios.

There is now a tenanted café downstairs at the hub, which provides several local jobs and an important community space. A management consultancy is also based on the lower floor, alongside a podiatrist, who both rent spaces. An arts and crafts gift shop and an exhibition space make up the remaining ground floor, both of which are directly owned by the hub and run by volunteers. Upstairs, several local small businesses now have workspaces, alongside some artists' studios, a social enterprise offering training and education, and a larger space that is available for community use. While the original intention had been to host a creative hub in the village, the studios now host a wider array of activities, focused on service delivery and business support, which respond to the socio-economic challenges faced by this remoter rural location.

The *Aald Skil* is located on the Shetland Islands, 100 miles north of the Scottish mainland. The islands have a fishing industry, oil industry and renewable energy sector but much of the land is of poor quality, supporting only low-grade agriculture. While they suffer from the typical socio-economic issues associated with remoter islands, the islands have a strong local council that draws its funding, in part, from compensatory payments from the renewable energy and oil industries. They also have a tourist industry, with cruise ships visiting at regular intervals.

The hub serves three adjoining villages with a shared population of roughly 700. The hub's main building was previously a school. The gradual deterioration of that building meant that a new, and slightly larger, school was built – leaving the old building available for a new use. Under the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015, local residents formed a group and applied for an asset transfer from the Council. The group was then formalised into the Community Development Company of Nesting and took ownership of the building and adjoining land.

Following significant restoration, the main building was turned into offices for the Community Development Company and a base for two micro-businesses, which provide health and beauty treatments and reflexology to local residents. Recently, electric vehicle charging points have been installed, providing income for the hub and supporting the greening of local travel. Outbuildings, which were once classrooms, have been developed into a community gym and a recycle/reuse centre – known as the ‘Scrap Store’. These provide two key services for the local community, focused on health and recycling. There are now plans to expand the Scrap Store to include a repair workshop, to reduce the number of broken goods ending up in land-fill.

Land adjoining the hub is being developed into community allotments, rentable polytunnels (provided by another Shetland-based social enterprise), and a new community woodland. The polytunnels will be available for residents wishing to grow fresh produce for local sale, or for hobbyists. The Community Development Company of Nesting invests its surplus from rent, and fundraising monies, into the local communities. Recent examples of this include not only the provision of space for the community but also the restoration of a local village graveyard and the hosting of a community food-bank.

## Enterprise hubs’ support for a postcapitalist future

Following Chatterton and Pusey (2020), the essential features of postcapitalist activities are the avoidance of (1) enclosure, (2) commodification and (3) alienation. First, regarding *enclosure*, the hubs described above are community-owned, and the buildings and land are held in common. The strategic oversight and everyday decision-making processes are democratic, involving elected boards of trustees or directors. At its inception, the Community Development Company responsible for the *Aald Skül* hub went door-to-door to ensure every member of the community had an input in setting the key priorities and long-term strategy of the hub.

Second, between enclosure and *commodification*, the trusts and development companies operating the Cheviot Centre and the *Aald Skül* are examples of what might be called ‘bridging cooperativism’: they provide opportunities for other social enterprises and community projects to establish and thrive. In this sense, the hubs are anchors for other postcapitalist activities that directly challenge both enclosure and commodification. The latter is also challenged by the ethos of sharing.

The Cheviot Centre hosts a ‘share space’: a small-scale example of a library economy or sharing economy (Hamari et al., 2016) that acts as a ‘library of things’ (Lax, 2020; Ameli, 2017). In the same vein, the ‘Scrap Shop’ in the *Aald Skül* serves a similar function by providing opportunities to reuse items no longer wanted by other members of the community. Surplus or profits from their various activities bring more assets back into common ownership, as they continue to support events and services that enhance community well-being. In the case of the Allendale Forge Studios, a communally owned café is leased out, on a highly competitive rent, to support local jobs and provide a space for the community meetings. The polytunnels at the *Aald Skül* enhance an asset— that is, community-owned land— that will support new businesses. Moreover, the enterprises incubated in the hubs often reject commodification and focus instead on the delivery of community benefit underpinned by more satisfying forms of work. These include, from the hub examples cited above, training that caters for the needs of people with learning differences, alongside physiotherapy and alternative treatments. The latter are, of course, commercial undertakings, but in rural areas stripped of their services and with aging populations, such provision can be considered a vital community service that negates the need for people to travel many miles to urban providers.

And third, what was not revealed in the vignettes was the passion with which tenants spoke of their jobs: all of them considered their roles to be fulfilling and useful. In the cases of the Cheviot Centre and the *Aald Skül*, services are provided to the local communities that cannot be provided on a fully commercial basis. The hubs address the challenge of *alienation*, for workers, businesses and communities. They provide vibrant and connected business environments for their tenants, affording access to networks, skills, services— and collaborations (Merrell et al., 2022b). Hubs are therefore incubators of business start-ups, providing the economic and social ‘relatedness’ on which business activity relies (Merrell et al., 2022a). Relatedness is key here: it extends beyond commerce to all forms of social connection, and commoning (involving people, assets and critical processes), that provide hub infrastructures with their essential purpose. If anything, hubs provide the means to achieve a higher level of relatedness in rural areas, lending crucial support to an alternative mode of social reproduction.



## Conclusion

Recognising how work under capitalism is frequently viewed as alienating and increasingly meaningless, self-help actions, which have taken root in many rural areas affected by socio-economic decline, have been part of a movement towards new forms of meaningful doing and working. That self-help has been triggered by a capitalist logic that results in the neglect of rural places and also by strict limits on public investment. The barriers to conducting work and delivering services in the countryside have been ameliorated through social enterprise, sometimes delivered in a framework of hub infrastructure. Through a social enterprise framing of work, this chapter has illustrated how not-for-profit businesses can provide more meaningful work and actively contribute to the rejuvenation of rural areas by providing vital community services.

The rural enterprise hubs detailed in this chapter are ‘bridges’ that provide onward support to further postcapitalist transformations. Hubs play vital roles in providing workspaces for social enterprises; they can help rebuild community cohesion and alleviate the sense of social isolation experienced by some residents. They can be seen as vital mechanisms for community wealth building (Dubb, 2016). Underpinning these infrastructures are rationalities of self-help, bottom-up organising and planning, participation, commoning and co-operation. The hubs discussed in this chapter meet all three of Chatterton and Pusey’s (2020) criteria of a postcapitalist practice of commoning, overcoming commodification through socially useful services and products, and helping to combat the alienating effects of capitalism. Because hubs appear so foundational to transformational change across multiple domains, future research on enterprise hubs might seek to further expose their everyday practices: their development histories, operation, governance, and their strengths and vulnerabilities. More particularly, their role in supporting meaningful work, circular rural economies and community wealth building is worthy of further exploration, and is likely to confirm their critical role in supporting the transition to a postcapitalist countryside.

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# Platform capitalism and the rural

Mark Scott

## Introduction

Digital platforms and platform economies are now a defining feature of contemporary capitalism. The digital economy, the sharing economy, the gig economy, the smart economy and on-demand consumerism are some of the terms that have been coined to describe the transformation of economies across the globe driven by data and evolving digital platforms. As recorded by Sadowski (2020), in the decade since the Great Financial Crisis, new platform giants, such as Uber and Airbnb, have emerged as significant economic players, while older giants like Amazon and Google have acquired unprecedented levels of power and wealth. Sadowski further notes that, today, the richest and fastest growing companies now operate platforms, not factories, with corporations based on platforms now dominating the global economy.

Digital platforms can be understood as ‘socio-technical intermediar[ies] and business arrangement[s]’ (Langley and Leyshon, 2017: 11), which aim to ‘automate market exchanges and mediate social action’ (Andersson Schwarz, 2017: 377). The main strategy of platform capitalism is to turn social interactions and economic transactions into ‘services’ that take place on their platforms, which become a necessary intermediary in the production, circulation, or consumption process. Thus, platform capitalism is often framed as a new form of rentier capitalism – instead of commanding payment from the use of landed property, these rentiers capture revenue from the use of digital platforms.

While these platform economies are highly globalised, their influence and impacts are spatially variegated while also re-shaping people–place relationships. Within the geography discipline, there has been a recent growth in studies of so-called platform urbanism to examine

the changing relationship between technology, capital and cities (Fields et al., 2020; Graham, 2020; Odendaal, 2022). However, the rural dimension of platform capitalism is currently under-researched – indeed, scholars have rarely asked if there is a specific or distinctive rural dimension at all. Extending the work of Davies et al. (2023), it is questionable the extent to which rural scholars have examined the spatial implications of key internet platforms that connect huge numbers of users, advertisers and service providers. In this chapter, I argue that platform economies increasingly exert influence over rural places. This influence, in many ways, is similar to their impacts on urban areas – for example, the role of platform retailers in eroding a local retail base or the impact of short-term rental platforms (such as Airbnb) on local property markets. However, the substantive focus of platforms may play out differently in a rural context – this may include the influence of platforms and ‘fintech’ in the enclosure and financialisation of ecosystem services as natural capital or data-driven precision agriculture. Moreover, platforms also require physical infrastructure, often creating new demands for rural space – this includes data centres and how these energy-intensive infrastructures are also fuelling investment in rurally located renewable energy infrastructures. These themes are examined in this chapter along with forms of resistance to the influence or extraction of value by platforms. First, however, the chapter identifies some key features of platform capitalism.

## What is platform capitalism?

Platforms have become important infrastructures and intermediaries within contemporary capitalism. As summarised by Sadowski (2020), platforms are found everywhere, offering (or promising) frictionless interfaces that automate market exchanges and mediate social action, while making existing arrangements more digitalised, datafied and trackable. In this way, platforms are central to ‘market encounters’ in digital space (Langley and Leyshon, 2017). Platform companies have been technical and economic disruptors based on digitisation, mobile communications, datafication and artificial intelligence (Davies et al., 2023). More fundamentally, these companies and the wider platform economy have changed the way value is derived from the capitalist system. As Davies et al. (2023: 246) highlight:

In previous iterations of capitalism, goods and services were produced and capital value was derived from them. This was often

dependent on the ownership of the means of production. In the platform economy, however, the production of a good or service is not dependent on ownership of the means of production, but rather on the development of a digital network that provides a matching service, made possible through technology. The platforms pass on all the risks onto the owners of the good and service being produced and extract value through the means of organizing the production.

In practice, different types of platforms operate across diverse domains of economic activity. Drawing on Sadowski (2020) and Langley and Leyshon (2017), the following comprises an illustrative (and sometimes overlapping) typology of platform types in this evolving landscape:

- *Online exchange markets*: providing a marketplace platform for the sale of products and services for physical distribution, downloads and streaming. Examples include Amazon, Apple, eBay.
- *Product platforms*: which collect fees from people for accessing and using goods the platform owns. Examples include Spotify, Netflix.
- *Social media and user-generated content*: platforms that host communities to post content. Examples include Facebook, Twitter/X.
- *Advertising platforms*: which sell ads based on captured and analysed user-data. Examples include Google, Facebook.
- *Lean platforms or so-called sharing economy platforms*: these generate profits by minimising their ownership of assets and overhead costs, while providing a service built on the users' assets. Examples include Uber, Airbnb.
- *Cloud platforms*: that own hardware and software infrastructures that are then rented to other organisations. Examples include Amazon Web Services (AWS).
- *Crowdsourcing platforms*: that create a marketplace for transactional and contractual work such as freelance or informal labour. Examples include Taskrabbit.
- *Industrial platforms*: that are applied to manufacturing to lower production costs based on so-called edge-to-core data management comprising the internet of things (IoT), smart sensors, data analytics, cloud computing and storage, and AI/machine learning analytical models. Examples include Hewlett Packard Enterprise, GE Digital.



As noted by Sadowski (2020), while this emerging platform landscape is increasingly diverse and penetrating different aspects of the economy, all the platform types are variants in supplying technology and/or creating services, and then controlling access and collecting rents. Platforms, therefore, provide critical infrastructure for contemporary capitalism (at scale) that is privately owned and controlled, increasingly interwoven with monopolistic practices and rent extraction (Davies et al., 2023).

Within this context, platforms are increasingly conceptualised as a form of rentier capitalism, based on value extraction rather than value creation. Sadowski (2020), for example, connects the model of platforms to traditional landlords in that both derive income (rent) from access to assets to mediate the means of production and the circulation of surplus capital. In a similar vein, Srnicek (2021), drawing on a Marxian analysis of land, argues that the power and wealth of platform owners is the result of ownership and control over scarce resources, namely data (which leads to advertising rents, arising from monopoly ownership of personal data), infrastructure (fees paid for access use of a platform) and intellectual property (often leading to digital enclosure), all of which create sources of rent for value extraction. Srnicek further argues that fixed capital is essential to rent-seeking, with businesses often renting access to both hardware and software from platform-based corporations, for example supplying cloud computing services based on the physical development of networks of data centres (see also Narayan, 2022). Consumers, governments, businesses, universities and so on, now rent access to core infrastructure like software applications and cloud storage on platforms, which provide a continual source of revenue and gives platform companies a critical position in social and economic life (Sadowski, 2020). Similarly, Mazzucato et al. (2020) identify two broad types of rent derived from platform capitalism: network monopoly rents and algorithmic rents through so-called matchmaking services in two-sided markets where a platform is an intermediary between a customer and a business. For Mazzucato et al., a focus on the various types of rents derived from platform companies can better enable regulatory actions at a national or transnational level. However, rather than focusing on this macro level, in the following section I focus on the specific rural dimensions and possible forms of resistance at a more local scale.

## Platform economies and the rural dimension

The literature on platform capitalism and platform urbanism is growing rapidly, explaining how platform companies are transforming capitalism, restructuring labour or changing our relationships with the places where we live, work or visit. However, in contrast, the rural dimension is relatively underexplored. This might reflect the lack of consumer critical mass in rural places that may make popular platforms unviable, such as Uber or fast-food delivery platforms like Deliveroo. However, like their urban counterparts, rural places are being transformed by the platform economy. In some respects, there are similar processes at play regardless of urban or rural contexts, including the impact of online shopping behaviours or the influence of short term rental (STR) platforms. However, the substantive focus might vary, for example with the rise of ‘smart farming’, or the physical implications can vary substantially from cities with rural places increasingly the location for the physical infrastructure (data centres and so on) associated with platforms. This section explores the rural dimensions of platform capitalism, focusing on four aspects: (1) the influence of online retail on rural places; (2) short-term rentals and rural places; (3) platforms and physical infrastructure; and (4) smart farming and precision agriculture.

### Online retail and rural places

In most sectors of the retail economy, e-commerce has become the fastest growing segment of the retail market. Online only e-commerce retailers have been increasingly joined by online marketplaces as well as the online presence of ‘bricks-and-mortar’ retailers that previously operated almost exclusively from shops. According to the Centre for Retail Studies (2023), the combined e-commerce sales in Western Europe (UK, Germany, France, Netherlands, Italy and Spain) were £152.20 billion in 2015, but by 2022 they had reached £328.91 billion (+116.1 per cent growth). Longer-term trends were also accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. E-commerce now accounts for over 26 per cent of market share for retail in the UK, almost 20 per cent in Germany and almost 19 per cent in the USA. To examine the implications of these trends for rural places, below I consider the Irish experience.

According to the Central Statistics Office of Ireland (CSO, 2023a), more than eight in ten (81 per cent) internet users purchased goods and/or services online in 2022, an increase of two percentage points on the same period in 2021. Only 7 per cent of persons (who use the internet)

never bought or ordered goods and/or services over the internet. Irish people currently in employment were most likely to purchase goods or services online – 86 per cent of these persons compared with 58 per cent of ‘students’ and 54 per cent of ‘retired persons’. While Dubliners are most likely to shop online (87 per cent), all other regions also experienced high levels of online shopping – from 70 per cent of internet users in the Midland region to 80 per cent in the West and 84 per cent in the South-East. Interestingly, online purchasing from national sellers is by far the most common option for Irish internet users, with nearly four in five (76 per cent) persons buying or ordering their goods from national sellers – this will include high volumes purchasing ready-made meals online from local suppliers. By comparison, over three in five (61 per cent) persons who purchased online bought goods from sellers from other European Union (EU) countries, while almost four in ten (39 per cent) reported purchasing from sellers from the rest of the world. However, if we exclude food and groceries, Irish online shoppers are more likely to purchase through international websites than those in other nations (SCSI, 2018).

While the impact on online retail expansion on ‘high streets’ is experienced across the country, urban centres with a higher footfall of potential shoppers have proved more resilient. In contrast, rural places have increasingly laboured to compete. ‘High streets’ outside of Ireland’s cities have struggled to maintain vibrancy over the last decade or more, with increasing vacancy rates impacting on their vitality. Doyle et al. (2021: 18) suggest that the increasing digitalisation of economic activity (including an exponential rise in online shopping) is a major factor along with changing consumer behaviour (particularly among younger cohorts), and increasing broadband and 4G/5G mobile network availability in rural places, which have all challenged the traditional retail roles of rural towns and villages. Furthermore, local or sole traders (which are traditionally present in rural locations) tend not to have an online presence to complement on-site sales.

Online retail trends have combined with other factors to produce high commercial vacancy rates in rural places. As recorded by Doyle et al. (2021) at the end of 2019 (Quarter 4), the national commercial vacancy rate stood at 13.3 per cent, with vacancy rates continuing to rise in most of Ireland’s local authorities. The five local authorities with the highest vacancy rates were all located in the west of Ireland (predominately rural), with County Sligo recording the highest vacancy rate at 18.9 per cent. A more recent study by the Northern & Western Regional Assembly (2022), a predominately rural region, recorded significant vacancy rates within its local authority areas. The commercial vacancy rate is 13.3 per cent compared with a State

average of 11.4 per cent. Of the 244 towns and villages in this region, 145 (almost 60 per cent) had a commercial vacancy rate above the national average. Thus, the implications of the growing shift to online retail can be profound for rural places – that is, the impact is not simply an erosion of the local retail base but a wider degradation of the public realm as rural towns and villages struggle with vacancy and dereliction. This can lead to a challenging cycle of decline, loss of local employment, loss of local business taxes (critical for maintaining local government services) and an overall decline in the longer-term function of towns and villages.

### Short-term rentals (STRs) and rural places

Holiday home ownership has been a longstanding feature of rural tourism. In particular, holiday homes have often been purchased by the urban elite in search of a temporary rural idyll. As outlined by Gallent (2014), there is a long established literature that examines second home ownership as a blight on rural places. Negative impacts include their distorting impact on housing supply and house prices, gentrification and displacement, erosion of local services catering for permanent residents, the impacts of seasonality and a loss of community cohesion. As Adie et al. (2022) note, while second homeowners and permanent residents have often co-existed in rural places, so-called sharing or peer-to-peer platforms, such as Airbnb, have added a further layer of complexity, with Gurran et al. (2020) contending that peer-to-peer holiday rental platforms have the potential to dramatically intensify the impacts of the visitor economy.

Much of the research on the impacts of STR platforms has tended to focus on major cities with high volumes of tourist visitor numbers (for example, Gurran, 2018; Aguilera et al., 2021; Colomb and Moreira de Souza, 2023). However, a growing body of literature is emerging to examine the impacts on rural locations, such as Gurran et al.'s study of rural coastal communities in Australia, Adie et al.'s (2022) comparative research on rural Wales and Sweden, Domènech and Zoğal's (2020) work on mountainous communities in Andorra, and Barrero-Rescalvo and Díaz-Parra's (2023) insights from Andalusia.

As outlined by Gurran et al. (2020), initial commentary on 'sharing platforms' lauded the potential for better use of latent resources, including idle property or empty bedrooms. However, more recent critical research in rural localities has tended to focus more on the impact on local economies (for example, impacts on the hotel industry) or on local communities. In this context, Gurran et al. suggest that STR platforms tend to *amplify* the negative impacts of second home ownership noted

above. Notably, Gurran et al. distinguish between different types of rural places and host communities. For example, within existing resorts already dominated by tourism, platforms such as Airbnb may have little impact, while in areas that may experience short-term surges in demand for accommodation (for example, due to a local annual event or festival), short-term lets often provide welcome additional income for locals renting rooms on a temporary basis. However, Gurran et al. also describe more invasive forms of short-term letting experienced in areas *transitioning* to tourism. This is referred to as a process of touristification, where increases in short-term rentals often result in increasingly scarce housing resources for locals (and possible displacement) or experiences of social conflicts, such as anti-social behaviour among visitors. This is similar to findings from Hidalgo et al.'s (2023) Spanish study, which contends that the greatest conflicts emerge in transitioning areas. Specifically, their study highlights the impacts of the increasing number of tourist-oriented businesses, defined as businesses where tourists spend more than locals, at the expense of businesses primarily oriented to locals.

While these impacts are important to capture, these issues tend to focus on the role of platforms in exacerbating long-identified tensions between permanent residents and tourists in rural localities. Less attention has been given to the nature of platform capitalism itself. For example, while these sharing platforms are extracting new forms of rent through the use of online services without ownership of actual assets, the platforms are making no contribution to local economies or tax revenues. Moreover, the platforms are critical in creating new demands for residential property. On the one hand, the possibility of deriving potential supplementary income may enable an individual to purchase a second home that may be intended for private use in the future. However, Barrero-Rescalvo and Díaz-Parra (2023) illustrate how STR platforms have also led to the rise of 'professional' and 'corporate' hosts, rather than ordinary people and amateurs. These professional hosts are extracting rent based on a wider trend of platform real estate (Fields and Rogers, 2021). In this way, STR platforms have enabled larger market actors to compete to appropriate a larger share of land rent, often concealed by platforms' use of terms such as 'hosts', which imply a more intimate scale of transaction. As highlighted by Colomb and Moreira de Souza (2023), property listings on platforms rarely mention the real name of the operator and exact address of the property until a booking payment has been made – sometimes not even at that point – while many platforms have, until recently, not agreed to share individualised, geo-localised data with public authorities.

## Platforms, data centres and physical infrastructure

While platform capitalism evokes a sense of frictionless consumerism and placelessness, it also requires physical infrastructure, which in turn is energy/carbon intensive. In particular, platform companies are dependent on data centres for cloud computing, central infrastructure in their rentier and monopolistic practices. Ireland provides an illustrative case of the exponential growth of data centre development with one of the highest concentrations of data centres in Europe and serving as one of the most significant repositories of data in the world (Bresnihan and Brodie, 2023). In part, this growth is based on Ireland's cool climate, suitable for data storage facilities to reduce overheating and energy costs for cooling. However, the growth in data centre development is also indicative of 'platform power' (Davies et al., 2023), whereby the Irish government has been a central facilitator of data centre development as an essential component of Ireland's digital infrastructure and for retaining the presence of large tech corporations, such as Google, Amazon, Microsoft, TikTok and Facebook, all with European headquarters in Ireland.

It is estimated that there are now 82 data centres operating in Ireland (Keena, 2023). Data centres now account for 18 per cent of Ireland's energy consumption – equivalent to all energy demands from urban households in the state. According to the CSO (2023b), electricity consumption by data centres increased by 31 per cent in a single year – between 2021 and 2022 – and by 400 per cent between 2015 and 2022. To date, the majority of Ireland's data centres have been developed on the urban-rural fringe of Dublin, often in close proximity to the M50 motorway. However, new data centre development is now encouraged to locate in rural areas, to be closer to green energy sources and away from grid-strained Dublin (Bresnihan and Brodie, 2023). Indeed, it is the surge on energy demand that is likely to be more transformative for rural space than actual new data centres. The development of data centres is now a significant driver of demand for clean energy, with platform companies increasingly a source of finance for large onshore wind projects. For example, an effort to demonstrate that a planned new data centre campus north of Dublin will be carbon neutral, is based on Amazon's contribution to three new wind farms in Cork, Galway and Donegal to be developed by Lettermuckroo Wind Farm Holdings (Keena, 2023). Companies like Amazon, Facebook and Microsoft are all involved in wind energy projects in rural Ireland.

This example is indicative of how many tech industry and data centre companies claim current or future goals of using 100 per cent renewable energy (Bresnihan and Brodie, 2021). Drawing on Bresnihan and Brodie, the connection between data centres and wind energy is significant for postcapitalist debates. First, data centres themselves are a physical infrastructure of platform companies engaged in monopolistic and rentier practices. Second, the increasing financing of wind energy projects from platform companies represents the enclosure of another resource – that is, wind (see also Chapter 17, this volume). Third, the increase in green energy demand requires a modification of the energy system to better balance supply and demand (due to intermittent wind energy supply) through smarter grids, sensor technology, algorithms and real-time data, all reliant on platform companies.

Rural places have emerged as a central arena for platform capitalism due to the location of renewable energy infrastructure and as a new site for data centres – with conflicts often played out through the planning system, as in the case of a protracted planning application for a large Apple data centre in the west of Ireland (Apple subsequently withdrew their application). Wind energy projects are increasingly contested in Ireland, particularly opposed by local rural communities who see limited local benefits. How will wind farm proposals that directly serve the needs of global corporations, such as AWS, and the wider global economy, be perceived within local ‘host’ communities? In parallel, tech companies have also been involved with carbon sequestration projects in rural Ireland. For example, Intel has recently partnered with the National Parks and Wildlife Service on a bog restoration and re-wetting project in the Wicklow Mountains to help meet Intel’s climate pledges through land-based carbon credits (also an example of the enclosure of ecosystem services). As Bresnihan and Brodie (2023) argue, both the drive for clean energy and carbon credits demonstrates an increasing entanglement of the global platform economy with the Irish rural landscape.

### Data, platforms and smart agriculture

Recent years have seen an increased focus in applying smart technologies to farm-level activities, often referred to as precision agriculture or smart farming. As outlined by Torkey and Hassanein (2020) and Moysiadis et al. (2021), smart farming utilises information technology, satellite technology, geographical information systems (GIS), and remote sensing for enhancing all functions and services of the agriculture sector. This also includes the increasing use of mobile apps, smart sensors, drones,

unmanned ground vehicles, cloud computing, machine learning and artificial intelligence (AI), IoT, image processing and blockchain. From an industry perspective, Torky and Hassanein argue that these technologies make it possible to process and access real-time data about the conditions of the soil, crops and weather along with other relevant services such as the crops and fruits supply chains, food safety and animal grazing. Smart farming and precision agricultural practices have enabled farmers to use farm-level data on inter- and intra-field variability to inform more efficient decision-making. Smart farming has the potential to further advance these practices by enabling the aggregation of individual farm data with data from other farms and/or other sources (for example, historical data, weather data, market data, benchmarking data), which in many cases occurs in real time (Regan, 2019). This data can inform decision-making at farm, industry and policy levels and/or support the development of new products and services.

While these developments may represent new forms of technological innovation within farming, Fraser (2022) contends that ‘smart farming’ reflects a drive by agriculture technology providers and agricultural transnational corporations to establish a deliberate position within the wider digital or platform economy. The strategy of these corporations involves the mass collection of farm data through sensors connected to an array of everyday farm equipment, resources and practices, such as tractors, water supplies and soil quality. In turn, real-time data provides digital platforms an opportunity to improve supply chains, to increase farm automation and to create new business models. As Gardezi and Stock (2021) observe, the critical outcome for agri-tech companies is to transform farmers from independent business owners to captured users as agri-tech monopolises data and IP. They argue that essential to this process is for agri-tech companies to successfully position their knowledge products as superior to farmers’ experiential (and often inherited) knowledge, thereby encouraging sustained engagement with new digital tools.

While proponents of precision agriculture position new technologies as part of a modernisation agenda, Fraser (2022) argues that *data* is smart farming’s new cash crop, used by platforms to create automated infrastructure governed by opaque and proprietary algorithms, allowing platform companies to pursue greater market share at various points along the food chain. Thus, for Fraser, the essential feature of platform-based smart farming is an operation that is productivist, extractive and profit-oriented based on:



- Locked systems and technology;
- Proprietary apps and software;
- A disregard for farmer privacy;
- Expropriation of data for profit; and
- A relationship of farm dependency on agri-tech providers.

Through these various tech tools, digitisation and platforms, agri-tech companies engage in data-grabbing as an accumulation strategy and to influence farmers' behaviours, opening new agrarian frontiers for surveillance capitalism (Stock and Gardezi, 2021). Through this process, agri-tech is actively reshaping farmers' relationship with the land and creates new tools of surveillance to enhance wider industry control of farm-based decision-making. Thus, while positioned as part of the long tradition of farm modernisation, smart farming neglects empowerment or capacity-building in terms of farm management (and enhancing farmer knowledge) towards replacing individual farmer knowledge with new knowledge tools.

Applying data-driven knowledge and adapting farming to emerging risks (for example, climate disruption) or to improve food security, is not in itself negative. However, applying the methods of platform capitalism and concentrating ownership, control and technology in the hands of a few corporations opens up the potential for rentier and monopolistic behaviour applied to food production. This approach, essentially based on a data grab in agriculture, 'holds out the possibility of altering food production systems and agrarian relations more generally in potentially profound ways' (Fraser, 2019: 897).

## Resisting platform power: hope for rural places?

The review of platform capitalism and its influence on rural places and activities demonstrates its uneven impacts across rural space and on economic relationships. While this critique is useful, as with other chapters in this book, it is important to ask the question: in the face of rentier (platform) power, what ought to be done?

Indeed, how to address the rise of platform companies has been a critical question for policymakers across the globe. Much of this discussion has focused on action at state or global levels in relation to developing appropriate regulatory frameworks for platform companies, particularly around fairer taxation on goods and services (including for cross-border purposes) and corporation tax. Anti-trust regulatory approaches have also

been raised to counter the monopolistic tendencies of the larger platform corporations. As outlined by Mazzucato et al. (2020), the measures often mooted include:

- Opening up data use to third party players;
- Splitting search and analytical functions of some platforms;
- Minimising anti-competitive data use; and
- Reorganising algorithmic capacity ownership.

These types of initiatives mostly focus on companies with search/advertisement co-functions or two- or multi-sided platforms that mediate the relationship between suppliers and consumers. For Mazzucato et al., these measures alone will not be enough to reform platform power to sufficiently address the value-extracting tendencies of platforms. Instead, Mazzucato et al. focus on different forms of rent, and methods to decentralise or diffuse these extractive features.

However, the focus of this section is not on these wider reforms but on how rural places and communities can mediate or better navigate an era of platform capitalism. This is not to suggest that we return (somehow) to a pre-digital age – technology is here to stay and brings enormous advantages – but rather how rural communities can mitigate the rentier features of platforms and capture/redistribute rent within rural communities. This section will focus on three approaches: (1) creating a digital commons; (2) shifting from platform capitalism to platform cooperatives; and (3) local regulation and taxation.

### Creating a digital commons

One aspect of reorienting platforms towards wider public good is through commoning practices to counter the enclosure of data, IP and algorithms – in other words, the creation of a digital commons. This might include the greater use of open source software, the use of creative commons licensing, or crowdfunding approaches. These alternative approaches may be used to counter data-extraction-for-profit by platform companies. In the example of smart farming discussed earlier in this chapter, Fraser (2022) argues for a radical shift from mainstream smart farming to ‘emancipatory smart farming’. In this example, rather than proprietary technological systems, data grabs and rentier practices, an emancipatory approach could be based on (Fraser, 2022: 206):

- Hackable instruments and devices (rather than locked systems);
- Open source software;
- Cooperative platforms (further discussed below);
- Shared or sovereign data; and
- Fostering of farmer independence from agri-tech providers.

These approaches enable the innovative aspects of on-farm technology adoption to be retained, without undermining farmer independence, privacy and knowledge, while also providing a more ethical framework. An example of this approach is the US-based Grower Information Service Cooperative (Borst, 2016), established in 2012. This is a farmer-owned ‘data cooperative’ with over 1,000 members, which has developed and deployed a data aggregating and integrating software platform for member use. For example, a recent project in Nebraska focuses on water usage data that integrates management of on-farm water resource use with wider river-basin management to develop integrated water management plans (see: <https://www.gisc.coop/nebraska-tpnrd/>). The aim of the platform is to provide enhanced data to encourage better on-farm decisions through aggregating data to inform management/business decisions. At the same time, farmers retain ownership of their data, which is not sold on to third parties.

The challenge for rural communities, as Fraser (2019: 907) argues, is how to contest data grabs and to foster data sovereignty:

... data sovereignty requires that actors in civil society, or in cooperative economic associations, develop principles and practices that explore whether the emergent value of data should be held in common, rather than privatized; destroyed, rather than analyzed and brought to market; or stored nearby, rather than exported.

Although Fraser is discussing smart farming, this approach equally applies to other rural fields where ‘smart technology’ is being applied, including smart villages, smart energy systems or smart data collection and capture related to ecosystem services that are often repackaged for carbon credits or biodiversity offsets.

### Platform cooperatives

The second and related approach is to incorporate the features of platforms into a community-oriented approach through the creation of platform cooperatives. In contrast to platform companies, these cooperatives

provide digital platforms designed to provide a service or sell a product, and that is collectively owned and generated by the people who designed it and participate in it. Thus, platform cooperatives are essentially concerned with democratic ownership models of the internet (Scholz, 2016).

Platform cooperatives aim to foster social change by creating a 'people's internet' by replacing corporate-owned platforms with user-owned cooperatives (Sandoval, 2020). Borkin (2019) identifies a useful typology of platform cooperatives that amalgamate the wider principles of the cooperative movement with technology:

- *Multi-stakeholder/community platform*: this entails users and producers of products/services plus platform developers, coming together as member-owners.
- *Producer-led platform*: a collection of producers (dispersed or geographically specific) who collectively sell their produce through a digital platform. The producers are members/owners. The aggregation and alignment of interests is on the producer side only.
- *Consortia/worker platform*: to provide a platform for workers to provide their services individually or collectively or to facilitate greater interaction among existing worker cooperatives.
- *Data consortia platform*: a mutual trust model, mainly focused around the ownership and use of data (such as discussed above, the Grower Information Service Cooperative). In this case, a platform cooperative manages data on behalf of its members, who have both democratic control and an equitable share of its profits.

Principles of platform cooperatives have been increasingly applied to Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) initiatives throughout Europe and North America (Espelt, 2020). CSA aims to foster solidarity between food producers and consumers and includes models that are alternatives to the market, including cooperatives and social enterprises, or as alternatives within the market, as an alternative to established retail chains. Therefore, CSA includes farmers' markets (direct selling to consumers), community gardens, solidarity purchase groups (for example, vegetable box subscriptions) or consumers supporting food production (referred to as prosumers) (Stehrenberger and Schneider, 2023). Within this context, platform cooperative models are increasingly being applied to CSA with platforms central to becoming a member of a CSA initiative, sharing information, organising members' work assignments, redistribution of food resources, facilitate sharing practices, and the digitisation of collective food procurement (Stehrenberger and Schneider, 2023).

An example of this approach is the Open Food Network (<https://openfoodnetwork.org/about-us/>), founded in Australia in 2012 and now operating in over 20 countries. The network develops open and shared resources and open source software to enable food producers to directly sell to consumers. The platform can be used by either consumer collectives (for example, to bulk-buy organic produce) or producer-led cooperatives. For producers, the open source platform can be used to establish their own online shop but more commonly to allow a network of local producers to collaborate and sell together. The platform can be used as a 'shopfront' and also to match demand and supply, organise deliveries, make/receive payments, and accounting. For example, StroudCo Food Hub (<https://www.stroudco.org.uk>) in Stroud, Gloucestershire (UK), connects local fruit and vegetable growers (over 80 local producers) to over 700 consumers who order online and collect orders at a local hub location. In Ireland, the Open Food Network platform has enabled North Tipperary Online Farmer's Market to collectively sell ethical produce online. The market was initiated by Cloughjordan Community Farm, a member-owned farm (with subscriptions to pay a farmer's salary and lease land) but has now expanded to include a range of local producers and local food businesses (see: [https://openfoodnetwork.ie/north\\_tipperary\\_online\\_farmers\\_market/shop#/about\\_panel](https://openfoodnetwork.ie/north_tipperary_online_farmers_market/shop#/about_panel)).

The organisation of platform cooperatives also appears aligned with long-established community-based models of rural development. For example, digital approaches could support traditional voluntary activity that underpins community life in many rural places. This proved critical in some rural communities' responses to the COVID-19 crisis. Gkartzios et al. (2022) outline the case of Spanish local action group (funded by the EU's LEADER programme) GALSINMA, in Sierra Norte de Madrid. The local action group, as a response to COVID-19 – created an online platform – *Acción Sierra Norte* – to coordinate volunteers, connect volunteers with those in need and to collect donations. This demonstrates the intersection of traditional active citizenship and community-building with digital tools and the importance of creating online communities that reinforce place-based community action. Through this platform, GALSINMA coordinated the distribution of over 85,000 masks (35 per cent homemade), 9,000 protective gowns (40 per cent homemade), and the production of 1,200 protective screens for the local region (ENRD, 2020). The platform was also used to coordinate a 'solidarity campaign' including connecting to people experiencing social isolation, distributing food to vulnerable families, and during COVID-19 recovery, providing a platform for local food producers to sell directly (online) to local consumers.

This combination of community-level action and platform technology could be applied to a wide range of rural development interventions. For example, a local retailers' platform could provide local shops or producers with a collective online presence to counter larger, external retailers – providing a critical mass of businesses which counters the prevalence of sole traders and independent retailers in rural places. Community-based rural transport is also readily applicable to platform cooperatives able to take advantage of real-time data and demand-oriented systems to facilitate car-sharing/lift-sharing or community-owned transport to address the deficits of public transport in rural places. Platform cooperatives that provide Airbnb-style platforms for short-term letting also offer potential. An example of this approach is fairbnb.coop where fees generated by the platform (as booking fees) are returned to the local host communities to fund social projects of their choice.

An example of a community-led approach to applying technology to energy systems can be found in Dingle/*Daingean Uí Chúis*, the main coastal settlement on the Dingle Peninsula/*Corca Dhuibhne*, County Kerry in the southwest of Ireland. Dingle village has a population of 3,500, with a total of 12,500 people living on the wider peninsula, which is a designated *Gaeltacht* (Irish-speaking) area with a distinctive cultural heritage and identity. Dingle has adopted a smart village approach to harness information and communications technology (ICT), digitisation and smart technologies as a means of developing more sustainable rural trajectories. The application of the smart village concept can cross various domains of action (Gkartzios et al., 2022), including developing smart rural economies (for example, developing local platform economies), smart environmental management (for example, volunteered geographic information for environmental monitoring), smart rural governance (for example, ICT-based methods of accessing public services), smart mobility (for example, public transport based on real-time technologies) and smart living (e.g. remote working hubs). Applying a smart village approach commenced in 2016, with the establishment of *Corca Dhuibhne 2030/Dingle Peninsula 2030*, a partnership between Dingle Creativity and Innovation Hub (a co-working hub), ESB Networks (state electricity company), North East & West Kerry Development (NEWKD), and MaREI, (a Science Foundation Ireland Centre for Energy, Climate and Marine). *Dingle Peninsula 2030* is a multi-stakeholder transition project that aims to decarbonise the Dingle Peninsula, focusing on energy, agriculture, marine, transport and tourism (Boyle et al., 2021).

The €5 million *Dingle ESB Networks Project*, initiated in 2018, involves the deployment of a range of new technologies to assist in the development of a smart, resilient, low-carbon electricity network including: solar PV systems, battery management systems, air source heat pumps, electric vehicles and smart EV chargers, peer-to-peer energy services and smart home devices (see <https://dinglepeninsula2030.com/>). The programme includes: the appointment of five ESB Networks Dingle Project Ambassadors; the full energy retrofit of three properties as demonstration projects; installation of solar photovoltaic (PV) panels on 25 local homes; the installation of 20 battery management systems in local homes; the testing of smart networks devices; and an electric vehicle (EV) trial, involving 17 EVs. Underpinning these activities is a concern with how best to activate the *Energy Citizen*.

Dovetailing with *Corca Dhuibhne 2030*, Dingle was also one of 21 European villages selected as a pilot project for the European Commission's *Preparatory Action on Smart Rural Areas in the 21st Century* programme (Smart Rural 21), which has an overall aim of promoting villages to develop and implement smart village approaches and strategies across Europe – this programme commenced in December 2019. The development of the Smart Rural Dingle/*Daingean Uí Chúis* Strategy was informed by a community-led and bottom-up approach, involving over 300 local participants. This was to ensure that any smart village strategy was based on actual community needs and aspirations rather than simply the application of available technologies. Leading this process was North East and West Kerry Partnership, an experienced local development partnership (for example, in the delivery of LEADER programmes).

The overall objective of the Smart Rural Dingle/*Daingean Uí Chúis* Strategy is to enhance liveability in Dingle for people throughout their lifetime through strategic investments in housing, family services, clean energy and a resilient economy. Fundamental to the strategy is the linking of digitisation and well-being, with a focus on: digital housing solutions (for example, environmental controls); digital healthcare solutions (for example, vital signs monitoring and tele-visits for older residents); digital social care solutions (for example, fall alarms, morning call schemes); and digital consumer solutions (for example, enhanced use of social media platforms).

The Smart Rural Dingle/*Daingean Uí Chúis* Strategy provides an illustrative case of community-led and multi-stakeholder place-making that explores the potential of ICT/smart technologies to overcome the challenges associated with dispersed and remote rural living. Harnessing smart technology illustrates the potential for a holistic approach to energy

transitions among rural communities. This includes retrofitting older housing stock for energy efficiency, deploying real time technology and geospatial tools for flexible management of community transport, remote working hubs to reduce commuting and piloting e-vehicle infrastructure. Developing *local* platform economies, creating local ‘short’ supply chains, and attracting inward investment and new residents through enhanced digital infrastructure are central to transforming the local economy. The smart village approach was underpinned by multi-partner and community collaboration, necessary in understanding local needs. Rather than proprietary technology and reliance on platform companies, the initiatives relied on a community–university–state body partnership and the engagement with local people throughout the process as a form of technology empowerment.

### Local regulation and taxation

As outlined earlier, the focus of this section is to explore how local/rural actors can navigate a new era of platform capitalism. Therefore, regulation and taxation from a national perspective will not be addressed; instead, this section will explore if there are any regulatory or fiscal tools available at a more local scale to contest the dominance of platform companies. For rural places, there are two critical challenges. First, mitigating the uneven impacts of platforms on rural places, such as the erosion of a local retail base or the capture of citizen or environmental data. Second, a related challenge is the ability of rural places to re-localise value capture. Both of these challenges could be addressed by creating a digital commons or platform cooperatives; however, local regulation or taxation might provide complementary approaches.

These issues have perhaps been explored most extensively in the context of short-term rental (STR) platforms such as Airbnb (Ferreri and Sanyal, 2018). Recent years have seen a growing awareness of the possible adverse impacts of STRs (discussed earlier) leading to municipalities developing new rules or regulations to better control their growth or impacts. Colomb and Moreira de Souza (2021) have reviewed growing regulation across 12 city municipalities in Europe, noting very different policy responses. Interestingly, different responses emerge depending on the type of actors who call for intervention – whether from the hotel sector, resident associations or advocates for a more community-centred sharing economy. Moreover, calls for regulatory action often overlap pre-existing political issues, particularly housing affordability, or concerns with over-tourism.



In this context, local regulation can emerge from planning policy, housing regulation and standards, taxation or health and safety (recognising that these may be structured by national legislation and municipal competency). Colomb and Moreira de Souza also note that for some municipalities, there was a concern not so much with distribution and impacts but rather ‘sovereignty’ regarding the platform economy, leading to stricter regulation of global platforms in favour of more localised approaches to a sharing economy. Overall, their study revealed that rather than prohibition measures, the majority of municipalities studied opted for mitigating measures, primarily to protect residential uses. Regulation often focuses on addressing (Colomb and Moreira de Souza, 2021): the existence of STRs; the quality of STRs; the geographic distribution of STRs; differential treatment based on ownership (for example, renting a person’s primary residence versus professional STR operators); and the practices of platforms themselves. The scope of these regulatory actions provides a degree of local control in the face of global platform power and to balance local needs with demand for STRs.

Improving the visibility and monitoring the existence of STRs is a critical challenge, with many platforms engaged in opaque practices regarding the details of listings. Visibility is paramount in relation to different forms of taxation, ensuring that tax on income generated by the hosts primarily sits at a national level. From a local perspective, tracking and treating STRs as tourist accommodation would enable local tourist taxes to be applied for each overnight stay. Alternatively, visibility would allow municipalities to apply local business rates to a property if rented above a set threshold of days, or at least to apply additional household taxes. In other words, improved visibility and transparency would enable some local value capture of STRs.

While regulation and taxation would allow local municipalities to gain more control, Colomb and Moreira de Souza (2021) note the challenges of regulation in a digital age. This includes ‘data gaps’, opaque platform practices and a lack of resources at the municipal scale to control or inspect STRs. These issues are likely to be heightened in a rural context with smaller local authorities and less resources. Moreover, any action is likely to be dependent on a growing grassroots opposition to STRs in rural places to stimulate regulatory action.

## Conclusion

The era of platform capitalism has been defined by new rentier and monopolistic practices as established and new global corporations position themselves as necessary intermediaries in the production, circulation, or consumption process. Instead of commanding payment from the use of landed property, these rentiers capture revenue from the use of digital platforms. While these platform economies are highly globalised, their influence and impacts have certainly penetrated rural space. However, the rural dimension of platform capitalism is often neglected or overlooked in the literature.

This chapter has attempted to address this deficit by examining the uneven impacts of platforms on rural places. In this critique, it is important to recognise that technology and connectivity brings enormous benefits; however, the current practices of platform companies and their influence on rural places deserves greater scrutiny and contestation. For example, online retail platforms, such as Amazon, have hollowed out the retail functions of many rural 'high streets', which as the Irish case illustrated, has left a degraded public realm, dereliction and high levels of vacancy in rural towns and villages. Short-term rental platforms amplify housing scarcity or affordability in some rural tourist 'hotspots', while moves towards 'smart farming' creates farmer dependency on agri-tech companies while capturing on-farm data for value extraction. The Irish case also demonstrated the increasing entanglement of platforms with rural landscapes due to new physical infrastructure needs that underpin platforms, specifically energy-intensive data centres and a surge in demand (and finance) for renewable energy projects across rural space. To contest these practices, the chapter examined three postcapitalist inspired strategies that could be adopted in rural places to better navigate the influence of platform companies, namely creating a digital commons, developing platform cooperatives and local regulation and taxation with a specific focus on re-localising value capture. Grassroots actions are encouraging but much more research is needed on how to combine effective solidarity practices and bottom-up rural development with new technological possibilities in ways that focus on local needs and contest the dominance of platform companies.

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16

## **Community land trusts in rural locations: a postcapitalist housing transition?**

Tom Moore

### **Introduction**

The role of community land trusts (CLTs) in providing rural affordable housing in England has grown in the last decade. In part, this responds to longstanding problems of high demand for rural housing relative to lagging supply and a practical need to identify ways to tackle unmet housing need. However, their emergence also reflects growing interest in alternative approaches to the consumption and ownership of housing and land. Private extraction of land value has had damaging effects on rural communities, with such capture often occurring through the transaction of housing and contributing to problems of housing access and affordability. CLTs, as non-profit, community-based organisations, are often framed as a challenge to the market-based logics that shape rural housing markets. This chapter assesses this proposition and the extent to which CLTs can be understood as a postcapitalist housing alternative.

### **Explaining the emergence of community land trusts**

CLTs are non-profit, community-based organisations that seek to own and control land and assets for the benefit of a defined group of beneficiaries, usually associated with a community of place or interest. With a strong emphasis on resident and community governance, CLTs are commonly associated with the provision of affordable housing. They acquire land and hold this in trust, imposing restrictions on its use for wealth accumulation,

commonly through retention of freehold and use of leasehold agreements that outline restrictions on the sale or rent of homes (Seagraves, 2023). By doing so, CLTs claim to ensure that housing remains affordable in perpetuity, with limitations on private profit and speculation enabling housing to be treated as a community resource rather than for private enrichment. CLTs draw inspiration from longstanding concepts of land trusts that similarly sought to capture land values for broader benefit, such as the original Garden Cities in England. Inspired by Georgist principles of capturing land value for public rather than private benefit, leaseholds were used to capture increase in land value that occurred through development, with proceeds in turn reinvested for the benefit of the Garden City (Lewis, 2015).

The CLT label has its roots in the rural United States, emerging first in the Civil Rights era as a way of securing land rights for minoritised populations that were otherwise discriminated against. Subsequently, the model expanded to urban neighbourhoods threatened by gentrification and displacement, with community ownership of land through CLTs thought to enable and maintain housing access for low-income households (Agnotti, 2007). CLTs have since proliferated in both Global North and South contexts, partly as a response to problems of housing affordability, access, and inadequacy, as well as community disempowerment in land use planning and landownership (Moore, 2022). While much of this proliferation has occurred in urban contexts, CLTs have proven popular in rural locations in some countries, particularly the United Kingdom.

While the meaning and value of rurality is not homogenous within or between countries, and nor therefore are the challenges that rural places encounter, there are a number of pressures on some rural locations that contextualise the emergence of CLTs. Kordel and Naumann (2023) explain rural housing crises with reference to three trends: increasing housing financialisation, expressed not only through distant, privatised ownership of some rural land resources but through the effects of urban housing financialisation on rural markets; residential mobilities and migration to rural locations, with consequent demand on housing stock; and rural gentrification, furthering the 'social exclusivity' (Shucksmith, 2023) of some rural communities. In essence, these trends highlight the commodification of rural land and housing and its effects on rural communities.

In England – the focus of this chapter – housing is fundamental to rural inequalities. Shucksmith and Sturzaker (2012) distinguish between production and consumption pressures that exacerbate rural housing problems. Production pressures relate to natural or political constraints

that may limit housing development, which in England is reflected by the modus operandi of national planning that generally restricts development in order to preserve rural landscapes (Satsangi et al., 2010), often to the benefit of landed elites and private homeowners who oppose housing development (Sturzaker, 2010). Consumption pressures are reflected by the competition for housing in rural communities, where demand can be high relative to supply. The attractiveness of rural living exacerbates competition for housing, as urban populations migrate to the countryside, and the high value placed on rural amenity increases demand in some communities for tourist and short-term holiday accommodation (Colomb and Gallent, 2022). The consequence of this is that housing costs in rural areas are, on average, higher relative to incomes than in urban areas (with the exception of London) (DEFRA, 2023), that younger, lower-income households with a need or preference to live in the countryside are disproportionately disadvantaged in accessing housing in expensive private housing markets due to financial constraints, and that there are concerns for the function and sustainability of rural communities whose planning and development is often predicated on an ‘amenity-centred rurality’ (Chapter 1, this volume).

Efforts to tackle these issues have often involved a community focus, including initiatives that aim to empower communities in the identification of land for housing development, neighbourhood planning, restrictions on second home ownership and tourist lets, and the use of occupancy conditions to prioritise housing for local households that hold community attachments. It is in this context that CLTs have emerged, representing an extension of the recent community focus of rural planning. While the above reforms involve regulatory responses or encourage community participation, CLTs involve citizens directly taking ownership and control of land and assets. In rural areas, they are typically formed and governed by local residents on a voluntary basis, with the intention of using land for the benefit of a defined geographic community. In England, this is most commonly associated with the acquisition and use of land for the provision of new affordable housing that is subject to controls on its future sale or rent. In this way, CLTs are often understood as a disruption to private housing markets.

The scale of CLTs is growing but limited. The Community Land Trust Network, a national membership body, reported in 2023 that 106 of 350 CLTs in England were based in small rural communities (CLT Network, 2023: 23). CLT development has been enabled by direct Government funding via a Community Housing Fund, including prioritisation for communities disproportionately affected by high rates of second home



ownership, and by development partnerships with rural housing associations (Moore, 2018). While this Fund was time-limited and, at the time of writing, has not been reinstated, in late 2023 CLTs – as part of a broader definition of ‘community-led housing’ – were cited for the first time as a housing delivery option in the Government’s revised National Planning Policy Framework (which lays out Government principles for planning policy), highlighting increasing interest in their use for the production of affordable housing. Prior to this, many of the pioneer CLTs that emerged in the early 2000s were found in rural locations, in part enabled by legacies of parish and community planning and planning rules that enabled access to rural exception sites for small developments (Aird, 2009; Moore, 2021).

## CLTs and postcapitalism

How might CLTs be understood as postcapitalist? Chatterton and Pusey (2020) argue that initiatives may qualify as postcapitalist where they attempt to build collective commons through co-production and common ownership of de-commodified social goods, spaces and property, as well as through ‘social organisation which refuses individualised notions of property and ownership’ (Chatterton and Pusey, 2020: 30). The postcapitalist treatment of land and property – challenging commodification, privatisation and the extraction of surplus value for private gain – can be interpreted as similar to the defining attributes of CLTs: collective, non-profit ownership of land, models of community governance and restrictions on the exchange value of housing. This aligns with the view of CLTs as maintaining a focus on the use value of housing rather than exchange value and on affordability rather than accumulation (Peredo and McLean, 2019). Meehan (2014: 115) argues that CLTs are part of an emerging ‘social market’, composed of an array of community-focused institutions, ‘that is conceptually different from either the capitalist profit market or the bureaucratic state’.

Given the nature of the rural challenge in England and the way it is driven by private capital accumulation, with longstanding issues of inequitable housing markets, large swathes of land held in private ownership, and limited Government intervention – the attractiveness of CLTs to communities seeking to effect change is understandable. CLTs may be located within a broader set of community-led housing initiatives that are distinct from corporate, financialised development and that prioritise local concerns and objectives (Jarvis, 2015). However, while alternative approaches to landownership, governance and value appear

to define CLTs, research in the United States has challenged the extent to which they can be interpreted as politically transformative. DeFilippis et al. (2019) drew upon Nancy Fraser's distinction between affirmative and transformative remedies for injustice; transformative actions being aimed at restructuring the processes that produce injustice, while affirmative constituting actions that remedy injustices without disrupting the productive processes. DeFilippis et al.'s work (2019) found a diversity of political meanings for those involved in CLTs, some of which were transformative in nature and politically motivated, but for others more affirmative, with limited political consciousness. The implication of this is that CLTs may be seen either as a method of advancing social change, or as a technocratic affordable housing solution. Engelsman et al. (2016) contrasted the radical and reformist tendencies of different CLTs, with access to power and resources sometimes mediated by state actors. Research has also argued that while the CLT model appears to disrupt wealth accumulation through housing, it can reinforce hegemonic meanings and values ascribed to different housing tenures, particularly as many CLTs promote their work as providing homeownership opportunities and the freedom and autonomy with which this is believed to imbued, which collides with the idea that they confront individualised notions of property (Martin et al., 2020; Pierce et al., 2022). This hints at a tension highlighted by Field and Layard (2017), in that in many advanced economies housing is not easily understood as a resource that lends itself to being shared in the same way as other resources – common land, parks, community centres – and that this may create difficulties in formulating shared visions for CLT formation and development.

Despite the growth of CLTs in rural areas, there has been limited study as to whether and how they can be conceptualised as part of a postcapitalist countryside beyond the initial reading of their attributes. Drawing on the author's previous research, the following section seeks to begin to fill this gap with reference to the motivations of rural communities that start CLTs and argues that models of resource acquisition and housing disposal expose tensions in their contribution to postcapitalist transitions.

## **Community-based and community-focused motivations**

This section discusses the motives of those involved in rural CLT initiatives, primarily drawing on previous qualitative research with board members and volunteers (Moore, 2015; Moore, 2021). Understanding the

perceptions and meanings of volunteers is key to understanding how and why objectives are set and particular processes occur when configuring solutions to social injustices. As DeFilippis et al. (2019: 797) highlight, if we are to understand the political meaning of CLTs, ‘the experiences of those involved with actually existing CLTs are as significant as their stated goals and formal legal structures.’

Many volunteers are motivated to form and develop CLTs by their awareness of the community impacts of rural housing problems. High property prices and limited supplies of affordable housing are perceived to have detrimental impacts to their villages, including to the viability of local amenities, as younger households are priced out. This has led to support for the provision of new, non-market housing that would be more affordable relative to local incomes. However, those involved in CLTs do not simply support the development of affordable housing, but the provision of housing for those with local and functional attachments to place. In interviews, CLT volunteers spoke not only of the housing crisis but of the way that it specifically impacted upon a defined population, such as longstanding community members and their relatives, friends or workers (Moore, 2021). While interviewees spoke of their opposition to more market housing being built locally and sought instead to acquire and use land for affordable housing, this was rarely spoken about as a challenge to larger economic relationships or processes but rather as a mechanism through which the specific housing needs of those with social and functional attachments to place could be met. This manifested itself in the allocation of the housing that was eventually developed by CLTs. The economic arrangements for this housing varied, with a mix of leasehold ownership and rental opportunities provided for households, but the application of local occupancy criteria was universal, reflecting the intentions of CLTs to ensure that residents with local ties benefited from housing.

While this suggests that the intent of CLTs diverges from critique of capitalist land and housing markets, CLTs were also driven by the opportunity to maintain the affordability of housing and to limit the opportunities to accrue wealth through housing, provided that the affordability of housing benefited a defined population affected by an inequitable housing system. This has implications for capitalist logics of housing provision: occupancy conditions restrict, though do not necessarily prevent, capital from flowing as easily from place to place. When coupled with resale restrictions, private accumulation and exchange is further restricted, embedding capital in place. As the following sections describe, this involves the use of sale and rent

restrictions. The ability of CLTs to achieve this is in part dependent upon their acquisition of resources – land and finance – that enable them to develop affordable housing.

## Acquiring resources and developing housing

The preceding section highlighted the community-focused motivations of CLTs. Research with CLT board members has revealed that they are often driven by pragmatic concerns over the nature of local housing markets and the inability of those with local connections to access suitable, affordable housing (Moore, 2021). In order to provide this, CLTs must acquire resources and navigate obstacles of planning, land identification and acquisition, funding and construction.

CLTs funded the acquisition of land and development of housing through different sources, including grant sources and loans that enabled them to purchase land, low-cost land transfers from public bodies, or purchase or transfer of land from sympathetic landowners that recognised local housing problems. Some CLTs obtained grants from Homes England, the national grant-making body for affordable housing, though in order to do so were required to become a Registered Provider<sup>1</sup> or to partner with an existing Registered Provider (typically a housing association). The process of becoming a Registered Provider has historically been difficult for CLTs due to the complexity of the application process, typically designed for professional and existing organisations, as well as ongoing regulatory requirements (Moore, 2018). As such, many CLTs have partnered with housing associations, who access grant on their behalf. In these partnerships, CLTs have typically retained ownership of the land, leasing this in exchange for a ground rent to housing associations who develop and manage housing and accrue rental revenue. While these partnerships have been beneficial to CLTs, particularly in relieving the burden on volunteers and opening access to grant, they also imply a different set of financial relationships where land and housing values are shared with housing associations rather than captured solely within structures of community ownership.

CLTs were also able to mobilise their local focus in order to acquire key resources, including low-cost transfer of land from sympathetic landowners who were keen to ensure that their assets were used for community benefit and, in some cases, saw the effect of local housing problems on local employees. CLTs were perceived as locally rooted bodies who were committed to meeting the housing needs of those with local and

functional attachments to place. In interviews, it was this commitment to meeting local needs that unlocked access to key resources, highlighting the importance of networks of shared affinity and kinship.

While CLTs are often framed as correcting the problems of the private housing market, there are also circumstances in which CLTs have developed and sold market housing to cross-subsidise their affordable provision. In these instances, CLTs have encountered funding gaps and used the revenue of homes sold on the open market to ensure they are able to provide more affordable homes where exchange values are restricted. This highlights a contradiction, with some CLTs that were formed to remedy the problems of the private housing market in fact partly reliant upon it to fund their work. This mirrors the observations of Argüelles et al. (2017: 39), who argued that new forms of community economy that aim to correct societal injustices often do so ‘while ignoring/accepting or even reproducing the structural (socio-economic) conditions that feed these problems’. It also suggests that the intent of CLTs is often related to seeking affordable housing tenures for their defined group of beneficiaries rather than as a direct challenge to the system itself.

This does not necessarily diminish the contribution of CLTs to, on a practical level, affordable housing provision, and on a more conceptual level to postcapitalist transitions. Indeed, given the severity of rural housing pressures, increased provision of a range of housing tenures may help to alleviate these problems. Nor are these cases representative of every circumstance – there is significant variation between the way that CLTs are funded and the housing that they provide. Rather, it highlights the complex, and in some cases inter-dependent, relationship between the motivations and attributes of CLTs and the dominant exchange value logics of private land and housing markets that they are often conceptualised as opposing, including benefiting from the benevolence of larger landowners and utilising the private market to fund affordable development. The complex relationship between CLTs and the private market is further highlighted when considering their disposal models for housing, as detailed in the following section.

## Postcapitalist housing provision

The alternative arrangements for managing and benefiting from the value of land and housing are distinguishing features of CLTs. Their purpose of holding land in trust and limiting wealth accumulation through housing

closely aligns with postcapitalist visions for de-commodified land and housing markets that limit exchange value and the extraction of surplus value for private gain.

Many CLTs achieve this through the provision of rental housing, often at state-defined 'Affordable Rents' of 80 per cent of market value where funded by Homes England grant, or through forms of shared, limited equity homeownership. The latter models typically involved CLTs retaining freehold of land and selling leaseholds to occupiers that meet local occupancy criteria, using the lease to enforce and maintain affordability through restrictions on resale prices and/or retention of a portion of equity. Purchasers would typically need to raise a deposit and access mortgage finance to fund their portion of the equity, as with purchase of 'conventional' homeownership products. In one case, a CLT sold the freehold of the land, using planning covenants to limit the resale price to a third of open market value, ensuring that the housing developed by a CLT would be subject to a permanent discount relative to market rates (Paterson and Dayson, 2011). In this case, the affordability produced through CLTs, while permanently discounted relative to market rates, is tied to and shaped by the dynamics of the private market.

The CLT model of homeownership has been recognised for its contribution to affordable housing provision in rural communities, helping to provide much-needed affordable homes for local families and workers with recognised housing needs (Forsyth, 2023). However, CLTs have encountered legal and financial challenges through the development and disposal of housing, which has influenced their decommodification of housing.

CLTs have been particularly challenged by the prevailing system of leasehold housing. CLTs, and other community-led housing groups and charitable housing providers, use leasehold to maintain the affordability of housing in perpetuity, often collecting ground rents to fund the work of a CLT and servicing of community amenities and common spaces that form part of developments. However, recent abuses of leasehold housing in England in the private market, including collection of high ground rents and service charges, have led to ongoing and proposed policy reform aimed at prohibiting the collection of ground rents and the creation of new residential long leases on homes, in addition to interest in extending and enhancing the process of leasehold enfranchisement, where residents are able to purchase their freehold and thus assume full ownership of land and property (Wilson and Barton, 2022). In many ways, were these provisions to come into force, this may challenge some inequities in landownership and the extraction of rent by landed elites.

However, these proposed reforms have caused concern for CLTs, as any change to their ability to retain freeholds may be detrimental to their enforcement of affordability restrictions. Many CLTs have historically been exempt from this, as exemptions have applied to homes developed on rural exception sites and homes funded by Government grant, but this does not apply to all. While these policy developments are ongoing, the Government has begun to acknowledge that the use of leaseholds by CLTs may fundamentally differ from their use by private developers and has exempted ‘community housing leases’ – including CLTs – from a recent prohibition on the collection of residential ground rents in new development. The Community Land Trust Network continues to lobby for exemption from leasehold enfranchisement for all CLTs.

The ongoing development of these policy provisions highlights that CLTs are emmeshed within a broader political and economic system, which can affect their ability to challenge – whether intentionally or otherwise – market-based housing logics. Similarly, though, it also highlights that the state and its legislative system can be utilised to help codify the scope of CLTs. While there is a wide literature on the risks that institutionalisation poses to radicalised forms of civil society, whose transformative intent can be co-opted and diluted through expansion and incorporation into policy frameworks (Lang and Stoeger, 2018; Sørvoll and Bengtsson, 2018), potential exemption from leasehold enfranchisement at a time when it is outlawed for others may support incremental change.

## Conclusion

CLTs have emerged as an important community-led solution to rural housing problems. They reflect community endeavour, self-organised outside the parameters set by the state, aimed at tackling the injustices of rural housing markets. Their appetite to restrict opportunity for wealth accumulation through housing may serve to enhance affordability and enhance access to housing for populations otherwise marginalised and displaced from rural communities.

The restrictions on the exchange value of housing that CLTs impose are often perceived as aligning with postcapitalist visions for land and housing, where assets are de-commodified, individual benefit is reduced for the benefit of a collective, and where communities retain collective ownership and control of assets. The use of leaseholds to impose resale restrictions and the acquisition of land from private landownership aligns CLTs with this vision of change. However, there are tensions within this

with respect to the influence of state legislation on the use of leaseholds, the need for blended funding models that necessitate adoption of market-based logics, and the use of disposal models that are inherently tied to market fluctuations.

These tensions highlight the challenges encountered by alternative models of economic organisation, particularly within political contexts that actively encourage private consumption of housing and land resources. As mentioned in the introduction, while garden cities provide an inspiration for the CLT concept, such initiatives also found it difficult to maintain their recovery of land value in the light of political reforms that agitated against the use of leaseholds, along with demand from residents to purchase freeholds of their homes (Lewis, 2015). The longer-term perspectives of residents and their commitment to the ideological underpinnings of CLTs will provide an interesting avenue for future study.

A further tension, under-examined in the literature, is whether CLTs may themselves represent a form of enclosure, as benefits from their work – the accrual of land values, the allocation of homes – are secured for their defined group of beneficiaries. This is not to diminish their work or question their motives; rather, to highlight that resolution of the significant, longstanding rural housing problems is likely to require more large-scale interventions that run in tandem with community-led initiative. This could involve adapting the principles of CLTs for large-scale development, as happens in France where the economic model of the CLT is utilised by public authorities and represents a more ‘top-down’ process in order to achieve scale, with limited community involvement. Alternative mechanisms could include land value taxation, presented as a means of taxing wealth and ensuring that uplifts in land value can be captured for public benefit (Hughes et al., 2020). However, such a form of taxation requires ideological and political commitment from politicians and policymakers, in the absence of which smaller, incremental initiatives such as CLTs may be one approach of tackling localised injustices in landownership.

As CLTs reconcile their potentially transformative models – even if those involved do not always think of their work in this way – we might conceptualise CLTs as mirroring Chatterton’s (2016: 205) description of postcapitalist agitation that seeks incremental economic change while ‘working symbiotically within existing structures’. Following Peredo and McLean’s (2019) analysis of CLTs, CLTs may offer resistance to the commoditisation of housing while simultaneously reproducing neoliberal spaces and models of economic organisation, such as the development and sale of market housing that reflect systems of exchange value and



individual benefit. As they describe, CLTs can be ‘seen as part of an existing resistance movement to the effects of those systems, however resilient and successful that resistance turns out to be’. CLTs offer an alternative form of collective land ownership that contrasts with private, enclosed ownership models, and hint at a postcapitalist housing transition, however intentional or conflicting their motives and development may be.

## Note

- 1 Registered Providers are the main providers of social and affordable housing in England. They are part of the ‘third sector’ – independent from Government but registered with it in order to access Government grant funding.

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# Unpacking the energy commons

Thomas Bauwens and Robert Wade

## Introduction

The reliance of human societies on fossil fuels poses fundamental threats to their survival. Current efforts to transition towards low-carbon energy systems prolong the business-as-usual, market-based approaches to energy as a commodity, rooted in the capitalist imperative for profit maximisation and continuous economic growth (Byrne et al., 2009). Business-as-usual advocates have pointed out economic trends, such as the decreasing cost of solar power, as evidence that the transition to clean energy is inevitable (for example, Seba, 2014; Nijse et al., 2023). In their view, the world is on an irreversible course towards decarbonising economic growth. As noted by Dawson (2022), this view is shared by influential organisations such as the World Bank, which promotes ‘inclusive green growth’, and even Greenpeace, which declared after the 2015 UN Climate Summit that the end of fossil fuels is near and must be hastened. Proponents of green capitalism believe that the shift to renewable energy is already in progress and will not disrupt the essential aspects of capitalist modernity.

However, evidence suggests that market-based energy transitions do not deliver the promised outcomes. Global coal usage has doubled since the mid-1980s, and natural gas usage has increased worldwide, with energy produced from gas expanding at a faster pace than renewable energy. Oil consumption is increasing globally. Modern renewables (excluding hydropower) currently account for only 7.6 per cent of the total final energy consumption, whereas fossil fuels account for 78.9 per cent (REN21, 2023). Despite a recent reduction in global carbon emissions related to the COVID-19 pandemic, overall greenhouse gas emissions continue to increase. In other words, the current market-driven

initiatives aimed at transitioning to renewable energy do not achieve the required speed and magnitude of change needed to address the climate crisis, thus far representing an addition to the existing system of fossil fuel dependence rather than its replacement (York and Bell, 2019). The vested interests of fossil fuel corporations in maintaining the status quo explain some of the barriers to a rapid shift towards a zero-carbon society (Moe, 2015; Grasso, 2019). Furthermore, despite renewables costing less than fossil fuels, profits remain high in the fossil-fuel industry. Since profit, not cost, drives investment, the global capitalist system remains largely intent on burning fossil fuels well beyond safe thresholds for humanity (Christophers, 2024).

This chapter argues that transitions to low-carbon energy require rethinking social relations with energy (Byrne et al., 2009; Baker, 2017; Wolsink, 2020; Ritzel et al., 2022). Instead of viewing such transitions as mere technology questions, they have the potential to trigger sociopolitical changes, which can lead to collective benefits and empowerment in the form of more socially equitable energy production and distribution. The roots of this discourse can be traced back to the 1970s, when the Alternative Technology movement advocated ‘soft energy paths’ (Lovins, 1977), comprising greater societal participation in energy systems drawing on renewable energy sources. Specifically, this chapter aims to apply the idea of the commons to energy (see also Burke, 2021). It examines four material realms of potential and existing energy commoning practices: socialised energy resource rights, cooperative ownership of energy production technologies, community-based peer-to-peer energy sharing and consumption initiatives, and circular energy commons. It argues that a prefigurative politics and research for a just, green and democratically managed transition towards the energy commons should consider the strategic interlinkages between each of these realms.

The remainder of this chapter is structured as follows: it first outlines energy as a commons; it then examines the realm of natural energy resources; the focus then shifts to the realm of energy production technologies, before energy exchange and use, and the downstream and upstream energy operations are considered. Broad conclusions are offered at the end.

## Energy as a commons

Commons are most frequently considered within a long tradition of wider academic debates on institutions for sustainable natural resource governance (Cumming et al., 2020). Debates in this field centre on whether the state, market or community (or hybrids of these) is best suited as an institution for sustainable natural resource management (Lemos and Agrawal, 2006). For example, historical debates and geopolitical tensions have arisen over the ownership and control of coal and oil resources and their associated industries (Bina, 2006; Fine, 2014; Slevin, 2016). Frequently, these debates centre on the opposition between the state and market forms of governance.

Building on and critiquing earlier work in institutional economics and political science (Samuelson, 1954; Buchanan, 1965; Hardin, 1968), Elinor Ostrom's (1990, 2010) seminal work demonstrated that communities can and do collectively organise to sustainably manage common-pool resources, beyond the market and state. Furthermore, these arrangements can apply to a wide range of resources or relations, suggesting that the commons are better understood as a process or practice ('commoning') than as an object or resource (Bollier, 2020; Linebaugh, 2009). Therefore, the term 'commons' refers to the social practices and governance rules through which a community of producers or users collectively creates and manages a resource (Ostrom, 1990).

Marxian scholars extend and resituate Ostrom's work on the commons within the broader context of capital accumulation, and 'see the commons as essential to both capitalist reproduction and to the development of anti-capitalist alternatives' (Hardt and Negri, 2009; Harvey, 2011). Often juxtaposed with capital (Linebaugh, 2009; Wall, 2014), the commons in this more expansive sense not only refer to specific natural resource systems but also to all of the natural and social world produced and reproduced outside of the capital relation, ranging from the social and cultural resources and relations inherited from our predecessors to the air we breathe (Karakilic, 2022). In this sense, we can characterise the commons and capital as two distinct but interlinked autopoietic social systems whose goal is their own reproduction (De Angelis, 2013). The sustainability of the capitalist system relies on continued accumulation and economic growth, which undermines its very existence due to the crossing of social and ecological thresholds (Steffen et al., 2015). Since commons do not rely on continued expansion for their reproduction, they are arguably more aligned with post-growth futures (van den Bergh and Kallis, 2012; De Angelis, 2013; Bauwens et al., 2020).

Capital and commons are deeply interconnected and can ‘feed’ off of each other (De Angelis, 2013). The history of capitalism has arguably been one of increasing enclosure or co-optation of commons by capital, for example ‘primitive accumulation’ (Marx, 2011). From the historical enclosure of British forests (Linebaugh, 2009; Wood, 2017), to present-day suggestions to privatise space, open access or common resources always face prospects of enclosure within a capitalist system as new sources of ‘Cheap Nature’ are sought to fuel capital accumulation (Harvey, 2004; Moore, 2015). Fortunately, enclosure is not an inexorable movement. Polanyi (1944) documented historical swings between commodification and counter-movements to de-commodify critical social and natural resources so they can be managed and used for the common good. Examples of successful counter-movements include nineteenth-century Poor Law Reforms in England and the twentieth-century social democratic welfare state (Burawoy, 2013). In the face of ecological collapse, the third historical wave of counter-movements may be focusing on reclaiming and decommodifying the natural world.

Strategies to push back, protect and develop the commons are receiving increasing attention (Barlow et al., 2022). Key among these are sites of reproduction of everyday life (Federici, 2018):

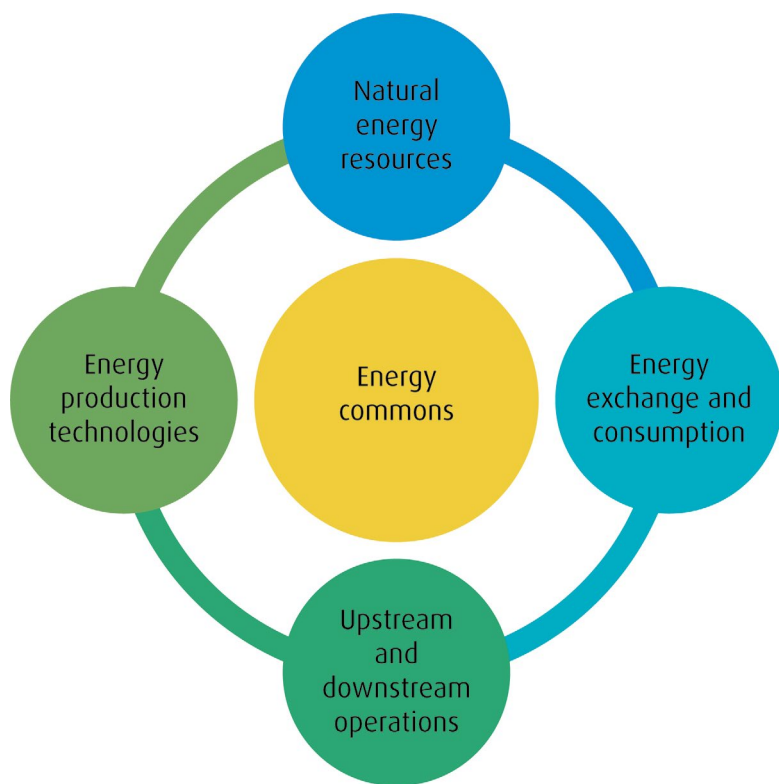
The social reproduction commons are those commons developed out of the needs of its participants to reproduce some basic aspects of their own lives: health, food, water, education, housing, care, energy. The development of these commons is strategically crucial in developing emancipatory and progressive alternatives. Such commons must address people’s basic needs and that [sic] empower them to refuse the demands of capital by offering access to alternative means of life.

(De Angelis, 2013: 614)

Systems of energy provision are critical to the reproduction of everyday life, yet our fossil fuel-based energy systems are largely dominated by the logic of capital (with the state playing greater or lesser roles in different contexts).

However, the advent of technically and economically viable renewable energy systems heralds the possibility for new terrains of struggle around the energy commons. This refers to the social practices and governance rules through which a community of producers or users co-create and co-manage resources related to energy production, distribution and consumption, with the aim of enhancing energy access,

efficiency and sustainability. However, when we talk about energy as a common (or commodity), what specifically are we referring to? It is possible to conceive of various emergent social relations and property rights arrangements that apply to renewable energy development (van der Horst and Vermeylen, 2008). These can be broadly split into four socio-technical-ecological realms (see Figure 17.1): (1) social relations and property rights to use the land or resources (for example, solar, wind, geothermal flows); (2) social relations and property rights to use and develop the technology that harnesses these flows and produces electricity or other useful forms of energy (for example, solar panels and wind turbines); (3) social relations and property rights to exchange and consume the produced energy; and (4) social relations and property rights to mine and extract terrestrial resources and minerals used to harness renewable energies, as well as to dispose of the waste produced by the energy industry. In the next sections, we discuss how existing renewable energy development practices tend towards commodification as the



**Figure 17. 1.** The four realms of the energy commons. © Authors.



dominant relation in each of these four socio-technical-ecological realms. We also discuss existing and hypothetical prospects for commoning to supplant commodification in each.

## Natural energy resources: from assetisation and resource-grabbing to socialisation of renewable resources

The commodification or commoning processes of energy begin with the natural energy resources themselves. Natural energy resources are easily conceived of as commons belonging to all, because they are not humanly created but are rather ‘free gifts’ of nature. Historically, the energy commons played a pivotal role in meeting people’s energy needs. Before the onset of industrialisation in the late eighteenth century, humankind predominantly depended on muscle power of domesticated animals and of humans themselves as sources of energy for agriculture and industry (Pirani, 2018). These were complemented by mechanical energy from windmills or water. People used biomass fuels, specifically firewood and charcoal, for their domestic energy needs. Firewood served various purposes such as cooking, lighting, baking and providing heat. People would collect or chop wood from hedgerows and forests, many of which were communal resources accessible to all (Thompson, 1991). The spread of capitalist wage labour and the acceleration of urbanisation in Western societies during the industrialisation era, combined with the waves of privatisation of common property, known as the ‘enclosure’ movement, disconnected people from the natural environment upon which they relied for accessing energy, and undermined the conditions for the continuation of these energy commons. Energy carriers were then traded commercially to townspeople, who transitioned from active energy prosumers to passive consumers. These processes turned wood, coal and other fuels into commodities. The energy carriers associated with the ‘second industrial revolution’ electricity and oil, while initially regarded as commodities (Pirani, 2018), also became central to state-led public energy systems, which played a significant role in energy production and distribution.

The fossil fuel industry has historically operated under the principle of the rule of capture, which holds that individuals extracting natural resources from a property are considered the owners of those resources, regardless of their movement from their original underground location (Dawson, 2022). This concept likened oil extraction to capturing wild animals, suggesting that the legal ownership of oil belonged to those

who could extract it, even if it came from beneath another person's land. It was not until the 1880s, with the development of a more precise understanding of reservoir geology, that it became clear that oil resided within stable reservoir rocks across specific areas. However, by this point, the rule of capture had already become an established legal doctrine. Today, oil resources are owned and controlled along a spectrum ranging from concession systems where resource rights are transferred to private developers, to more state-centred contractual systems in which the state retains ownership and control rights to the resource throughout operations (Ghandi and Lin, 2014). By and large, greater retention of public ownership and greater state involvement allows for the state to capture more of the benefits (or 'government take'). This suggests that the extent of state involvement reflects the general power of developers vis-à-vis the state (Slevin, 2016). Indeed, the move from concession systems to contractual systems was associated with anti-colonial geopolitical movements in countries such as Libya, Venezuela and Iran, and the formation of OPEC (Slevin, 2016).

Resources such as wind, wave, solar and geothermal energy represent a massive new resource frontier in the context of energy transitions. For example, it is estimated that annual global wind resource potential stands at 560 PWh onshore and 315 PWh offshore (Eurek et al., 2017). This is compared with world total final energy consumption which reached approximately 115 PWh in 2019 (IEA, 2021). These resources could be subject to various ownership regimes, but their ephemeral and intangible nature has tended to blur the arrangements around their control and ownership. Although it is not possible to formally privatise the wind or solar radiation (for example), in most cases, landowners can today control access to renewable energy resources, and can therefore be understood as proxy renewable resource owners (Hartman, 2009; Alexander, 2011; Bäumlér, 2017; Marshall, 2018; McDermott Hughes, 2021; Traldi, 2021; Wade and Ellis, 2022). This is evidenced by disputes over 'wind theft' between neighbours related to wake effects between turbines (Kaffine and Worley, 2010; van der Horst and Vermeulen, 2010; Rule, 2014; Lifshitz, 2015). Similar proxy landownership arrangements are likely emerging for solar and geothermal flows in many jurisdictions too (Abesser et al., 2018). Indeed, a recently passed law in Texas bestows ownership of geothermal energy explicitly upon the landowner (Cariaga, 2023). Geothermal energy in Ireland is also attached to landownership (Oireachtas Library & Research Service, 2021). In the US, the Solar Rights Alliance lobbies to enable land and property owners to harvest solar energy resources.

Through their land rights, landowners can extract a fee, thereby assetising or commodifying these resources in the form of rental payments. In the case of wind specifically, these rent payments are not associated with the previous value of the underlying land (Pondera Consult, 2013; Ecorys, 2018) but are rather directly derived from control over access to wind resource. In other words, the possibility to extract these resources boosts the underlying land value (Haan and Simmler, 2018). Under certain circumstances, landowners in these situations command large power in the development process and can demand high rents. In Germany, for example, landowners have been reported to demand super-rents of €80,000 per wind turbine per annum or more (Agora Energiewende, 2018). Solar leases tend to be higher in value than wind leases because they often entail a change in underlying land use and therefore involve a compensatory element.

In other contexts, landowner power is weaker and their ability to bargain with developers is lessened. For example, in the case of Brazilian wind power, Traldi (2021) argues that the low levels of rent, the embedded rights to renew leases and the exclusion of landowners from the leased lands amounts to a case of ‘accumulation by dispossession’. In some instances, the state facilitates developers in acquiring land through, for example, expropriation (Copena and Simón, 2018; Franquesa, 2022). These dynamics have also been termed ‘green grabbing’ and are most frequently reported in the Global South, but also more recently in the Global North (Siamanta, 2019; Hashimshony Yaffe and Segal-Klein, 2023). Green grabbing refers to the appropriation of land, resources and territories in the name of sustainable development (Fairhead et al., 2012). This concept highlights how certain actors, including governments, corporations and international organisations, may use environmental justifications to dispossess local communities of their traditional lands and resources. There have been trends towards increasing expropriation of land by state-backed developers. In these instances, the ability of landowners to assetise the resource is limited and it instead represents a pure grab of a use value. However, since landowners and land rent play a (potentially) key role in these dynamics, Alonso Serna (2022) suggests using the term ‘value grabbing’ as a mediating concept.

Nonetheless, there are several examples of practices whereby access to renewable resources is not governed by a private and exclusionary logic, but rather one encompassing notions of the energy commons. Some state landowners play important roles in energy transitions, such as Ireland’s peat and forestry boards in developing wind energy. While these often act commercially, an argument can be made that their

benefit represents the public interest. Similarly, since the state often owns seabed, offshore energy developments represent a proxy example of state renewable resource ownership and rent appropriation. The ratio of ‘government take’ from these projects will likely be a key issue going forward in evaluating the public benefit obtained from these resources (Slevin, 2016). Some authors have suggested explicitly nationalising (onshore) renewable resources like wind (Bäumler, 2017; Schmidt-Eichstaedt, 2018; McDermott Hughes, 2021). Some of the purported benefits of such a model include more rational spatial coordination of renewable energy generation and redistribution of rents to impacted communities. In Germany, geothermal energy access is governed by state mining authorities and not by landowners (Agemar et al., 2014). Heilongjiang province in China also represents an example where ownership of climatic resources, such as wind and solar radiation, have been severed from the land and nationalised (Chen and Cui, 2013). While state ownership and control of renewable resources is likely preferable to exclusive private ownership, it is unclear what specific benefits or empowerment effect this would have for local communities impacted by the harvesting of these resources (Wade, 2023).

However, in some instances, renewable energy resources are collectively managed at a local level. The increasingly common practice of landowner pooling is used by commercial wind energy developers to simplify the spatial coordination of projects and avoid intra-neighbour conflicts. For example, the Dutch Wind Energy Association recently added this to its best practice guidelines (Nederlandse WindEnergie Associatie, 2020). Sometimes, on the other hand, landowners take a more proactive approach themselves. For example, Alonso Serna (2022) documents Mexican landowners collectively organising to enhance their benefits as wind owners. Several authors have suggested different legal mechanisms to embody these landowner commons such as forced unitisation (Vollprecht, 2017; DuVivier, 2021). Lockman (2023) goes one step further and suggests that forced unitisation can be extended to residents and not just landowners. This is in line with ‘community wind rights’ proposed by Wade and Ellis (2022). These community wind rights could provide communities with a veto on projects and an ability to manage how their wind resources are used. Community property rights like this could fundamentally rearrange rural power relations with respect to energy generation (Doyle, 2023), potentially bringing distributive and procedural justice to impacted communities as well as supporting community-based initiatives such as those discussed below.

## Energy production technologies: the roles of renewable energy communities

A second realm in which commodification and commoning processes of energy occur relates to the means of production – the energy generation technologies such as wind turbines or solar panels. The commodification process of energy production technologies manifests itself in industrial-scale renewable energy projects: the extensive technological artefacts created to harvest renewable energy on a large scale functionally preempt commons management of these resources. Large wind farms and solar plants are, at present, a product of concentrated financial and political power. Such industrial-scale forms of renewable energy are very rarely established through the democratic action of communities; instead, they tend to reflect today's overwhelming concentration of power in the hands of large corporations (Velasco-Herrejón et al., 2022). They generate benefits for developers and their shareholders rather than for the communities in and near which they are situated, often creating profound social divisions among local communities over the real and perceived economic, environmental and health impacts of renewable energy technologies (Velasco-Herrejon and Bauwens, 2020).

The phenomenon of energy communities is central to the idea of renewable energy technology as a commons. Energy communities describe initiatives where citizens come together to tackle diverse aspects of low carbon energy transitions, including the development and collective ownership of projects to generate heat and power from renewable energy sources (Bauwens et al., 2022a). Some of the earliest frontrunners in renewable energy development, such as wind turbines, were local community-owned projects, although they used to play marginal roles. Countries like Denmark and Germany are often-cited examples of this (Mey and Diesendorf, 2017). However, in the past few years, energy communities have sparked increasing interest and started to leave the niches to which they were relegated for decades. Schwanitz et al. (2023) estimate that there are more than 10,500 of such initiatives in Europe. By 2050 they could contribute almost two fifths of the electricity produced by citizens (Kampman et al., 2016). The development of inexpensive generation technologies that are reasonably efficient and easy to operate on a small scale in conjunction with the implementation of public policies supporting the massive deployment of renewable energy sources have contributed to their emergence. These communities have played central roles in mobilising financial capital for the transformation of energy systems in several European countries (Bauwens, 2019; Punt et

al., 2021; Dudka et al., 2023). Moreover, research suggests that they may also contribute to local support for renewable energy projects (Bauwens and Devine-Wright, 2018).

The European Union recently introduced its first ever policy supports for renewable energy communities, which it defines broadly as organisations which require a legal entity as a community umbrella, must be voluntary and open, should be primarily value-driven rather than focusing on financial profits, and require specific governance (that is, ‘effective control’ by certain participants). Although in the case of wind energy, the ownership and control over production is increasingly exclusive as turbine sizes increase, reducing the ability for local actors to purchase them (Bauwens et al., 2016). By contrast, cost reductions for solar panels make investment for communities more feasible than ever before. Shallow geothermal energy policy is increasingly targeted at individual or household prosumers, who are incentivised to harvest this resource using heat pump technology. Deeper geothermal sources, on the other hand, tend to require larger capital investments.

Because of their democratic, citizen-based control and their not-for-profit orientation, energy communities prefigure a just, green and democratically managed transition towards the energy commons (Giotitsas et al., 2020). In many countries, rural areas are the preferred place for the emergence of community-based energy projects. The energy transition currently under way can ideally offer new development opportunities for rural areas, with their abundance of renewable energy sources (sun, wind, water) and land availability (Magnani et al., 2017). In addition, energy communities have the potential to address local economic and social challenges in rural areas, such as reinforcing rural community cohesion, common identity and social trust. Unlike large business-led initiatives, they strengthen the local control of territorial resources and draw on local knowledge and networks. They can generate local wealth and abundance by harnessing renewable resources to produce energy. Accordingly, they can facilitate the emergence and development of so-called ‘pluriversal technologies’, which ‘embrace ontological and epistemological diversity by being co-designed, co-produced and co-owned by the inhabitants of the socio-cultural territory in which they are embedded’ (Velasco-Herrejón et al., 2022: 11). In most instances, the energy produced by energy communities is sold on the grid for a profit which can be deployed to address local needs. However, oftentimes energy communities can be exclusionary of individuals or groups who do not have the financial (or other) resources to participate, and are therefore sometimes lacking in elements of solidarity.

## Energy exchange and use: the promise of peer-to-peer energy sharing for solidarity

Moving from the means of energy production to the means of energy transmission, distribution and use reveals another frontier for energy commodification or commons. Historically, diverse local producers, including individual entrepreneurs, local communities and municipal governments, have played a crucial role in setting up and operating electricity grids. In the early twentieth century, large rural and mountain areas of Europe and North America still had no modern energy infrastructure, and private and publicly owned energy companies were generally unwilling or unable to provide people and businesses with access to electricity, gas or heat, typically because of unsatisfactory profit expectations or limited available capital. As a result, in many cases, it was local cooperatives that took the initiative and invested in generation, distribution, and sometimes even in transmission assets. Electrification in numerous Alpine valleys and in wide parts of the inland US occurred in this way (Rossetto et al., 2022).

However, as the demand for electricity increased and new applications emerged, local producers and suppliers decided to collaborate and merge their mini-grids, so as to share their infrastructural costs and reduce the risk of failures in supplying their customers (van der Horst and Vermeulen, 2008). These mergers spurred economies of scale and led ultimately to the centralisation of production. In many countries, state authorities eventually nationalised monopolies. Electricity generation, distribution and transmission grids were commonly owned and controlled by states for much of the twentieth century, operating on a not-for-profit and public welfare basis.

A wave of electricity sector liberalisation and privatisation followed the oil crisis in the 1970s. This was led by Chile, with many Global North and South countries following suit (Sen, 2014). While states continue to play a key role in managing grids, liberalisation frequently entailed an unbundling of transmission and distribution from generation and retail, opening the latter two to market entrants and, with them, competition. With the aim of increasing pressure to deliver electricity efficiently and at low cost, electricity was rendered a commodity. As with any commodity, this means that those who cannot afford it are susceptible to privation and energy poverty. Greening electricity grids does not address this issue and, in some instances, can even exacerbate it. For example, as fossil-based domestic or customary fuels such as turf are banned to clean the electricity mix, this deprives dependent rural consumers on a cheap heat

source (Bresnihan and Brodie, 2023). Furthermore, it is unclear whether liberalisation has even led to reduced energy prices (Sen, Nepal and Jamasb, 2016).

In some contexts such as Germany, remunicipalisation of local energy grids has occurred in order to bring electricity distribution under public control and a not-for-profit logic (Becker, 2017). Technological innovations, including in micro-grid technologies and digitisation, offer possibilities for more localised and community-centred approaches to the distribution and consumption of energy once it is generated (Giotitsas et al., 2015, 2020, 2022; van Summeren et al., 2020). Indeed, the EU's definitions of 'Citizen energy communities' and 'Renewable energy communities' in the recast Renewable Energy Directive (RED II) and Internal Electricity Market Directive refer to activities well beyond generation including aggregation, energy storage, distribution, consumption, provision of energy related services, supply and sharing.

Local use of renewable energy has some economic advantages, because it does not require the construction of lines and inefficient transmission across large distances. Furthermore, community and local approaches to electricity demand response can potentially provide greater flexibility than market-based approaches, thus supporting grid integration of renewables (Melville et al., 2017). These activities can be organised according to various logics (Montakhabi et al., 2023). Many peer-to-peer (P2P) electricity schemes operate according to market logics with a narrow focus on finding an optimal balance between energy supply and demand. This misses the opportunity to embed energy sharing in more commons-based institutional arrangements which decommodify energy (Georgarakis et al., 2021). For example, community-based virtual power plants attempt to inculcate a community logic in their institutional setup (van Summeren, 2022). These hold potential to create energy commons along the principle of self-organised 'reciprocity in perpetuity' and a needs-based distribution of energy rather than one guided by individual utility maximisation (Fournier, 2013: 435). Indeed, research on P2P energy sharing in India and the Netherlands found that people are not purely driven to share energy by desire for monetary returns but instead are motivated by other non-monetary factors, and that this is influenced by the web of social relations within which they are embedded (Singh et al., 2018; Georgarakis et al., 2021).

Community retrofitting schemes can also represent more collective approaches to energy consumption practices, depending on how they are organised. In more 'advanced' energy transition contexts, where more difficult sectors such as residential heating and transport are critical



challenge areas for decarbonisation, more community-centric approaches hold great potential. Community micro-grids also hold potential for electrifying rural areas in contexts such as Africa or India (Murenzi and Ustun, 2015; Nathan et al., 2022). It is often in Global South contexts such as these that the final realm of energy commodification is felt most acutely.

## **Upstream and downstream energy operations: the circular energy commons**

Considering upstream and downstream operations in the energy supply chain opens other realms for energy commodification and commoning. Upstream operations encompass the mining and extraction of terrestrial resources and minerals used to harness renewable energies, from steel to lithium to rare earth elements. Downstream operations concern the management of the waste streams produced by the energy industry. These waste streams can take various forms, such as emissions from power plants, spent nuclear fuel, or hazardous materials from oil and gas extraction. Both dimensions can be the sources of additional commodification processes and exploitative practices, in addition to the dispossession processes stemming from the exploitation and control of the energy resources themselves, described in the section ‘Natural energy resources’. On the one hand, extraction often occurs within a wider framework of land control that commodifies and separates land from labour, thereby enabling the creation of an extractive regime where technologies and infrastructures connect local sites of extraction with wider commodity chains (Kramarz et al., 2021). On the other hand, commodification of land encourages the use of nature as a depository for waste and pollution (Martinez, 2017).

At the extractive end of the energy supply chain, although the manufacturing supply chain for renewable energy is cleaner than that of fossil fuels, industrial mining for the metals and minerals used in renewable energy technologies leave enduring impacts on local communities, ecosystems, organisms and landscapes. These impacts include, for instance, the removal and usurpation of native species of flora and fauna, the diversion and extraction of surface and subsurface water, and land, water and air pollution. Furthermore, the concentration of raw materials essential for producing wind turbines, solar photovoltaics (PV) and lithium-ion batteries in a few select countries creates a situation prone to rent-seeking behaviours, similar to those observed in locations

like the Democratic Republic of Congo (Church and Crawford, 2018). Manufacturing wind turbines involves the extraction of heavy metals like lead and the substantial use of concrete. Similarly, the production of solar PV panels relies on obtaining metals such as copper, lead, nickel, zinc, iron, aluminium and other minerals, leading to the dispossession of local populations and communities (Fischhendler et al., 2016). Furthermore, there is extensive evidence of displacement resulting from lithium mining, crucial for manufacturing lithium-ion batteries. For instance, in the 'lithium triangle' encompassing the Salar de Atacama in Chile, the Salar de Uyuni in Bolivia and the Province of Jujuy in Argentina, mining activities have caused the physical displacement of local and Indigenous communities, frequently resulting in violent conflicts (Lorca et al., 2022). Similar processes have taken place in the cobalt and copper mines located in the Democratic Republic of Congo (Geenen, 2014).

At the tail end of the energy supply chain, the lack of adequate and effective rules for handling hazardous waste, in many jurisdictions where downstream operations and waste disposal practises take place, exacerbates risks for local populations and ecosystems, given the toxicity of wind, solar and long-life energy storage technologies (Kramarz et al., 2021). Solar and wind energy can produce hazardous waste streams, especially large volumes of electronic waste (Cross and Murray, 2018). For instance, cadmium compounds are known for their harmful effects on fish and other animal species (McDonald and Pearce, 2010). Similar concerns arise regarding the disposal of metals from lithium-ion batteries at the end of their life cycle, which involves incinerating the batteries (a process known as pyrometallurgical separation) in order to enable manufacturers to recover valuable metals (usually nickel, copper, cobalt) by burning away organic matter, plastic and lithium. Batteries that lack significant quantities of valuable metals are often sent to landfills, underscoring the necessity for improved governance in this area. Beyond the European Union, where there is a mandate for companies to recycle less profitable parts of lithium and regular batteries, regulations are generally insufficient. Australia, as an example, lacks regulations specifically addressing lithium battery recycling, resulting in approximately 98.3 per cent of batteries being disposed of in landfills (Goe and Gaustad, 2016).

Addressing these issues will entail forging effective transnational governance mechanisms of minerals and metals for renewable energy, in which energy supply chains are managed as common resources across national boundaries (Auld et al., 2018). Frequently mentioned among the factors inhibiting such transnational governance regimes are the lack of information about resource extraction and disposal at the up- and

downstream ends of the supply chain, an increasing concentration of power hindering transparency, accountability and effective governance across multiple value chains, and regulatory gaps, silences and inconsistencies that sustain the kinds of ‘race-to-the-bottom’ practices observed within and across national jurisdictions (Kramarz et al., 2021). Tackling these empirical and policy voids in knowledge and information will be pivotal to advance transnational governance regimes of circular energy commons.

## Conclusion

The commodified energy system quintessentially exemplifies capitalist social relations, exacerbated in the last decades by economic globalisation and financialisation. We argue that energy commons and commoning at multiple governance levels can play a crucial role in countering commodification trends, and contribute to creating low-carbon and socially just energy systems. This chapter concludes by arguing that prefigurative, postcapitalist politics of energy in rural places and, more broadly, the construction of postcapitalist futures (Gibson-Graham, 2006; Chatterton and Pusey, 2020; Dallyn and Frenzel, 2021; Wittmayer et al., 2022), can be galvanised by connecting the four abovementioned realms of commoning (see Figure 17.2).

Each of these realms of energy commons have their own substantive benefits. Socialised renewable resource rights can provide a legal veto right with which communities can insert themselves more forcefully into the energy transition process. They could provide a strong foundation with which to bargain for more favourable conditions for community energy initiatives, either with the state or private capital. Crucially, they avoid the need for policymakers to prematurely define community energy, which is fraught with difficulties (Tews, 2018). Rather, local resource rights give communities the freedom to use their resource in the way that is best suited to local contexts, in line with the principle of subsidiarity.<sup>1</sup> Energy communities might be a desirable way to do this since they can generate abundance for local communities through productive initiatives. However, there is likely also room in many cases for hybrid models where the state or private capital plays a role. The central point is that commons invert with the commodity to become the dominant logic in the system. Furthermore, configuring energy commons in the realm of exchange and consumption is key for ensuring values of solidarity and equity prevail over green consumerism and energy inequality (Rommel et al., 2018). Finally,

the idea of circular energy commons in the context of globalised energy value chains can play a central role in building transnational governance regimes of upstream and downstream energy operations. This realm draws attention to the need for higher scales of coordination and both national and international levels, to ensure that benefits of more localised models do not come at the expense of other localities, thereby merely creating new patterns of uneven rural development.

There is also a strategic advantage to thinking about the energy commons in this joined-up way (Bauwens et al., 2022b). Social actors participating in issues regarding land or resource grabbing, extractivism, community energy and collective sharing or presumption should align their perspectives around the common goal of the energy commons. For example, the case of Community Power in Ireland shows the interrelationship of these elements. It was set up to enable energy cooperatives to sell their electricity to their members. While the community logic Community



**Figure 17.2** Potential and existing energy commoning practices.

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Power aimed for needed to be diluted in certain ways to operate within a competitive sector, this hybrid strategy has helped to support community energy initiatives in this market (van Summeren et al., 2023). This demonstrates how strategic inroads in the realm of energy exchange and consumption can have knock-on positive effects in the realm of energy production. Similarly, Wade and Rudolph (2024) stress how ownership of land and control of renewable resources such as wind is intricately tied up with the possibilities for energy communities in the context of spatial scarcity despite resource abundance. They argue that social wind rights could fundamentally shift the balance of power in the energy transition in favour of community energy generation initiatives. On the flipside, similar interrelations apply to commodification. As we have seen, exclusive wind resource control tied to private landownership can serve to enable ‘green grabbing’ of these resources by capitalist developers through secretive negotiations (Kirkegaard et al., 2023).

In this sense, we argue that it is crucial, when thinking of postcapitalist energy strategies, to think of these different elements of the energy commons and their interrelatedness. By tracing these (potential) connections between different sites of energy commons, synergistic strategies can be uncovered. For example, landownership can be a central locus of power in supporting energy communities that challenge traditional forms of capital (Manning, 2022). Sequencing might also be important. For example, community resource rights could provide a financial means with which communities can then invest in energy production or exchange/consumption technologies. In this sense, commoning actions in one realm may feedback or cascade with others, engendering positive social tipping dynamics (Alkemade et al., 2023; Meckling and Goedeking, 2023) or what Erik Olin Wright refers to as interstitial transformations (Wright, 2010). Combining all parts of the energy commons in a practice of prefigurative postcapitalist politics reduces the pressure in any one realm to be co-opted by market forces.

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## Note

- 1 Note that local communities might not be the only social owners. Other groups such as environmental organisations could be represented too in a Trust formation (Schumacher, 1973).

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# Rural heritage as a commons

Mark Scott

## Introduction

Rural places are critical repositories of tangible and intangible heritage. Tangible heritage relates to cultural landscapes, historic rural towns and villages, individual historic buildings, cultural heritage sites (such as archaeological sites) and natural sacred sites, along with the association of rural places with specific traditions relating to language, music, religious rituals (for example, pilgrimage sites or routes), food and culinary practices. These tangible attributes also translate to intangible values, such as identity (local and national), a sense of place and place attachment. Moreover, in an era of globalisation, rapid changes to communication technologies, political polarisation and homogenised urbanisation, heritage is central to the perception of 'rural' as somehow representing authenticity, uniqueness, stability and a nostalgia for the past.

Heritage protection and conservation began to be institutionalised into international charters and national legislation in the early to mid-twentieth century, with a focus on the protection of tangible heritage as public goods. However, towards the end of the twentieth century, heritage policy and practice took an increasingly instrumental turn as heritage was positioned as an economic, place-fixed asset to be exploited for local development. This included creating a distinctive place-brand to attract tourists and inward investment, or to market local products based on place-uniqueness. In this context, heritage is commodified and monetised for private or individual benefit. To offer an alternative perspective on rural heritage, this chapter considers heritage values, embodied in place, landscape and community, as a *commons* based on collective tangible and intangible heritage grounded in shared values and the lived experiences of rural communities. From this perspective, rural

heritage-led regeneration depends on heritage as a collective, shared experience or resource – that is, no single person ‘owns’ the local culture, distinctive practices, the landscape and so on. However, the benefits flowing from heritage are privatised and accumulated by individuals. As Alonso González (2014) argues, the process of accumulation of heritage values by public and private social actors means that something is being enclosed and accumulated. This includes the privatisation of heritage sites, promotion of real estate accumulation through gentrification processes or the capture of heritage values of a community by tourism enterprises – in other words, converting cultural commons into *private* commodities. Private appropriation of heritage values can be independent of property rights, as local entrepreneurs profit from common heritage values without reinvesting in the community or heritage assets. Moreover, profits may be extracted by external actors such as tour operators, hotel chains, or second-home owners (for example, through holiday letting platforms). Furthermore, the focus on attracting tourists or on place-branding centralises the role of capital in shaping heritage, for example through privileging selective interpretations of heritage. To explore these themes, this chapter is structured in three parts: first, the chapter considers the shift in rural heritage practice from conservation as a public good to the commodification of heritage for economic development. Second, the chapter provides a postcapitalist critique of rural heritage practice, arguing that place-based rural heritage is a commons based on inherited culture, which has been enclosed and commodified for private gain. And third, the chapter explores examples of postcapitalist practices that may provide an alternative framing narrative for rural heritage, proposing forms of resistance and approaches to mobilise postcapitalism.

## Rural heritage: from public goods to commodification

Over the course of the twentieth century, two key strands of heritage theory and practice emerged. The first strand relates to heritage *conservation* and the protection of heritage as a public good with the second strand relating to the instrumental use of heritage to stimulate economic development. The first strand dominated heritage practice from its origins as a social movement in the late nineteenth century through to its later institutionalisation in the early twentieth century and remaining important today. This primarily relates to the protection and conservation of tangible heritage ‘artefacts’ as public goods (Veldpaus et al., 2013). This approach traditionally is dominated by conservation professionals, with

an 'expert' knowledge and status that has allowed them to frame decision-making, privileging architectural/archaeological, historic, scientific and aesthetic value, and protecting the authenticity of tangible assets (Smith, 2015). This perspective is often translated to top-down, expert-centric decision-making based on international charters, national legislation and official heritage designations (for example, national parks, UNESCO world heritage sites). The key motivation here is preservation.

The protection of tangible rural heritage, particularly prized landscapes, archaeology and historic properties emerged in the late nineteenth century and became widely institutionalised at state level and within international charters from the beginning of the twentieth century. For example, protecting rural landscapes has been a longstanding feature of planning approaches to countryside management for much of the twentieth century, particularly in more urbanised societies. Concerns with competing demands on emblematic and highly prized landscapes, urban sprawl, loss of farmland and 'countryside character', and promoting access to the countryside have provided the backdrop to some of the most enduring legacies of 'town and country planning'. A key approach has been the designation of national parks based on the principle of preserving prized landscapes for the nation, motivated by an aspiration to preserve and protect 'natural monuments' (Bell and Stockdale, 2019). In North America, for example, National Parks were first established and protected by law in the late nineteenth century – here the emphasis was on wilderness protection, often through the public ownership of land resources as a means of preserving nationally symbolic landscapes. Within these settler-colonial states, the protection of wilderness was central to myth-making and nation-building with wilderness landscapes viewed as representative of a nation's values or symbolic of humanity's ability to master or tame nature. Early examples included the establishment of Yellowstone National Park (US) by the US Congress in 1872 and Banff National Park in Canada in 1885. National parks were also widely established and institutionalised in many European countries in the post-Second World War era with an emphasis on protecting 'special places' often on the grounds of scenic value or providing access to the countryside for the urban working and middle classes. In contrast to the public ownership model applied in North America, national park designations often overlapped private property ownership and landscapes that co-evolved through nature-human interactions over time to produce unique cultural landscapes. For example, in England, while national parks are not in public ownership, they are strictly managed and regulated to capture public goods associated with natural heritage.



Within an era of rapid urbanisation in the twentieth century, cherishing landscapes and rural places became politically important reflecting the rise of a popular conservation movement motivated by defending the countryside from inappropriate development. For example, in the UK, rural preservation designations such as National Parks, Greenbelts or Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty (recently renamed as National Landscapes), emerged as common approaches to the preservation of the countryside and landscape on aesthetic grounds. These themes were espoused almost 100 years ago by the seminal work of Patrick Abercrombie on the preservation of rural England (1926: 6). In discussing rural change within an English context, Abercrombie declared the countryside as England's 'greatest historical monument': 'we are apt to forget that the essential thing which is England, is the Countryside, the Market Town, the Village, the Hedgerow Trees, the Lanes, the Copses, the Streams and the Farmsteads'.

In parallel with the preservation of cultural landscapes, the twentieth century witnessed widespread measures to protect tangible rural heritage, particularly monuments, religious sites, archaeology and historic properties. National legislative frameworks were widely established to protect tangible heritage as a public good through statutory protection or public ownership. These frameworks relied predominately on so-called expert knowledge, with heritage experts capable of identifying a hierarchy of significance and universal value (based on architectural, historic, scientific and aesthetic value). At an international level, these efforts to protect historic monuments and properties were institutionalised within international charters, such as the *Athens Charter for the Restoration of Historic Monuments* adopted at the First International Congress of Architects and Technicians of Historic Monuments (a forerunner of ICOMOS) in 1931, which established agreed recommendations on the conservation and restoration of historic sites (Parkinson and Scott, 2022). Similar to the protection of cultural landscapes, rural built heritage was preserved as a public good to be protected from loss and preserved for future generations. The essential elements of this approach are outlined in [Table 18.1](#).

While rural heritage preservation remains central to countryside management or territorial planning for rural places, since the 1980s, the emphasis has shifted from *preservation* of heritage to a second strand of heritage practice – that is, *making use* of heritage within local economic development. This instrumental use of heritage has two sources. First, heritage professionals themselves increasingly promoted heritage as a potential driver of local economic development. Emerging within an urban

**Table 18.1** Elements of the protection of rural heritage as a public good

<b>Traditional rural heritage conservation</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Emergence in late 19th century;</li><li>• A concern with loss and preservation;</li><li>• Top-down professional control;</li><li>• Emphasis upon expert knowledge and skills, outstanding universal value, a hierarchy of significance (privileging architectural, historic, scientific and aesthetic value), and protecting the authenticity of tangible assets;</li><li>• Policy instruments: landscape designations (e.g. national parks, AONBs), statutory protection of archaeology, monuments, structures and areas of heritage significance through the planning system.</li></ul> <p><i>Values: Heritage as a public good</i></p>

context, Pendlebury (2009) notes the increasing instrumentalisation of conservation from the 1980s onwards, and a wider recognition of the relationship between conservation and regeneration outcomes as heritage was reframed as a driver of economic development. Prominent examples of heritage-led urban regeneration, such as Faneuil Hall Marketplace in Boston, Harbor Place in Baltimore, Covent Garden in London or the redevelopment of the Liverpool's Royal Albert Dock, provided templates not only for policy transfer to other cities (Redaelli, 2020; Fageir et al., 2020), but also to more rural regions as well. These successes resulted in heritage professionals further promoting the economic potential of heritage conservation (Scott et al., 2023), such as English Heritage's influential publication, 'The Heritage Dividend' (English Heritage, 1999).

Second, not only did heritage professionals increasingly recognise the economic potential of heritage, but for rural communities facing depopulation, erosion of local services and higher levels of unemployment, heritage-led rural development has been actively promoted as a potential pathway towards generating economic activity. From this perspective, heritage is viewed as a form of cultural capital – a key place-fixed asset – which can be mobilised in local development and converted to economic capital, primarily through tourism or as a form of place-branding (Courtney and Moseley, 2008). Thus, economic benefits may include tourist spend to support existing or to stimulate new local businesses, which in turn may generate local employment opportunities, or the use of heritage to create a distinctive place-brand that would allow local businesses to market products (for example from local food producers) based on heritage-related place distinctiveness (Gkartzios et al., 2022). The key motivation is to generate economic benefits from the instrumental use or commodification of heritage.

Exploiting heritage for economic benefits can result from a range of processes. For example, early rounds of the European Union’s LEADER programme for bottom-up rural development were often dominated by community-led rural tourism initiatives based on local heritage assets (Barke and Newton, 1995; Maroto-Martos et al., 2020). Alternatively, individual or networks of entrepreneurs may seek to exploit local traditions (craft products, traditional food products) or to utilise heritage to establish brand authenticity or to build consumer trust. This may also include how landscape and heritage can boost or lend prestige to relatively new products or services. Duarte Alonso and Northcote (2009), for instance, demonstrate how wineries in an emerging wine-producing region in Western Australia emphasise heritage and landscape characteristics for origin branding to forge a ‘vintage’ identity for their products to compete with long-established European wine producers. Third, state actors may also be active in linking heritage designations (for example, as national parks or world heritage sites) with place ‘branding’ to stimulate economic development (Porter, 2020). While Porter discusses how national park authorities in England often combine landscape management with place-branding within specific landscapes, in an Irish context, branding of landscape and heritage has been tourism authority-led and used to link widely dispersed heritage ‘assets’. The best-known example is the *Bord Failte*-promoted (*Bord Failte* is the national tourism authority) ‘Wild Atlantic Way’, launched in 2014. This initiative was Ireland’s first long-distance touring route (over 2,000 km in length), based on the natural heritage and distinctive cultural landscape of Ireland’s west coast to attract visitors to more remote rural places through linking a series of photo-friendly marker spots (Dunne et al., 2020). The essential elements of making use of heritage for local regeneration are outlined in Table 18.2.

**Table 18.2** Elements of the instrumental use of heritage for regeneration

Instrumental use of heritage for economic regeneration
<p>Emergence in late 20th century;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A concern with profit and commodification;</li> <li>• Increased involvement of non-state actors (e.g. through partnership governance);</li> <li>• Emphasis on demonstrating the economic potential of heritage;</li> <li>• Policy instruments: ‘flexible’ and ‘soft’ spaces for heritage management (non-statutory), rural development ‘tournament’ funding, community-led rural development, business/enterprise support, place-branding, marketing.</li> </ul> <p><i>Values: Heritage as an economic driver</i></p>

## Rural heritage: a postcapitalist critique

This section aims to position rural heritage within a postcapitalist framework. As discussed in the previous section, traditionally, heritage conservation emerged as a concern with ‘loss’ and the preservation of heritage as a public good, often through statutory/regulatory instruments or public ownership. However, by the end of the twentieth century, heritage was becoming increasingly framed as an economic asset to stimulate wider economic benefits and place-based regeneration. This perspective became more entrenched in line with neoliberal values, with the protection of heritage reorientated towards market goals and a deepening (over)commodification of heritage values. Within this context, a postcapitalist framework offers a useful critique of this shift in how heritage is framed and managed, the actors involved and potential alternative outcomes. To assess these themes, first, I consider heritage as a commons, before examining ways in which heritage values are enclosed for private gain – this moves beyond the enclosure of something physical (for example, land or a heritage building) to consider ‘commons’ as both tangible and intangible heritage. Second, I explore heritage commodification and (through a postcapitalist lens) how it shapes social relations between people and heritage. In the chapter’s next section, I will explore alternatives to the enclosure of heritage values.

In what ways can heritage be considered as a commons? The foundation of place-based heritage is rarely based on a single material aspect of heritage or a single event, but rather is based on a shared tradition, cultural livelihood or, commonly, an aesthetic homogeneity stemming from a townscape ensemble or a cultural landscape (Alonso González, 2014). Thus, place-based heritage comprises an assemblage that may be made up of historic places, archaeological sites, sacred landscapes, places and objects, cultural and ritual practices, traditional fine and performing arts, languages and symbols, or traditional knowledge (Gould, 2017). Consider the example of Ireland’s Wild Atlantic Way branding of a touring route in the West of Ireland highlighted earlier – this is based on ‘collective assets’ that represent national and local identities. This includes natural heritage (a coastal, ‘wild’ landscape), various heritage towns, *Gaeltacht* communities (Irish language speaking areas), island communities, traditional Irish music, literature, pilgrimage sites and archaeology. For Wanda George (2010), these attributes represent a rural community’s ‘inherited culture’ that provides a community or place with a uniqueness. This is best demonstrated by cultural landscapes that have been formed from a combination of natural processes, how a landscape

has been shaped by distinctive farming practices (often handed down from one generation to another) or through wider societal and economic processes (for example landownership), or perhaps been given additional cultural value through artistic practices (visual art, poetry or literature). In the context of cultural landscapes, Fairclough (2020: vii) argues that the ‘commons sit at the heart of most humanistic and cultural definitions of landscape, notably of the pre-Renaissance, customary definitions, and specifically that of the [European] Landscape Convention. Landscape is a commons’.

While place-based heritage can be considered as a collective and inherited resource that gives a community or area a uniqueness, Wanda George (2010) argues that it is this *uniqueness* that is increasingly enclosed, privatised or commodified. The focus on Wanda George’s analysis centres on tourism. She argues that local rural culture has been appropriated to satisfy the needs of tourists and exploited by multiple commercial tourism operators for personal gain, with little, if any, of the profits realised for the local community – the actual creators and owners of the local culture. Cultural landscapes are a prime example. For instance, *Cinque Terre* in Liguria, Italy, is a national park and UNESCO world heritage site, which attracts around 3 million visitors per year (pre-pandemic levels). The landscape comprises five picturesque coastal villages (total population of around 4,000 inhabitants) surrounded by mountains (see Figure 18.1). The mountainous steep slopes have been cultivated primarily for vines, olive trees, citrus trees and vegetables for over 1,000 years through a combination of terraces and dry-stone walls along with a network of paths (100+ km) traditionally used to connect the five villages (Santoro et al., 2021). Over the last decade, tourism numbers have been swelled by a growing number of day-trippers from cruise ships docking at nearby ports, exacerbated by the growing trend of mega-liners (carrying over 6,000 passengers). While natural and cultural heritage form the backbone of cruise ship tourism (Papathanassis, 2017), the profits from cruise ship tourism are rarely experienced within host on-land sites, but instead are focused on tour operators, transport companies and food and drinks suppliers. This illustrates how a region’s place-based heritage is appropriated by external actors, independent of property rights. Paradoxically, tourism spend within local communities can be limited and constrained by overcrowding of heritage attractions and strains placed on tourism infrastructure (Larsen et al., 2013). At the same time, growing tourist numbers have placed enormous stresses on Cinque Terre’s landscape, including overcrowding of popular walking trails, erosion of mountain paths and overcrowded transportation



**Figure 18.1:** Manarola village, Cinque Terre National Park, Italy – the distinctive mountainous backdrop is shaped by terraces and dry-stone walls. © Authors.

infrastructure. Tourism management has so far focused on methods to control visitor numbers with proposals in recent years focused on limiting visitors and access issues. However, the imbalance between profits on the one hand, and resources needed to sustain the cultural landscape, has been given more limited attention. How can tourism revenue be redirected to support farming practices that maintain the terraced landscapes and dry-stone walls? How will tourist numbers increase spend on traditional local products? And how does the host community benefit financially from a tourism model based on their inherited cultural landscape?

Alonso González (2014) also stresses the role of tourism in relation to the enclosure of place-based heritage; however, his assessment of the enclosure of heritage moves beyond the impact of global tourism. Alonso González argues that place-based heritage is central to the global political economy of ‘prestige’ that seeks to extract exchange value by converting cultural commons into commodities. Thus, for Alonso González, while the capture of heritage values of a community by tourism enterprises is critical, other examples also include the promotion of real estate accumulation within heritage-rich places (with subsequent gentrification outcomes) and the privatisation of heritage sites. One could also add the example discussed earlier of how heritage values are captured by private enterprises to ‘lend’ prestige, tradition, authenticity and trust to food,

drink or clothing production. This is particularly effective for new products that can draw on place-based heritage values or a cultural landscape to add an authentic or traditional quality – that is, linking to product *and* place – or in relation to capturing inherited culinary traditions associated with a specific place within a private enterprise’s branding.

A recent example of this connection between place-based heritage and product relates to the rise of micro-breweries and craft beer producers, with Gatrell et al. (2018: 360) suggesting that the growth of the craft beer industry in North America ‘resides at the nexus between nature, place and identity’. For example, Eberts (2014) illustrates the tendency for craft breweries to connect to place-based heritage through brewery and beer brand names, while Taylor and DiPietro (2020) outline how place-based heritage has a positive relationship to consumers’ perception of product quality, thus linking brand attachment to place attachment, providing an important point of difference to global brands. In this context, Gatrell et al. (2018) argue that it is not enough for a brewery to be located within a specific heritage-rich area but that it must embody the ‘spirit’ of that place to convey authenticity. Similar to tourism enterprises, the critical issue here is how entrepreneurial actors appropriate and exploit heritage values for private gain, with limited resources recycled into protecting or sustaining the heritage that these enterprises seek to commodify.

While entrepreneurs appear to be key actors in the enclosure of heritage values, Alonso González (2014) identifies a broader set of actors involved in this process, including central and local government, heritage experts, architects, planners along with service sector entrepreneurs who have channelled large scale investments into the restoration and shaping of heritage sites as places reliant on service sector economies that serve leisure and tourism. This is particularly the case within peripheral or declining areas that are increasingly reliant on heritage values (natural or cultural) to generate new economies and cultural identities that provide territorial rents in the form of real estate value, tourism and service sector businesses. These initiatives, according to Alonso González, tend to privatise the benefits obtained from the common heritage values of a territory, and indeed government interventions on heritage preservation are increasingly justified on the basis of business growth outcomes.

While much of the postcapitalist literature focuses on processes of enclosure, Chatterton and Pusey (2020) also highlight the importance of critiquing *commodification*. As these authors stress, capitalism is a social relation founded on the production of commodities and the organisation of a society based around market principles in a process of value creation. Therefore, under capitalism we become incorporated in



this circuit of value creation through the production and consumption of commodities, which become central to our social existence. While heritage-led rural development holds allure for many rural communities, in a series of papers, Mitchell and colleagues chart the results of *over*-commodification of rural heritage within rural Canada (Mitchell, 1998; Mitchell and de Waal, 2009; Sullivan and Mitchell, 2012; Mitchell and Shannon, 2018). Central to this body of work is how entrepreneurial investments that focus on the commodification of rural heritage can lead to a destruction and a loss of community and heritage values. Mitchell charts how early entrepreneurial investments in a heritage-rich rural place tend to focus on the restoration or reconstruction of a vernacular building or the reproduction of products symbolic of a pre-industrial past (or as a cleaned-up version of this heritage). Initial investments generate surplus capital which is reinvested in further heritage-themed products. However, as later argued by Mitchell and de Waal (2009), this investment is motivated by profit and promotion rather than preservation, which can lead to the destruction of the *heritage-scape* to be replaced with a more homogenised *leisure-scape*. Mitchell and de Waal highlight the example of how small towns with heritage elements are transformed into heritage or tourist shopping villages, which increasingly resemble theme parks. In contrast, these places increasingly are of more limited value to local residents as services increasingly cater for tourists rather than the needs of locals who, in turn, may be displaced through increasingly tourist-orientated investment. While Mitchell does not view these transformations through a postcapitalist lens, the case studies discussed in her work illustrate how heritage ‘values’ are captured by a limited number of entrepreneurs for profit, which increasingly displaces non-tourist facilities essential for community life. Discussing the outcomes within a village in Ontario, Mitchell observed (1998: 283):

While investment levels have generated significant financial benefits for those involved in the creation of this commodified landscape, such investments have also led to a partial destruction of the rural idyll; to the loss of a community that is happy, healthy and problem-free.

As Mitchell (1998) contends, heritage has been increasingly shaped by its commodification to generate profits for private enterprises and real estate actors. This, in turn, shapes society’s relationship with heritage values (something to be consumed) and fundamentally distorts a local rural community’s relationship with their own inherited culture – something



to monetise, profit from or create value from for individual gain. This is problematic from a number of perspectives. As heritage is increasingly framed through a monetised lens, some aspects of heritage gain privilege over others, leading to selective interpretations of heritage. An example of this is in the marketing of Irish heritage that is often underpinned by a focus on the Irish diaspora (particularly in North America), which often results in a fairly generic or simplified Irish story that can become disconnected from local heritage values that tend to more dynamic and fluid. Also, framing heritage in transactional terms often results in difficult, uncomfortable or complex stories being neglected. Some of these 'hidden' stories have been brought to light in the wake of recent decolonialising debates that have increasingly challenged how society views heritage and rurality. For example, Corinne Fowler's excellent *Green Unpleasant Land* (Fowler, 2020) project has employed creative writing practices to challenge nostalgic narratives concerning the English countryside. Fowler explores rural England's colonial connections that have shaped the landscape, often through the wealth of the landed class who were profiteering from slavery and imperial riches. In particular, Fowler challenges the 'Country House' as the jewel of rural England's heritage and as a bastion of unchanging tradition, to put a spotlight on how the homes of the elite reflected power relations, land enclosure and prominent roles in Empire-building. This type of reinterpretation performs a critical role in redefining our relationship with history and heritage beyond a narrow economic or 'heritage-industry' perspective.

The commodification of rural heritage also risks eroding the connection between place and community identity. For example, when external actors are dominant in rural heritage commodification, there are risks of alienation, displacement, or the destruction of the rural ideal and its place-based heritage. Tonts and Greive (2002), for example, highlight how rural areas characterised by traditional farming landscapes, picturesque countryside and perceptions of cohesive local communities, are much sought after by urban counterurbanisers seeking to 'buy into' a rural lifestyle. In discussing an example from Western Australia, Tonts and Greive demonstrate how this consumption of a heritage-rich rural ideal has led to an unfettered pattern of development that has resulted in the gradual destruction of the countryside ideal. In an English context, with more restrictive planning policy towards new rural housebuilding, this consumption of heritage-rich rural places results in the gentrification of rural towns and villages as houses have been purchased by second homeowners or by ex-urban residents, often displacing local residents from the housing market (Gallent and Scott, 2019). These examples

illustrate how natural and built heritage are critical in transforming rural housing markets, but undermine the values that consumers often seek, either through new development to meet market demands or through a loss of community cohesion and sense of place that appeals to consumers in their ideal of a rural place. Representations of rural places as embodying traditional values, as picturesque and endowed with natural heritage are central to the development process – how property is sold and marketed, and thus, these are central to uneven development (Wachsmuth, 2014).

## A postcapitalist alternative

While a postcapitalist perspective opens interesting analytical avenues to understand how heritage is used in the remaking of rural places – and who benefits from this process – a postcapitalist framework also opens up alternative practices. This includes how to reorientate the benefits of a community's inherited culture *for* the community and how to challenge how the market shapes our relationship with heritage. A useful starting point is to reconsider the idea of heritage (tangible and intangible) as a commons and to identify strategies to resist or counter its enclosure for private gain. As discussed by Chatterton (2016), in its simple historical form, the common was governed by those who depended on them, and thus tied up with specific social relationships and forms of governance. Drawing on Chatterton's work, in relation to heritage, the implication is to experiment in creating 'new vocabularies, solidarities, social and spatial practices and repertoires of resistance that can be used against capitalism' (2016: 407) – in short, Chatterton argues for a process of 'commoning' to take place as a detour from capitalism.

One aspect of this relates to the direct community ownership of heritage 'assets' through community-based organisations, such as community groups or community land trusts. Community asset transfer has risen in prominence in recent years. In a heritage context, asset transfer enables local groups to own and manage a heritage asset. As Murtagh and Boland (2019) suggest, while critics contend that asset transfer or community ownership is simply an extension of neoliberalism (for example as the state withdraws from heritage management), it also offers transformative potential for local communities. This includes challenging the notion of private property rights, enabling communities to accumulate and create local consumption circuits or to preserve an aspect of heritage important to local identity or place attachment. Moreover, community ownership often provides a greater diversity in

the motives for how heritage is used, particularly in emphasising social, rather than market, value. Recent schemes in Northern Ireland illustrate this potential. In Caledon village in County Tyrone, for example, a local regeneration community group has restored a nineteenth-century wool store (reflecting its market town function) and adapted the building to provide a childcare facility and afterschool club for local families. Similarly, a community group in Rathfriland village, located close to the Mourne Mountains in County Down, has taken ownership of a nineteenth-century former bank building, now converted into two rental residential units and a community space that is primarily used as a music venue. A third example is Rathlin community association, located on an island off the coast of County Antrim, which has restored a historic lighthouse (still in use) and has converted the former lightkeepers' cottages and outbuildings into a mix of holiday let cottages and spaces for community enterprises. These different projects illustrate the motives of community-based organisations to preserve built heritage of importance to the local residents and to transform them into social spaces, residential units and workspaces. Although one example has a tourism focus (in Rathlin), this project allows the community to generate surpluses from historic property ownership for other community purposes. While this case is a further example of how heritage can be commodified and monetised, community ownership enables a return of rent for community/collective, rather than individual, benefit. These types of community initiatives also require a wider enabling framework – these examples were all supported with seed funding from the Architectural Heritage Fund, a charitable organisation that promotes the reuse of historic buildings, which facilitated and supported these groups to undertake feasibility studies, employ specialist architects and to access other funding supports to complete these projects.

A second avenue for fostering resistance is to frame heritage not as objects, fabric and material, but towards a people-centred and value-focused approach. In other words, as Fairclough (2020: x) argues, to focus heritage on 'the people who create and enjoy heritage through ascribing values and associations through shared use'. For Fairclough, this approach suggests that tangible heritage is a resource of the commons, while democratic participation in heritage emphasises the process of commoning and use right claims. Thus, heritage represents a shared-by-all common asset independent of ownership, and that use rights could be claimed based on long-term intergenerational responsibilities beyond or alongside legal ownership (Fairclough, 2020). This perspective enables a values-based approach whereby heritage can be used to explore community and place and to redefine our relationship with heritage

beyond its commodification. This approach is increasingly being explored by the heritage sector. For example, ‘heritage week’ (August, 2023) in Ireland, promoted by the Heritage Council, focused on grassroots projects and volunteer-led schemes that explored ‘living heritage’, spotlighting traditions and practices, knowledge and skills passed down through generations. This initiative was not tourism focused, instead promoting a more intimate community connection to its own heritage and to foster intergenerational relations through heritage.

Exploring the social value of heritage through creative practices also enables heritage to play a critical role in place-making and community-building. An interesting example is discussed by Lennon (2020) in relation to a collaboration between a theatre company and a local community in Callan, County Kilkenny, in Ireland. The village is a former market town with a population of around 2,500, and like many rural towns in Ireland, the village has experienced a high level of vacancy and dereliction within the village centre. To reimagine the future of the village’s historic main street (Bridge Street), an immersive promenade theatre show was staged as part of a local festival, involving a large cast of local residents. The play explored fictional proposals to demolish Bridge Street’s historic buildings as a means to explore what this historic built fabric means to local people, its importance to local identity, and ideas for its adaptive reuse. As Lennon argues, this approach enabled local residents to rethink the historic core of the village through a collective civic experience. This exploration of a collective experience emphasises how heritage is interpreted and claimed as a shared-by-all asset, whereby heritage is central to community-building beyond its instrumental use for economic regeneration.

**Table 18.3** Elements of a postcapitalist framework for rural heritage

Postcapitalist rural heritage
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nascent experimentation;</li> <li>• A concern with resisting commodification;</li> <li>• Increased involvement of grass-roots actors (although the state or the heritage sector may take an enabling role);</li> <li>• Emphasis on heritage as a commons and inherited culture;</li> <li>• Commoning practices: direct community ownership of heritage assets; heritage and a digital commons; emphasising the social value of heritage; a human-centred and values-based approach (e.g., citizenship, community-building and place-making); and experimentation on financial benefits or compensation for heritage preservation to counter enclosure.</li> </ul> <p><i>Values: Heritage as a commons</i></p>

A third approach to resisting heritage enclosure is through alternative tax regimes or financial compensation to ensure local communities benefit financially from their inherited cultures and heritage, and to provide sustainable resources for the preservation of heritage. Wanda George (2010), for example, argues for the creation of community cultural heritage preservation funds in smaller rural communities to ensure that the authenticity of a community's heritage is protected. Wanda George suggests applying a range of tactics within rural contexts (2010: 386) including:

- A visitation fee/head tax to commercial operations for every tourist brought to tour a culture-based tourism community, with fees paid to the community.
- A fee for the opportunity to capture exclusive on-site photos of local cultural heritage assets. For Wanda George, this might include from inside local museums, churches, schools and within protected structures.
- An entrance fee for non-local residents to heritage buildings, archaeological sites, local museums or even local cemeteries.
- Licensing fees for outsiders to use local cultural images for their own commercial promotional and marketing purposes, such as images of local landscapes, historic townscapes or monuments. This could be extended to any business that uses place-based heritage imagery to promote products or services that utilises heritage to foster trust, place association, authenticity and so on. In this context, Wanda George draws parallels with copyright laws and how this might apply to inherited culture.
- A fee for commercial filmmaking in the community.
- Heritage preservation donation boxes at strategic locations around a host community.

Essentially, these tactics are based on a return of 'rent' (through various fees) from those who 'enclose' heritage values to those who are the producers or owners of inherited culture. In practice, these measures may be difficult to implement or may clash with more formal state or regional tourist taxes. However, the key point here is the importance of experimentation in terms of generating financial benefits for communities that are the creators and owners of inherited culture and intangible heritage (Table 18.3).

## Conclusion

Historic rural landscapes have been formed through incremental change over many years in response to natural processes and shifting economic and demographic dynamics to produce complex and highly differentiated rural places in terms of visual attributes, nature–human interactions, ownership and the historic periods represented. The *shared* characteristics of historic rural landscapes make them primary cultural assets, which are increasingly being reframed and recognised for their potential to deliver wider economic, social, cultural and sustainability benefits. Within this context, conservation of rural heritage and its ‘exploitation’ as a driver of rural economies have become firmly established as central to countryside management *and* rural development policy.

In this chapter, I have attempted to examine rural heritage through a postcapitalist framework. This has been very much exploratory in nature; however, the approach offers a number of useful insights. First, the reconceptualisation of heritage as a ‘commons’ places an emphasis on a more human-centred and values-based approach, which in turn can challenge the dominance of our monetised relationship to heritage. From this perspective, place-based rural heritage is viewed as a shared, inherited culture that is often enclosed for private gain with limited benefits for the owners or producers of that heritage, or for the actual preservation of heritage itself. A postcapitalist critique also shines a light on the actors involved in the enclosure and commodification of heritage – from tourist operators, entrepreneurs and the real estate sector profiting from natural and cultural heritage, to the role of heritage professionals and state-led interventions. Finally, the chapter explores a postcapitalist alternative for reconsidering how rural places engage with their heritage. This includes ‘commoning practices’ such as the direct community ownership of heritage assets or grassroots initiatives that challenge heritage commodification to focus on the social value of heritage in local place-making or community-building. These approaches are not without challenges – including community capacity, local leadership skills or an enabling funding landscape. This chapter has contributed to the debates through providing examples of alternative practices, experimentation or analytical perspectives that might challenge how rural places engage with their complex heritage stories.

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Part IV

## **The social transformation**



# Re-distributed private landholding as 'postcapitalism': homeownership and inequality in Britain

Nick Gallent and Phoebe Stirling

## Introduction

Capitalism in the nineteenth century was characterised by the concentration of land and capital in the hands of an extremely wealthy and powerful minority. The risk of social unrest, rooted in abject poverty, was widely recognised in Victorian Britain and in other European countries. This prompted steps to improve living conditions, through infrastructure investments and eventually through public housing programmes. But by the middle of the twentieth century, a democratisation (or broadening) of asset holding, rather than public welfare, was being lauded as a pathway to socio-political stability. Expanding homeownership to the growing middle classes and beyond – to create a 'home owning democracy' – would mean a private stakeholder society and expanded support for the status quo as it pertained to landownership. Quoting Foye (2022), Shepherd has recently observed that 'political pressure regarding the land question was arguably reduced as a result of the expansion of home-ownership, which produced a coalition of small landowners who had an interest in increasing house [and underlying land] prices' (Shepherd, 2023: 94).

Countries around the world followed the same path – towards 'asset-based welfare' (Rossi, 2017). The expansion of asset-ownership was viewed as endorsement for the extant system: *postcapitalism* in the sense that it moved past the gross inequalities of nineteenth-century capitalism, offering a brighter and less unequal future. But poverty remained inevitable in the worldview underpinning democratised

capitalism: there need to be losers if there are to be winners. By the early twenty-first century, the project has burnt itself out. Some new capitalists outcompeted others, accumulating more land and more assets. The expansion of homeownership has stalled. Profit-taking from assets by a minority has accelerated, to the extent that capitalism in the twenty-first century *remains* characterised by the concentration of land capital in the hands of an extremely wealthy and powerful minority

The guiding question of this chapter, conveyed in these opening paragraphs, is whether a different private distribution of landed property (achieved through policies supporting the expansion of private homeownership) addresses the problem of inequality and embedded poverty noted in [Chapter 1](#). The chapter takes its cue from George's discussion of six alternative remedies to 'increasing poverty amid advancing wealth' (George, 1879, Book VI, Chapter 1:299). Those remedies focus on leaner government, better education, unionisation, the co-operation of labour and capital, corrective governmental direction, and 'a more general distribution of land'. The last of these will be our focus.

George considered whether poverty might be remedied through re-distribution, concluding that 'equal distribution of land is impossible' and is a *mitigation* that would 'prevent the adoption of a cure'. Before examining that distribution and its impact in Britain,<sup>1</sup> we briefly review George's other alternative remedies. All can be detected in recent political discourse and policy – in numerous countries – as governments seek to ameliorate (or be seen to ameliorate) unequal opportunity and poverty without returning to the land question.

## Land and George's 'alternative remedies'

George saw private land monopoly as the root of social injustice and poverty. That monopoly, which tends to become more exclusive over successive generations (through the processes of inheritance, consolidation and unequal competition), deprives the landless of the wherewithal needed to meet their own needs. It also locks them into a renter–rentier relationship, which is extractive – landlords siphon off surplus value through rent, reducing net wage (and making rent a secondary tax) and amplifying inequality. George's thinking was hugely influential: in the decades after *Poverty and Progress* was published, 'landowners, especially speculative ones, were often cast as parasites who benefitted unjustly from their monopoly power as rentier owners of a limited resource' (Shepherd, 2023: 92). Watered-down versions

of George's remedy – his 'single tax' on land rent – appeared in various guises after the Second World War, as did the alternative remedies that he presented and ultimately dismissed.

Leaner government, or 'greater economy in government', was thought in nineteenth-century America to be a route to greater shared prosperity. It seemed obvious that European economies were burdened by the weight of 'aristocratic and monarchical institutions' (Book VI, Chapter I) and that public expenditure should be reduced to the 'lowest possible point'. But the idea that reduced spending equates with increased wealth and equality was quickly rejected. George observed that the costs of government were far less than the benefits brought, for instance, by the extension of railways. And irrespective of the size of any possible saving, the same 'inexorable laws would operate as to [the] distribution' of any gains, and 'the condition of those who live by their labour would not ultimately be improved' (George, 1879: 302). While accepting that governmental economy is desirable, 'reduction in the expenses of government can have no direct effect on extirpating poverty and increasing wages, so long as land is monopolized'. This is perhaps clearer today than 150 years ago as so much expenditure is dedicated to social welfare and services that aim to ameliorate the worst disparities in wealth distribution, providing the most vulnerable with basic non-market services – health, housing and so forth. The liberal mission in the nineteenth century was to break the socio-political dominance of archaic institutions: how governments spend money did not feature in the logic of that mission. Today, 'public subsidy' – derived mainly from general taxation on productivity and earnings – is commonly used to meet the expense of public infrastructures that are costly to provide because of unchallenged rent claims within the private land market. For example, government grants are distributed to the providers of 'social housing': the grants are needed to buy land and pay development costs. Their role is to protect land rent from disturbance: taxes on earnings (that fund the grants) substitute for taxes on land (that would render the grants unnecessary or at least less necessary). Greater economy in government would mean, therefore, an inability to deliver the correctives that try to alleviate housing and other forms of poverty.

Better education, or the 'diffusion of education leading to improved habits of industry and thrift', was the second of George's alternative remedies. It was predicated, claimed George, on the 'belief among the more comfortable classes that the poverty and suffering of the masses are due to their lack of industry, frugality, and intelligence': 'those who remain poor do so simply from lack of these qualities' (George, 1879:

304). The claim is quickly rejected, with George likening the belief to the 'assertion that every one of a number of competitors might win a race'. Education can equip individuals with the skills needed to get ahead in a competitive environment, but the labour needs of that environment are fixed. As education has intensified competition for prestige and lucrative professions, families with wealth have sought to gain advantage through private elite education for their own children – to the point where the elite and lucrative professions are the preserve of the privately educated (Green and Kynaston, 2019). However, education has the power to inspire and seed ingenuity, leading George to observe that 'intelligence, which is or should be the aim of education, until it induces and enables the masses to discover and remove the cause of the unequal distribution of wealth, can operate on wages only by increasing the effective power of labour' (George, 1879: 308). Therefore, education is key to productivity, but can 'raise the wages of the individual only in so far as it renders him superior to others' (George, 1879: 308). Moreover, 'no increase in the effective power of labour can increase general wages, so long as rent swallows up all the gain' in productivity (George, 1879: 308). In the US in the 1870s, improvements in education were accompanied by increases in poverty and falling wages. The same is arguably true in Britain in the 2020s: falling wages in real terms and rapidly increasing rents, acting as a secondary tax on those wages.

Unionisation, increasing the power of labour with a view to raising wages, was the third of George's alternative remedies. In theory, labour attempts to win a greater share of surplus value from capital and land. In reality, it is argued that higher rates of wage, in aggregate, have no impact on rates of profit, but particular employers may gain advantage for suppressing wages or suffer disadvantages from seeing wages rise. George argues that unionisation (or 'effective combinations of labourers') tends to accomplish 'extremely limited gains' while enduring 'inherent disadvantages'. This is first because higher wages in one part of the supply chain may suppress wages in another (necessitating deeply coordinated, and often international, action by unions to ensure that this does not happen), and second, union action is a 'struggle of endurance' that can wear down capital (which earns nothing when labour is idle) but is merely an inconvenience to land, whose owners can endure dips in production while targeting a future speculative rent. George contends that wages can of course rise without impacting negatively on productivity, but strike action – the only weapon in the arsenal of unions – must be highly organised and coordinated; it must engage in a 'destructive war' with landowners rather than capitalists, as the latter can only pay higher wages

if rents are reduced and the former can afford to sit out the hostilities. Strike action is a 'struggle of endurance' that lessens wealth and fails, ultimately, to address the power imbalance with owners of land, which is at the root of wage suppression.

In terms of the 'co-operation' of labour and capital, George's fourth alternative remedy, the focus is on securing cost savings that increase productivity. Two beneficial forms of co-operation are singled out: that focused on 'supply' (cutting out the middle-men from distribution and exchange) and that focused on 'production' (reverting to a system where the capitalist takes a fixed percentage of surplus value, leaving workers the possibility of taking a greater wage where productivity is increased). The first reduces cost and the second induces productivity, the theory being that wages grow. George (1879: 318) rejects both claims:

... as experience has amply shown, improvements in the methods and machinery of production and exchange have no tendency to improve the condition of the lowest class, and wages are lower and poverty deeper where exchange goes on at the minimum cost of production has the benefit of the best machinery. The advantage but adds to rent.

Experience today confirms this tendency: online distribution of goods (removing the need for high-street stores) cuts out the middleman, but empowers the online sales platform; and modern machinery has brought incredible efficiencies and cost-savings to production. But neither of these phenomena have raised wages in real terms. Rather, they have increased demand for flexible, low-skilled labour, and thereby contributed to an overall depression of earnings.

The experience of the twentieth century appears to be that none of George's first four remedies have greatly contributed to rebalancing wages with profit and rent. Any savings achieved from smaller government have been negligible; education has raised awareness of gross inequality, without resolving it; labour organisation has won important victories for workers, without altering the imbalance between wages and rent; and the many visible changes in exchange and production, mainly in support of rising consumerism, have not addressed broad socio-economic inequalities. But the last two of George's alternatives present arguably more direct challenges to the distribution of resource and land.

The first of these, George's fifth alternative remedy, was 'governmental direction and interference'. Some degree of socialism – a 'grand and noble' idea – could be built on a 'graduated tax on incomes'



that sought to reduce or prevent 'immense concentration of wealth' and could, through 'regulating everything and finding a place for everyone', engineer a better social state. The regulation of everything could look something like the command economies of the twentieth century, which sought to suppress private power and wealth; and finding a place for everyone could resemble Western welfarism during the same period, with its bureaucratic distribution of essential infrastructures such as housing. While George applauded the intent of such interference, he doubted whether an ideal socialist society could be 'manufactured', arguing that 'society is an organism, not a machine'. How the organism is directed to grow (from its foundations), and distribute its fruit, is a more fundamental intervention than trying to control productive processes and redirect spending: 'we have passed out of the socialism of the tribal state, and cannot re-enter it again except by a regression that would involve anarchy and perhaps barbarism' (George, 1879: 321).

Land provides the foundations of the social organism and, therefore, in his sixth alternative remedy, George turns to land: 'there is a rapidly growing feeling that the tenure of land is in some manner connected with the social distress which manifests itself in the most progressive countries' (George, 1879: 321). A 'more general distribution of land' is viewed as desirable in some quarters, achieved through the removal of 'restrictions on conveyances'. But the freeing of trade in land tends, says George, to accelerate its concentration rather than its distribution. Examples of that concentration are drawn from the US and from Britain. Even if the tendency were in the other direction, towards distribution, a point would be reached where there was no more land to distribute. Forcing the 'greater division of land' is another possibility, with George giving the example of France and Belgium, where the 'minute division' over successive generations had not resulted in greater prosperity. The major claims of George, in relation to the distribution of land, relate to the natural tendency towards concentration in a 'free market' and the failure to raise wages or improve the condition of the lowest classes. Rather, and very critically, its 'tendency is to prevent the adoption or advocacy of more thoroughgoing measures, and to strengthen the existing unjust system by interesting a larger number in its maintenance' (George, 1879: 326).

Hence, George provides us with three cues for examining the advancement of homeownership in Britain today: (1) the tendency towards concentration; (2) the failure to raise the welfare of the poorest and most vulnerable; and (3) the succour it provides to the existing system of tax on earnings rather than land.

The expansion of homeownership in the twentieth century, which has been the major direction of housing policy, has sought to kill the land question by bringing as many people as possible ‘on side’, giving them a vested interest in the maintenance of a relatively ‘tax free’ private property status quo. The manifestation of this alternative remedy in Britain – on the back of more direct post-war socialist intervention – has been the expansion of homeownership. The means of achieving that expansion, and its outcomes – whether George was right or wrong about its remedial qualities – is the focus of the remainder of this chapter.

## **A ‘more general distribution of land’ through advancing homeownership?**

George (1879) saw England as the epitome of advanced land monopoly, which sustained ‘piteous poverty’. He was writing at a time of growing concern in England for the unionisation and social unrest that was accompanying advanced industrialisation. Engels was writing in Liverpool, and Marx was arguing – at roughly the same time – that Britain and Ireland would eventually embrace socialism – as the only future for its working classes. Other writers had documented the abject poverty being endured by the industrial classes (including Booth, 1893). Direct intervention in public housing provision was the state’s eventual response (George’s fifth remedy – his corrective governmental intervention). It arrived slowly, after enabling legislation in 1885 and 1890, but accelerated after 1919 (The Addison Act). But in time this corrective was considered too expensive, giving way to support for private asset-holding as a less costly welfare strategy (Stirling et al., 2023).

The advance of asset holding (that is, homeownership as (land) re-distribution and asset-based welfare) had mixed motives, targeting a leaner state, providing a market freedom that would widen opportunities for private accumulation (and reduce poverty), and building a majority in favour of largely untaxed accumulation through property.

Governments initially targeted credit liberalisation, in partnership with building societies, as a means of growing homeownership. The privatisation of municipal housing, selling council homes to tenants, after 1980 was an extension of this project, but the overall narrative, from the earliest supports to the present day, aligns with George’s prediction that the freeing of trade in land causes its greater concentration rather than its broader distribution. George’s thinking on the land question was anchored in two basic beliefs: that natural monopolies should be publicly owned

and that individuals have a right to the value they produce themselves. Because the value accruing to land, as rent, is largely generated by the agglomeration of collective human activities, it should rightfully be socialised. That being the case, at least in Georgist terms, the expansion of homeownership witnessed across Britain during the twentieth century was dependent on a reconditioning of land, through a mix of finance supports, tax policies and municipalisation programmes, to ensure that value could be channelled to individual owners and away from the public.

The progressive refunctioning of land for housing as a new asset class resulted in a shift away from housing's post-war role as social infrastructure. The public benefits won after 1945 were sequestered to private interests, as land was assetised and housing commoditised. Forrest and Hirayama (2015, 2018) have argued that these processes ultimately led to falling rates of homeownership and to a rise in private portfolio landlordism (or 'multiple home ownership') during the current period of 'late homeownership'. The investment potential generated by the assetisation of land (both for individual consumers and for the institutions drawn into that investment) seeded rampant speculation in the housing market, raising demand and competition in the market for homes and precipitating a concentration of housing wealth in fewer hands.

George's first cue therefore provides a critical frame for an examination of the counterintuitive tendency of homeownership supports to concentrate land and capital in the hands of a minority despite their advertised goal of advancing the distribution of property and attendant welfare benefits. As we demonstrate below, the *assetisation* of land and commoditisation of housing was pivotal to the expansion of homeownership, but because of this assetisation, this 'social project ... arguably driven by an inclusive political agenda' (Forrest and Hirayama, 2015: 238) became a driver of widening inequality.

In Britain, the 1956 *House Purchase Scheme* was the first policy explicitly designed to drive an expansion of homeownership by prioritising this goal above other government investments. Eight years earlier, in 1948, the Building Societies Association (BSA) published *The Case for Home Ownership* in which it noted mortgaged homeownership's role in allowing individuals to gradually acquire 'a substantial investment and a security on which [to] readily borrow'.<sup>2</sup> In 1956, government set out its decision to: ... enable more people to buy their own homes. The way to do this is by increasing the amount of money available for lending on mortgage. This will be achieved by *advancing Exchequer money to Building societies for re-lending to would-be house purchasers*' (NSC, 1956: Para 1, emphasis added).

This scheme was the first of a series of efforts to bolster homeownership during the 1950s and 1960s, a period ostensibly associated with the promotion and delivery of council housing. The policy worked by engaging building societies in a scheme of government subsidy. Societies would be loaned finance for mortgages at the relatively low interest rate of 5 per cent, so that they could advance mortgage finance to their customers at an affordable 6 per cent rate.<sup>3</sup> Building societies were to grant creditworthy borrowers a mortgage advance of at least 75 per cent, and up to 95 per cent, of value, repayable over 20 years.

The scheme proved controversial as the interest rate at which building societies could borrow from government was set at a lower rate than for central lending on transport and energy infrastructure. It was also less than the rate at which local authorities could borrow for schools, roads, and health services.<sup>4</sup> But any political risks were thought to be outweighed by the private benefits that were being delivered through the house purchase scheme, namely security of tenure and protection against future rent rises<sup>5</sup> that would contribute towards private welfare and reduced government spending over the longer term (on council housing and benefit payments). By the 1960s, however, it was recognised that lending support could only take the homeownership project so far and that further measures would be needed to increase affordability and bring more buyers to the market.

To that end, the Finance Act 1963 reformed the scheduling of income tax. Schedule A covered profits taken from rights over land in the UK, distinguishing between *earned income* (for example, from holiday lettings) and *unearned income* arising from beneficial interest. The latter included income in kind (or 'imputed rent') derived from the occupation of land. The Act abolished tax on beneficial interest and recharged direct rents and other receipts from land to Schedule D. In effect, the taxing of homeowners' imputed rent ceased and homes became a tax-efficient investment. Households with outstanding mortgage debt also benefited from tax relief on mortgage interest, which they needed to claim from the Inland Revenue. The combination of Exchequer support for lending, Schedule A abolition, and tax relief on interest payments started to extend the reach of government's homeownership ambitions, increasing interest in private home-purchase, and transforming land and housing into a highly desirable form of investment.

Two years later, another Finance Act (1965) introduced capital gains tax on the disposal of assets, but exempted principal private residences from this levy. Reductions in public subsidy for housebuilding alongside reforms to rent control, also in 1965 (which transitioned to 'rent

regulation' under the Rent Act 1965: that is, from controlled to regulated tenancies), started to affect the availability of council housing and drive private rents upwards, ensuring a differential of rents achievable from 'each class of housing'.<sup>6</sup>

The souring of these tenures undoubtedly encouraged those renters with the means to do so to jump to homeownership. However, these various supports failed to raise the welfare of the poorest and most vulnerable, with many becoming trapped in a residualising rented sector in which rents were rising but quality was not improving. On the other hand, less well-off *buyers* became dependent on the supports given to homeownership, making a reversal of tax relief on imputed rent, for example, virtually impossible. If untaxed beneficial interest in land was part of an 'unjust system', that system had just been strengthened by 'interesting a larger number in its maintenance'.

Hence, the die was cast: all subsequent policies were guided by the same logic. The Labour Government's *Help Towards Home Ownership* (1966) scheme, again developed in collaboration with the BSA, sought to further expand access to homeownership through a new package of mortgage support. The scheme made 'larger sums' easier to borrow by reducing 'the annual payment a man of modest means has to make for a given amount borrowed and, as a result [ensuring that] lenders will often be willing to advance a larger sum' (Para. 2).

In the following decade, further steps were taken to extend the reach of homeownership. The 1971 White Paper, *A Fair Deal for Housing*, reported that BSA 'leaders' had: '... commended to their members practices which will improve the prospect of a mortgage for people whose earnings are good but whose capital resources are limited (for example skilled workers and those who have completed long studies for a professional qualification)' (HM Government, 1971: Para 18).

The White Paper re-affirmed the asset function of housing as an underlying rationale for this approach: 'If the householder buys his house on mortgage, he builds up, by steady saving, a capital asset for himself and his dependants' (1971: 14).

The BSA took the lead in this instance, arguing that building societies should be permitted to advance mortgage finance to greater numbers of potential borrowers, employing 'surplus funds in a way that would further assist the spread of home ownership, which is their central purpose'.<sup>7</sup> This episode is notable for emphasising the crucial link between government supports, growing consumer demand, and evolving lending flexibilities. Governments' homeownership ambitions were bound up with an expansion of the mortgage market, which was underpinned by

tax relief on loan interest and synchronised promotion of the benefits of owning one's home (for reasons of security and investment) by both government and its key partners.

National housing discourse during this period was replete with governmental and business-sector promotion of the asset and investment function of homeownership. During the 1950s, speculative housebuilders made only oblique references to the benefits of buying rather than renting a home, which would mean being 'your own landlord' (*Coventry Evening Telegraph*, 1955) or 'planning for your future' (*Eastbourne Herald*, 1950). But by the 1970s, mortgaged homes were being marketed on their capacity to 'gain in value this year and every year' (*Newcastle Journal*, 1971).

The lending practices of building societies and the selling strategies of builders and agents were of course guided by the hard financial 'encouragements' provided by the state. Malpass (2008) has argued that the mix of supports noted above amounted to a *subsidy*, rewarding individuals who chose (or were able to choose) this tenure.

Covering transaction costs and making 'expensive houses' easier to purchase, through a combination of looser lending rules and tax reliefs, caused a decoupling of the cost of homeownership from income requirements: house prices were no longer scaffolded by earnings, and could now rise independently. The extent to which tax relief and other subsidies to homeownership drive house prices is a perennial debate (see Holmans, 1987; Dorling, 2015). But as Malpass (2008: 67) notes, during the early 1970s HM Treasury 'refused to acknowledge that tax relief was a subsidy' despite Britain experiencing 'its first serious house price boom, when prices rose by 37 per cent in 1972 and 32 per cent in 1973'.

That boom was also predicated on lending rules and credit supply. In September 1971, the Bank of England cut direct controls on lending through its *Competition and Credit Control* policy. This experiment sought to increase credit flexibility (in support of homeownership and business investment) by no longer imposing ceilings on lending by individual banks and instead trying to exert indirect influence over money supply through broader market controls. The experiment was not a success, but it revealed the clear reaction of house prices to credit: a reaction that has more recently been labelled a 'housing-finance' cycle (Ryan-Collins, 2021).

Surging house prices during 1973–4 led the Bank of England to re-establish direct controls on lending through its Supplementary Special Deposit Scheme, but many flexibilities remained with lenders encouraged to support homeownership through the development, 'very quickly', of 'new policies on borrowing and lending'.<sup>8</sup> In the background,

government would continue 'subsidising the less well-off ... to offset the effect of higher interest rates necessary to produce an adequate flow of mortgage funds'.<sup>9</sup>

Sustained government supports and a rapid expansion of mortgage products by the late 1970s fundamentally altered perceptions of homeownership. By this time, 'the relative cheapness of owner-occupation compared with other forms of expenditure [had] been absorbed in the national consciousness, virtually as a self-evident natural right'.<sup>10</sup> Again, a system of tax-efficient landholding, freed from capital gains obligations and supported by tax reliefs, had been strengthened by 'interesting a larger number in its maintenance'.

That strengthening continued during the 1980s, with building societies encouraged to adopt 'more flexible interpretation[s] of their lending rules', since the greatest obstacle to 'downmarket' [or 'sub-prime'] lending was seen as the over-restrictive lending rules which some building societies at branch level continue[d] to apply'.<sup>11</sup> The goal by this decade was to draw the 'less well off' into homeownership. The '*right to buy*' granted to the secure tenants of council homes, through the Housing Act 1980, was one way that this goal would be achieved. Local authorities had been able to build for sale or sell homes to tenants from the 1950s, but were under no obligation to do so. Some, however, engaged in extensive sales programmes. The Greater London Council (GLC), for example, circulated a pamphlet (*A Home of Your Own*) to its tenants in September 1978 in which it highlighted the opportunity to purchase GLC homes. Similar initiatives were taken elsewhere, with effort expended on providing 'marginal purchasers' with a route to homeownership.

Other tools for further expanding homeownership included 'low-cost' vehicles for ownership, including shared ownership and 'low-start' mortgages, in which borrowers would be allowed a larger loan than usual in relation to their incomes.<sup>12</sup> Both of these carried the explicit promise of acquiring housing as an asset. Shared ownership carried the same investment promise: 'you will have a capital stake in your home and therefore the possibility of tax-free capital appreciation in proportion to the share that you own; that is, if you own a 50 per cent share, you will be entitled to 50 per cent of the capital appreciation'.<sup>13</sup>

The distribution of land property via homeownership supports, which began in the 1950s, was entirely credit and tax driven. It depended on cheaper mortgages, riskier patterns of lending (underwritten by government) and eventually the transfer of public assets to new private owners. In order to support homeownership, government accelerated the assetisation of housing through *both* the preferential tax treatment

of private housing consumption *and* through the active promotion of an asset narrative. British households were sold the logic of private accumulation through property, while other tenures – renting in its social and private forms – were heavily denigrated, especially by the New Right after 1979. But supports for homeownership proved expensive. The view that tax relief was not in fact a public subsidy was eventually abandoned, and mortgage interest relief at source (MIRAS), which had replaced the practice of reclaiming tax relief on loan interest from the Inland Revenue in 1983, gradually reduced from 1988 (Drabble, 1990) until being phased out completely in 2000. However, the mortgage market continued to reregulate, maintaining its irrepressible search for new borrowers and new forms of consumption. The asset narrative took a new turn in the 1990s with the rise of buy-to-let products. As with the mortgage lending deregulations of the 1970s (and the drive to create more flexible products), this new pattern of lending set house-prices on a higher upward track. It is now speculative investment that drives those prices, which, in many markets, have now entirely decoupled from in-area earnings.

Historic supports for homeownership, predicated on assetisation, and recent patterns of mortgage lending (often supporting the growth of property portfolios rather than the entry of new buyers into the market) are now driving a concentration of homeownership. The level of owner-occupation across England fell from 67 per cent to 63 per cent in the 10 years to 2017 (Gallent, 2019: 2). The rate among 35 to 44-year-olds fell from 72 per cent to 52 per cent during the same period. The upward march of house prices and (untaxed) capital appreciation, and their decoupling from (taxed) earnings, largely because of a proliferation of speculative rent-seeking behaviours (which extend to the extraction of rent via financial channels, including through mortgage debt securitisation) has produced a residual class reliant on deregulated private renting.

Fifty years ago, in 1973, the housing system comprised relatively affordable homeownership (prices had not yet drifted entirely away from earnings despite the surge triggered by the suspension of direct controls on lending), relatively secure private renting (despite the shift from controlled to regulated tenancies eight years earlier), and a social sector that was still growing (despite episodic and localised municipal sales). Today, in 2023, homeownership is unattainable in many areas, private renting is often low quality, expensive and precarious, and the social sector is either inaccessible or unaffordable to households on the lowest incomes. Those locked out of buying (especially younger households)



often find themselves paying rent to a new landlord class, from a combination of their wage earnings plus, in the case of the lowest earners, public subsidy to rent (in the form of Housing Benefit, now incorporated into Universal Credit). Thus, the redistribution of landed property, underpinned by expanded credit supply, achieved majority interest in private property but created 'generation rent' (and worse situations). The rise of generation rent – a term used in the UK to describe younger people who appear consigned to spend their entire housing careers in renting privately, and unable therefore to share in the supposed benefits of homeownership – signals the tendency of the private housing system towards land concentration, towards the separation and consolidation of rentier and renter classes, as George predicted and observed.

Today, this is largely because credit rationing and supply now favours existing homeowners, exerting downward pressure on owner-occupation and concentrating homeownership in fewer hands. The 'dream' of owner-occupation for the majority has gradually given way to the reality of multiple homeownership and rent extraction by a wealthy minority.

As Forrest and Hirayama (2015, 2018) observe, the era of rising homeownership has been replaced by one of contracting owner-occupation rates, and rising private landlordism. They characterise this as a shift from the 'social project' of expanded owner-occupation ('the centrepiece of the spread of middle class lifestyles' (2015: 234)) to 'late home ownership' involving a contraction of owner-occupation rates, fewer people owning more homes, and rising private landlordism.

After the 2008 debt crisis, and subsequent financial crash and recession, 'unconventional' macroeconomic monetary policy (such as quantitative easing) required a low-interest rate environment to increase lending. This further accelerated the 'assetisation' witnessed during previous decades. An explosion in house prices then became a critical structural constraint to any growth in the owner-occupied sector, as competition in the market for homes led to falling transaction rates, and the consolidation of housing in fewer hands. Housing has transitioned 'from being *socially special* in relation to status, stability and aspiration to being *economically special* as a source of income and magnet for investment' (Forrest and Hirayama, 2015: 236). The shift in the housing narrative to one of 'asset accumulation' (Forrest and Hirayama, 2018: 262) began in Britain in the 1950s. The logical conclusion of that narrative is growing investment in housing for private letting and the view that the most 'sensible financial strategy' for any household is 'to own your own home and somebody else's as well' (Forrest and Hirayama,

2015: 239). It is this central logic, seeded in the tax treatment of housing, and in differential access to loan credit, that acts as a brake on the wider distribution of land through homeownership.

## Land distribution and private accumulation in rural areas

Our concern in this chapter has been largely structural, examining processes that transcend particular geographies. However, in Britain's rural areas, there was a clear progression through the twentieth century from George's fifth to his sixth alternative remedy. After 1919, rural district councils were provided with the loan sanction needed to build public housing and to replace poor quality tied accommodation (Gallent et al., 2022). Access to cheap land, at close to agricultural value, made this possible. But post-war economic prosperity 30 years later, and new road and rail connections from urban areas, facilitated both counter-urbanisation and broader demands for rural land and housing. The costs of acquiring land for public housing grew in the decades after 1945, driving the structural switch, highlighted in this chapter, from supporting public welfare to facilitating private welfare through reduced taxes on homeownership – on redistributed asset-holding.

The supports for homeownership detailed in the main body of this chapter, and the intentional assetisation of housing, affected cities, towns and the countryside alike, albeit in different ways. The tendency towards concentration in patterns of homeownership has been compounded in rural areas by counter-urbanisation and the unequal competition for homes between buyers from different labour markets (and therefore with different income levels) (see Pahl, 1975). That competition has been accentuated by the relative scarcity of rural housing in the post-war period, as planning rules have sought to protect rural amenity and valued landscapes from new development. The greater connectivity of rural areas to urban markets, because of new road infrastructure, caused a growth in retirement and second-home buying from the 1960s onwards. More recently, rent-seeking behaviours, underpinned by the logic of private accumulation, have been amplified by online platforms such as Airbnb, which have driven a proliferation of short-term rentals (STR) across European rural areas (Colomb and Gallent, 2022). In situations of supply scarcity (rural areas are not locations of planned housing growth, and existing housing supply is scattered and limited), such private accumulation strategies will accentuate the concentration of housing wealth, forcing out-competed households either into privately

rented homes (if they have not been lost to the STR trend) or displace them from rural communities altogether. In other words, the assetisation of housing clearly works against the interests of the poorest and most vulnerable households. And, of course, the logic of private accumulation through housing becomes normalised in rural locations, being seen not only as a source of privatised welfare, but also a support for rural economies, delivering broader welfare through trickle-down (someone has to clean those second homes, or mow the lawns).

The reality, however, is that an expansion of homeownership predicated on assetisation has been accompanied by an elimination of other housing options. Where housing is a ‘magnet for investment’, development land becomes unaffordable. This has made it extremely difficult for local councils or housing associations (the ‘registered providers’ of new social housing) to supply non-market alternatives. Henry George did not foresee the full range of means of broadening the distribution of landed property. Taking a cue from nineteenth-century examples and contemporary political philosophy, he imagined that land might be confiscated or nationalised. However, he also imagined a future return of market norms in which land would again be traded and competitive processes would confer advantage and trigger a return to concentration. The political economy of Britain in the twentieth century would not have appeared entirely alien to George: private land enclosure and rent-seeking, and the accumulation of housing wealth predicated on inherited advantage, preferential access to credit and low taxes, would have resulted in the same conclusion – the tendency of any system of private accumulation through land monopoly must be towards greater inequality, in both town and country.

## Notes

- 1 England, Scotland and Wales moved in lockstep for much of the twentieth century, with patterns of homeownership underpinned by common reforms and shared laws. It is only since devolution that paths have diverged.
- 2 Parliamentary Archives SAM/G/25-29.
- 3 National Archives CAB 21/4421.
- 4 National Archives CAB 21/4421.
- 5 National Archives: HLG 117/181.
- 6 Ministry of Housing and Local Government (1953) *Houses: The Next Step*. Cmd. 8996.
- 7 National Archives HLG/118/1027.
- 8 National Archives HLG 118/2937.
- 9 National Archives HLG 118/2937.
- 10 National Archives T 379/25.
- 11 National Archives HLG 118/2618.
- 12 National Archives HLG 118/3774.
- 13 National Archives HLG 118/3774.

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# The land question and postcapitalist countrysides: towards a town–country synthesis

Yousaf Nishat-Botero and Matt Thompson

## Introduction

This chapter identifies what urban–rural struggles and transformations in social relations might move us beyond a capitalist to a postcapitalist mode of production, or mode of *life* (Moore, 2015). In this transition from one mode of life to another, the question of land – the question of the urban and the rural – is of fundamental importance (Foster, 2023). What new ways of thinking about and relating to land would it take to bring about *postcapitalist countrysides*, as the title of this edited collection articulates it? Such a speculative leap requires us first to take a step back to understand historically the land reforms and societal transformations through which capitalism came into being.

This is the move made by an emerging strand within the burgeoning economic planning literature that foregrounds specifically *agricultural* revolutions as the basis for moving beyond capitalism, just as revolutions in food cultivation have laid the social foundations for each preceding mode of re/production (Bernes, 2018, 2020; Clegg and Lucas, 2020; see also Thompson and Nishat-Botero, 2023). If the first agricultural revolution, the Neolithic Revolution, gave birth to many modern institutional forms, including state bureaucracies, (grain) taxation and monocrop production (see Scott, 2017), it also arguably created the ‘countryside’ as we might conceive of it today, as the spatial analogue to townscape.

Agrarian empires and early city-states ruled over large rural hinterlands from urban centres, disciplining their populations through tax collection of grain (Scott, 2017). Over time, under the feudal mode

of production, the countryside came to be associated with the peasantry and their common rights and rites (rituals), as a commons managed collectively (Linebaugh, 2009). This was a domesticated and tamed but relatively 'natural' landscape of mixed arable and pasture farmland – beyond which lay untamed or even uncharted territory or 'wilderness', understood as spaces of *relative* wildness with a degree of autonomy from capitalist and pre-capitalist social forms (Malm, 2018; see also Cronon, 1996). Thus, the countryside emerged as a relational space defined by triadic contrast to urban settlements and wilderness.

This chapter explores contemporary visions of postcapitalist countrysides that evoke, elaborate and mobilise in different ways these deeply related images of town, country and wilderness – and what these imply for landownership and management. To envision postcapitalism, however, we must first gain a clear view of capitalism. In the first part of this chapter, therefore, we define capitalism by tracing its historical emergence out of feudalism and its founding forms of domination and primitive accumulation. Next, we suggest what a communist countryside might look like, in terms of freedom from both feudal and capitalist forms of domination. In the section 'Tracing transitions from feudal to capitalist countryside', we turn to the metabolic rifts that inaugurated the split between town and country, and inscribed capitalism into rural landscapes, before exploring the scaling up and geographical shifting of metabolic rifts through a process of planetary urbanisation. Here, we show how planetary urbanisation entails capitalist incursions into wilderness, which nonetheless retains an emancipatory, postcapitalist potential. In the third section, 'Metabolic, epistemic, and spatial rifts and shifts', we explore how the global capitalist system of petrochemical-fuelled industrial agriculture commodifies the countryside, dispossesses peasants and Indigenous communities for a mass surplus population, and exacerbates ecological destruction and climate breakdown, provoking agrarian and environmental movements to contest these violent processes. We compare capitalist agro-industry with its postcapitalist alternative, agroecology, and explore how an agroecological communism might emerge out of two contrasting visions of the postcapitalist countryside: land-sharing eco-communism and land-sparing half-earth socialism. Finally, we outline the specific institutional innovations and reforms in landownership and management required for an agroecological transition. We conclude by reiterating the importance of transformations to property relations and landownership regimes in any successful transition to a postcapitalist, if not communist, countryside.

## Tracing transitions from feudal to capitalist countryside

The school of thought that has done the most work to define what, precisely, is distinctive about capitalism in relation to its precursor, feudalism, is what's known as Political Marxism, associated with the historians Ellen Meiksins Wood and Robert Brenner (see [Wood, 2016](#); also [Bieler and Morton, 2021](#)). These two thinkers characterise feudalism as a pre-modern state of hierarchical bondage to the land, and the 'lords' of the land, in which a dominant class of landlords wielded political force to extract economic surplus from a subordinate class of serfs, commoners or peasants. This was a class society, much like capitalism, only one mediated by personal rather than impersonal forms of social domination ([Mau, 2023](#)). Under feudalism, agrarian surpluses produced by commoners were extracted by landlords exercising a monopoly on law through customary dues, tributes, rents and labour services under the threat of violence.

Across Europe, this patchwork of 'parcellised sovereignty' – very local and personal relations of domination fusing political and economic power, and governing peasants' everyday life ([Bieler and Morton, 2021](#)) – gave way to the centralised sovereignty of monarchies and absolutist states. It was the modern territorial state – increasingly controlled by bourgeois class interests for the extension of exchange relations – that enabled the transition from feudalism to capitalism through the legislative, administrative and military facilitation of violent acts of enclosure. Beginning in sixteenth-century northwestern Europe, this process of 'primitive accumulation' achieved two major transformations of social relations with respect to land and labour ([Hodkinson, 2012](#)). First, it enclosed common land as private property, consolidated for large-scale and increasingly mechanised agricultural production for the emerging world market – sowing the seeds for our contemporary system of petrochemical-fuelled industrial agriculture. Second, it dispossessed commoners, both from their feudal bonds and from their common land rights and rites ([Linebaugh, 2009](#)). This newly landless class of labourers were made 'free' in a double sense: liberated from feudal ties and cut free from the means of subsistence; free to sell their labour on the market or face starvation ([Bieler and Morton, 2021](#)). Industrial cities thus swelled with the ranks of the displaced and dispossessed. The depopulation and depeasantisation of the countryside was a precondition for the contested rise and consolidation of capitalist labour regimes, large-scale manufacturing, and world trade through increasingly urbanised socio-spatial arrangements ([Spanier and Feola, 2022](#)).



The processes unleashed by primitive accumulation continue to this day, through forms of ‘accumulation-by-dispossession’ that David Harvey sees as fundamental to the reproduction of capitalist society (see [Castree et al., 2022](#)). The urban–agrarian structure of capitalism has generated ‘depeasantisation’ across the world, becoming especially salient in the Global South in the last quarter of the twentieth century, when the Green Revolution combined with urban industrialisation to force peasants into sprawling mega-cities ([Taşdemir Yaşın, 2022](#)). These are the historical origins of the ‘spatial rift’ ([Saito, 2023: 26](#)) between town and country that defines contemporary urbanisation and the geographical form of modern industrial society – a significant structuring relationship we return to below.

Political Marxism’s genius is to see the transition from feudalism to capitalism not as driven by development of the productive forces – by technological innovations such as the invention of the plough or crop rotation – but rather by transformations in the social relations of production, notably enclosures of common land and the establishment of private property relations that historically underpin the labour-capital relation ([Bieler and Morton, 2021](#)).

### The mute compulsion of market dependency

It was only with the advent of capitalism, then, that the *personal, political* domination of feudalism was largely transformed into an *impersonal, economic* form of domination through markets; a social relation that Søren Mau ([2023](#)), elaborating on Marx, characterises as ‘mute compulsion’ – capitalism’s distinctive form of economic power operating alongside the coercive political power of the state and the consent-based power of ideology. Unlike the personal power of feudal landlords over peasants, backed by violence, capitalism operates through a more diffuse, abstract form of power mediated through impersonal market mechanisms that effectively compel *both* labourers *and* capitalists – each at the mercy of the competitive market, in different ways, for their survival (see [Roberts, 2017](#)). This represents, as Hayek ([2002: 19](#)) put it, ‘a kind of impersonal coercion that will cause many individuals to change their behavior in a way that could not be brought about by any kind of instructions or commands’.

Whereas feudalism fused economic and political power into one system, capitalism ideologically separates economy from polity, state from market, public from private – concealing their deep co-constitution; the state, for instance, plays a central role in shaping

and regulating markets and ‘planning for competition’ (Bonefeld, 2017). Problematising the ontological and epistemological foundations of capitalism, Jason W. Moore (2015) argues that the Cartesian dualisms articulated in liberal-bourgeois thought – between mind and matter, subject and object, humanity and nature, economy and polity, production and social reproduction, and so on – are less a reflection of underlying social reality than an ideological expression of capital’s material interests in maintaining a colonial outside or subordinate other – externalised ‘cheap natures’ to be conquered and plundered for profit. This idea can be extended to urban–rural dualisms that, following Brenner and Ghosh (2022: 877), assume and reproduce the ‘analytic externalization’ of the rural, or the countryside, from epistemologies of the urban.

Such epistemological ‘rifts’ can be understood as reflections of the original ‘metabolic rift’ that capitalism opened up between society and nature, manifested spatially in the division between town and country, and politically in the domination of the former over the latter (Bernes, 2018: 342–3; Thomas Clement, 2011). For Moore (2015), it is the shifting dialectic between (urban) ‘zones of capitalisation’ and (rural) ‘zones of appropriation’ that makes accumulation at the world-scale possible (also see Conroy, 2023).

The transition to capitalism was, therefore, less a clean break with feudalism, more an overlaying sedimentation in which newer forms of domination coexist and conjoin with older forms, such as slavery, forced labour and sharecropping (Bieler and Morton, 2021). Monopoly rent and landlord power shape much of contemporary capitalism, through the ‘value-rent-finance nexus’ (Purcell et al., 2020). Value takes the form of interest-bearing finance and rents on access to land and resources, in addition to the profits and wages distributed through the capital–labour relation.

The idea of a sharp break between feudalism and capitalism is also problematised by theorists like Cedric Robinson (2021) who emphasise enduring continuities and intersections through the lens of racism, colonialism and empire. For Robinson, as Robin D. G. Kelley (2017) puts it, ‘capitalism and racism ... did not break from the old order but rather evolved from it to produce a modern world system of “racial capitalism” dependent on slavery, violence, imperialism, and genocide’. In other words, capitalist regimes of value, power and profit are articulated, stabilised and reproduced within and through racialised, gendered and imperial partitions of urban/rural social space (Conroy, 2023). The dispossession of land, and displacement of its Indigenous inhabitants, is

indeed also mediated by imaginaries of landscapes as *terra nullius*, and development discourses based on individualised conceptions of landed property rights and enclosure (Fields, 2017).

Such enduring, arguably premodern, forms of social mediation imply that capitalism is better understood as ‘an articulated amalgam of past and present modes of production woven together by the disciplinary compulsions of the capitalist world market’ (Arboleda, 2022: 157). This is a *landscape ontology* that, to quote Jamie Peck (2019: 50), ‘denotes hybrid complexity, structural asymmetry, and contradictory coexistence, rather than systemic singularity, equilibrium, or purity’.

Abolishing domination for a communist countryside?

Another way of thinking about capitalism’s hybrid constitution is through the three classical factors of production – capital, labour, land – each with their own form of surplus value extraction: profits/finance (capital), wages (labour), rents (land). If capitalism is defined by the relationship between the first two – capital and labour – it is nonetheless inextricably linked, and shaped by, the third, land and the rents collected through its ownership. Henri Lefebvre was among the first Marxists to highlight this ‘trinity’ formula that ‘transcends the capital–labour binary to bring in a third cluster of factors – land, the landowning class, ground rent, and agriculture’ (Lefebvre, 2022: xv). ‘Land’, of course, should be understood expansively as representing the ecologies that exist on land, as representing extra-human nature.

Indeed, recent theorising in Ecological Marxism suggests that we should think bigger than the labour–capital relation – to theorise capitalism as structured by the capital–nature relation, where ‘nature’ includes human labour as well as land and ecological resources (Moore, 2015; Patel, 2022; Taşdemir Yaşın, 2022). It is this relation to land and nature (and rents on nature) that enables a clear view of the capitalist – and postcapitalist – countryside. A first cut at defining a postcapitalist countryside, then, would foreground freedom from the domination of landlords and rents on nature of all kinds.

This brings us to the agricultural revolution thesis, which paints a picture of the urban – agrarian relations that might underpin the postcapitalist countryside (Bernes, 2018, 2020; Clegg and Lucas, 2020). If it was the first agricultural revolution, the Neolithic Revolution, that tethered previously ‘free’ hunter-gatherers to the land, as domesticated peasants under the personal dominion of feudal rule, and it was the second, capitalist agricultural revolution that loosened this tether, cutting

the ties of feudalism yet tethering people anew to the impersonal ‘mute compulsions’ (Mau, 2023) of market dependency, then the postcapitalist agricultural revolution will have to cut the tethers of both impersonal and personal domination once and for all (Clegg and Lucas, 2020). Here, postcapitalism is imagined as something akin to ‘communism’ – a society of freely associated peoples engaged in cooperative labour within the horizon of a common plan.

Jasper Bernes (2021) suggests two tests for achieving communism: abolishing both the labour–capital relation (law of value) *and* class society altogether. Indeed, for capitalism to be transcended, both personal and impersonal forms of domination must be abolished. Communism would be free from the unaccountable power of both political and economic compulsion: a ‘classless, moneyless, stateless society; freely associated workers meeting their needs with the means of production under conscious and planned control’ (Bernes, 2021). This gives us some idea of the elements of a postcapitalist or communist countryside – agricultural land that is managed collectively, through forms of common ownership and democratic planning, free from the dominations of either local landlords or global markets, and that is put to socially productive use for meeting the needs of all.

## Metabolic, epistemic, and spatial rifts and shifts

However, this first cut at a postcapitalist countryside focuses only on the human dimension and misses the other side of the dualism: nature. Such a split in thinking – and organisation (Bernes, 2018: 342–3) – reflects the ‘metabolic rift’ that has opened between society and nature, an idea first articulated by Marx, and elaborated by various Ecological Marxists, not least John Bellamy Foster (Foster, 2000; see also McClintock, 2010; Napoletano et al., 2015). In metabolic rift theory, labour – that is, work to transform nature for human use – is understood as the mediator between humanity and the rest of nature: ‘man [sic], through his own actions, mediates, regulates and controls the metabolism between himself and nature’ (Marx, 1976: 283). Prior to capitalism, this ‘social metabolism’ between society and nature operated broadly sustainably with the needs of nature; nutrients and materials harvested as resources were returned to their source through sustainable cycles.

Feudalism’s class character notwithstanding, it was *relatively* sustainable in ecological terms, with serfs working the land *in situ* and returning nutrients to the soil, including through crop rotation and animal

and human waste recycling. According to Marx, it was the advent of *wage-labour* as a distinctive social relation generalised through capitalist urbanisation that disrupted this social metabolism and inaugurated an irreparable metabolic rift. Marx understood land (soil) and labour as the two ‘original sources of all wealth’ (quoted in Patel, 2022), both of which were exploited and degraded in the *longue durée* of capitalist metabolic regimes.

From biophysical to atmospheric and human metabolic rifts and back again

Drawing on chemist Justus Liebig’s work, Marx saw how modern industrial agriculture ‘robbed’ the soil of its nutrients, leading to soil degradation and exhaustion. Two basic mechanisms were held responsible for this biophysical rift in soil fertility (Saito, 2023: 24–8; see also McClintock, 2010; Thomas Clement, 2011). First, a ‘temporal rift’ emerged between ‘nature’s time’ and ‘capital’s time’ (Saito, 2023). Intensifying market competition between farmers of newly-enclosed agricultural land incentivised the maximisation of profits over careful maintenance or stewardship; long-term fertility sacrificed for short-term productivity through the extraction of nutrients from the soil without their replenishment. In seeking to accelerate the turnover time of capital by revolutionising productive forces and bringing new technologies to bear on more efficient production – disciplining, accelerating temporalities that jar with natural cycles – capitalism is especially adept at incentivising the discovery or invention of artificial chemical fertilisers. As capitalism accelerates away from – and exhausts – natural nutrient cycles it taps into older temporalities, harnessing geological time in the form of natural deposits such as fossil fuels.

Second, enclosures forced commoners into burgeoning cities and reinforced the ‘spatial rift’ between town and country. Industrial urban forms lacked the mechanisms for returning nutrients consumed as food by the urban working class to the countryside to replenish the soil for food growing, thereby spatially severing the nutrient cycle. Human waste – ‘night soil’ – was, at best, pumped into sewerage systems and flushed out to sea. What starts as a relatively localised rift between town and country escalates into colonial spatial rifts at increasingly global scales. In the original case of soil exhaustion observed by Liebig and Marx, emerging capitalist societies in Europe turned to other sources of fertility, notably *guano*, especially nutrient-rich excrement from seabirds and bats found primarily in Peru (Patel, 2022). Thus the metabolic rift in

European soil fertility fuelled violent colonial conquest and the expansion of capitalism globally (Moore, 2015). To this day, industrial agriculture is unsustainably dependent on the “mining” of soils elsewhere on the planet’ (Duncan, 1996: 97).

This reveals how temporal rifts become spatial rifts, and vice versa, displacing metabolic rifts one onto another through a ricocheting process of geographical displacement, rescaling and restructuring. As nature is depleted or thwarted in its regenerative capacities it gets propped up by spatial and temporal ‘subsidies’. ‘Whenever metabolism is rescaled to incorporate a new subsidy’, argues McClintock (2010: 194), ‘a new ecological rift is created because it is impossible to close the loop between source and sink of the subsidy’. Such ecological subsidies thus borrow or import energy from elsewhere or other times. The result is a climate emergency caused by the harvesting for fuel of deposits of past ecological cycles. Each technological or spatial fix of specific metabolic rifts generates further metabolic rifts. Rifts in the nitrogen cycle governing soil fertility have escalated into rifts in the carbon cycle governing climate; biophysical rifts transmuted into biospheric and atmospheric rifts at a planetary scale.

But rifts do not only escalate ‘up’ scales; the social metabolic rift also expresses itself *within* organisms. In the 1844 *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, Marx described nature as humanity’s *inorganic body* (Marx, 1976: 25). Shortly after, in *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels argued that historical materialism must be premised on an analysis of human *corporeal organisation* and its relations to (the rest of) nature (Marx and Engels, 2000; also see Mau, 2023). More recently, Raj Patel (2022) shows how the metabolic rift is now no longer merely a metaphor for social metabolism but descriptive of a rift in actual human metabolisms, with individual microbiomes among the affluent populations of the Global North increasingly weak, malnourished and less robust than the poorer, more biodiverse microbiomes of the Global South – contributing to a litany of diseases of affluence from asthma and obesity to cancer and depression – and fuelling a cottage industry in the ‘mining’ and colonial export of human excrement transplants from the rich microbiota of the Indigenous Yanomami of South America.

Attempts to address metabolic rifts in one place thus entail the displacement of ecological crises elsewhere and the imperial export of capitalism’s ‘entropy problem’ (Moore, 2023). Capitalism is thus a system of ‘rifts and shifts’ (McClintock, 2010) in a constant process of geographical restructuring in relentless search for ‘cheap natures’ (Moore, 2015) from which to extract value and plug gaps in its unsustainable

social metabolism. The challenge for postcapitalist praxis is to heal these metabolic rifts; to end the colonial extraction of ecological subsidies and the imperial export of entropy.

### The town–country antithesis

It is the spatial aspect of metabolic rift theory – between town and country – that most concerns us here. Marx and Engels saw the ‘town–country antithesis’ as the spatial manifestation of the fundamental dialectical relation defining capitalism, the labour–capital antagonism, such that ‘the abolition of the antithesis between town and country is no more and no less utopian than the abolition of the antithesis between capitalists and wage workers’ (Engels, quoted in [Thomas Clement, 2011](#)). In 1878, Marx and Engels wrote that ‘[t]he present poisoning of the air, water and land can be put an end to only by the fusion of town and country’ (quoted in [McClintock, 2010](#): 195). Indeed, the abolition of the town–country division was one of ten measures proposed in *The Communist Manifesto*. In *Anti-Dühring*, Engels argues that the abolition of the town–country antithesis has become not only possible, but also ‘a direct necessity of industrial production itself, just as it has become a necessity for agricultural production and, besides, of public health’ (quoted in [Foster, 2023](#): 7).

Since Marx and Engels, the town–country divide has largely been side-lined as a merely ‘epiphenomenal’ or secondary contradiction of capitalism (see [Thomas Clement, 2011](#)). However, some Ecological Marxists have foregrounded the spatial rift as one of the primary contradictions of our time. Moore (2003), for instance, suggests that ‘the rural-urban dialectic [is] the overarching ecogeographical framework of the modern world’. Indeed, the town–country antagonism can be seen as a microcosm of the core–periphery dynamics shaping the uneven global development of colonial-capitalism.

### Planetary urbanisation and the rural

A vibrant sub-field within critical geography seeks to understand contemporary dynamics of capitalist urban development through the lens of ‘planetary urbanisation’ – a concept originally developed by Lefebvre (see [Brenner, 2014](#); [Goonewardena, 2018](#)) – and most recently extended as ‘planetary rural geographies’ ([Wang et al., 2023](#)). This literature starts from the popular refrain that we are now living in an ‘urban age’ ([Brenner and Schmid, 2014](#)) but goes much further than the usual quantitative demographic renderings of urbanisation to suggest

how, qualitatively, even the countryside and rural hinterlands have now been incorporated within the logic of ‘the urban’. Planetary urbanisation thus describes the dialectical dynamic between ‘implosions’ of people, products and ideas within dense urban agglomerations and ‘explosions’ of energy, materials and technologies across networked space, including rural land and commodity frontiers in what used to be wilderness zones (Brenner, 2014).

Planetary urbanisation works in two directions: first, outwards from cities to understand forms of ‘extended urbanisation’ beyond centripetal settlements to also include all the centrifugal infrastructures, networks and supply chains that make these concentrations of people possible; and, second, from within the everyday life of rural space, increasingly connected to urban ways of life and rhythms through the saturation of transport, telecommunications and information technologies and the industrialisation of agriculture (Lefebvre, 2022). Modern life in the countryside begins to resemble that of the town – a far cry from the rites of feudal rurality – just as its form and function are reshaped to serve the needs of capitalist urbanisation. Not only does the countryside get subsumed within planetary urbanisation, so too does the town – the *polis* – and its traditions of democratic citizenship in the agora and the assembly (Bookchin, 1987). This is, as Marx inferred (quoted in Mau 2023: 25), ‘the general domination of capital over the countryside’ writ large.

For planetary urbanisation theorists, in this *longue-durée* reconfiguration of social space, the rural has been subsumed by the urban to such an extent that it is no longer adequate to speak of urban and rural as separate and independent realities (Spanier and Feola, 2022: 160). As formulated by various traditions of Ecological Marxism (Gellert, 2018), the metabolic transformations accompanying the capitalist reorganisation of town and countryside have enrolled human and extra-human natures for the expansion and reproduction of capital in increasingly alienating and exploitative ways. However, recent work on ‘planetary rural geographies’ has pushed back against the epistemological privileging of the urban, and its ontological subsumption of the rural, and called for attention to be turned to the ‘more-than-human and more-than-terrestrial relations’ that traverse ‘the globe, across city and countryside, and above and below the Earth’s surface’, arguing for the rural as a space of agency irreducible – albeit dialectically related – to that of the urban (Wang et al., 2023).

The upshot is that struggles for the postcapitalist city must be co-articulated with struggles for the postcapitalist countryside. To call for postcapitalist land reform, then, is to call for a reconciliation of town



and country within the horizon of a new urban and, therefore also, agricultural revolution. One ‘half’ cannot, to paraphrase Vettese et al. (2022: 116), solve the crises of the other ‘half’. The way in which planetary urbanisation has created an increasingly industrialised countryside – and its contestation by new social movements – is the subject to which we turn next.

## Composing and contesting the contemporary capitalist countryside

Since the second, capitalist agricultural revolution (Clegg and Lucas, 2020), the countryside has been dramatically transformed from a well-populated and lived-in landscape – of finely-mixed arable and pasture fields, paddocks and gardens separated by hedgerows and coppices, with biodiverse crop rotation and onsite recycling of waste as manure, ploughed into soil by animals, living side-by-side with humans – into a highly regimented, industrialised and technologically augmented environment largely evacuated of human and non-human life. Here, livestock are concentrated in intensive factory farms and fields stripped of hedgerows for vast tracts of monocultural cash crop production, made viable only by fossil-fuelled machinery and synthetic chemical fertilisers and increasingly toxic herbicides and pesticides manufactured with petrochemicals.

Through the domination of capital over the countryside, farming has become a ‘chemical-mechanical practice ... as a biophysical process accelerated by industrial fertilisers, drugs and machines’ and an increasingly ‘biologically-genetically modified and technologically controlled practice’ (Taşdemir Yaşın, 2022: 1368). Farming is now big business – dominated by an oligopoly of agro-industrial transnational corporations that control production and distribution, from seeds to machinery. Corporate control is extending to the genetic (com) modification of seeds, designed to be infertile so that farmers are rendered utterly dependent on the agribusiness corporations that develop and patent these abysmal technologies (Mau, 2023). Thankfully, farmers’ unions and social movements are successfully pushing back against these patents – including struggles to develop national-popular food labour processes broadly aligned with agroecological principles.

## Colonising wilderness zones and urbanising peasants

However, not only is existing countryside coming under increased domination of capital, but so too are the ‘wilderness’ spaces that remain relatively undomesticated, notwithstanding the role of Indigenous communities in inhabiting and maintaining those ecologies, as well as that of the maroon communities of the Americas (Robinson, 2021). Wild land here is ‘an abomination in the eyes of capitalists, for it is a space of resources that has not yet been subjugated to the rule of exchange-value’ (Malm, 2018: 11). This includes the ‘land grabbing’ and deforestation of old-growth rainforests such as in the Amazon and their transformation into plantations for monocultural ‘flex crops’ such as soy beans or palm trees that can be used for food, feed and/or fuel (Taşdemir Yaşın, 2022). Replacing carbon-emitting coal and oil with cleaner and ‘greener’ biofuels such as soybean or palm oil is capitalism’s attempt at reinventing itself as a bioeconomy. Such plantations are, of course, plugged into global circuits of speculative finance that expect returns on investment, binding these hyper-capitalist countrysides into far-reaching debt relations that only exacerbate extraction, reflecting agri-business relations in general.

The expansion of such commodity frontiers into ‘wilderness’ zones through the violent incursion of monocrop plantations is so pervasive – and ecologically impactful – that it’s bequeathed the moniker ‘Plantationocene’, as an alternative to the more familiar ‘Anthropocene’ or ‘Capitalocene’ framings of our present geological era (see Moore, 2023). Plantationocene captures how modern colonial plantations employ sophisticated technologies to dominate, programme and *enslave* non-human as well as human natures in the production of surplus value at the great expense of socio-ecological health. The plantation economy should be situated within the historical development of capitalism (Cooke, 2003), its urban/rural landscapes understood as sites for the emergence of capitalism’s successive modes of ‘metabolic domination’ (Mau, 2023). Here, the countryside as we knew it becomes barely recognisable.

This ‘urbanised’ form of countryside is a product of the very same processes responsible for the growth of mega-cities. The third agricultural revolution, the ‘Green Revolution’ in the Global South, enabled the rapid urbanisation and industrialisation of countries such as China, India and Brazil, aided and abetted by the dispossession and displacement of millions of peasants previously populating the countryside. This momentous process of ‘depeasantisation’ created sprawling informal settlements around growing megacities, but not necessarily the industrial jobs to employ these dispossessed, urbanised peasants. Depeasantisation

in the Global South has not been matched by proletarianisation, as it was in much of the Global North a century or two earlier, with the creation of a vast global reserve army of under-employed and informal workers (Taşdemir Yaşın, 2022). This surplus population performs the tasks that capitalism does not want to pay for, such as informal waste work and the recycling and revalorising of the waste produced by industrial production and urban consumption (Irvine, 2023). The agrarian question, therefore, remains tightly bound to the urban question: forced underconsumption, poverty and starvation for the displaced rural surplus population subsidises urban overconsumption; people dispossessed as neither (rural) peasant nor (urban) proletarian. These developments highlight the urban dimensions of the new agrarian question, and the associated socio-spatial shifts of emerging ‘urban agrarian struggles’ (Shattuck et al., 2023: 500–502).

### Climate justice and agrarian movements in the fight for an agro-ecological alternative

As industrial agriculture exhausts soil fertility and sees a diminishing Ecological Return on Investment (EROI), it attempts to artificially prop-up falling yields with technological subsidies that in turn require increasing injections of cheap natures and entail the displacement of metabolic rifts elsewhere, in a relentless process of endlessly deferring, exporting and escalating capitalism’s ‘entropy problem’ (Moore, 2015). Meanwhile, intensive technological subsidies produce rising toxications and therefore compound ecological crises that boomerang back to create an ever-faster falling EROI and ‘ecological distribution conflicts’ (Martinez-Alier, 2022). Thus we witness the intimate and deepening relationship between the agro-industrial food crisis and the climate crisis – what Taşdemir Yaşın (2022) describes as the ‘environmentalisation of the agrarian question’ and the ‘agrarianisation of the climate question’. The two social movements resisting each process are beginning to come together – a harbinger, perhaps, of the postcapitalist countryside yet to come.

Historically, the climate/environmental justice and agrarian/peasant movements have been organised, and studied, as separate phenomena. The first associated most obviously with middle-class consumption-based politics in urban centres of the Global North; the second with peasants and Indigenous communities at the colonial frontiers of capitalist extraction in the Global South. Since 2010, however, we have witnessed a convergence between these two movements – partly

explicable by the intensification of land grabbing and food crises and their manifestation in climate breakdown; partly by improved transnational movement-building and cross-class alliance-making (Taşdemir Yaşın, 2022). Food has become the new battleground of climate politics – the ‘belly of the revolution’, as Bernes (2018) puts it. For Max Ajl (2021: 127), this is ‘a hatch which when opened up, allows us to see and manage an even larger element of social reproduction: the human relationship with the non-human world’. It is increasingly understood across these movements that they must unravel the unholy trinity between capital, labour and land, and push for socio-ecological sovereignty. Here, food sovereignty, land sovereignty and climate justice struggles are fusing together for a broader ‘anti-systemic socio-ecological justice’ movement (Taşdemir Yaşın, 2022).

The socio-ecological justice movement unites dispossessed peasants, colonised Indigenous communities, the informal waste workers of megacities, guerrilla gardeners, climate justice campaigners and urban food growers around the shared material practices coalescing as ‘agroecology’ (Ajl, 2021; Heron and Heffron, 2022). Agroecology describes alternative farming techniques and land stewardship practices that attempt to heal the metabolic rifts opened by industrial agriculture. It includes the fine mixing of ecological habitats with agricultural production for more robust, biodiverse and self-sustaining food ecosystems; the (re)integration of crops and animals and trees; the (re)use of human and animal waste as fertiliser; crop rotation, mixing and synergistic circularity between agricultural inputs and outputs; the (re)use of human labour over machines; the development of new marketplaces and networks through socialised and localised food supply chains, and wider translocal cooperative federated systems for distribution and exchange.

Where agro-industry produces diminishing returns, such ‘small-scale agro-ecological farming promises to increase the EROI of agriculture’ (Taşdemir Yaşın, 2022: 1366). Harnessing Indigenous knowledge and cooperative landownership and management in Palestine, for instance, agroecology has provided ways to grow crops without irrigation (Fattaleh and Albarghouthi, 2022) – something of increasing importance for drought-prone regions around the world. At its most radical, perhaps, agroecology points towards ‘a land-sharing eco-communism defined by intricate matrices of urban and rural land uses, conservation and rewilding, stewarded in common. A patchwork landscape of human and nonhuman flourishing’ (Heron and Heffron, 2022: 121). Ajl (2021: 118) describes this as a ‘Planning for a Planet of Fields’ that puts more agriculture in cities, makes rural areas more urban and improves the

conditions of the food labour process within the horizon of a common plan centred on agroecological principles. This would be an urban–rural planning that calls ‘into question who owns the land, who works the land, and for what purpose’, breaking down ‘the division between town and country, core and periphery in practice’ (Heron and Heffron, 2022: 127).

### Land-sharing eco-communism versus half-earth socialism

If agroecology is an element in the synthesis, if not total abolition, of town and country, for ‘land-sharing eco-communism’ (Heron and Heffron, 2022), what place does it have within the horizon of another prominent alternative: socialist planning for half-earth? Half-earth socialism proposes eroding the separation of town and country by harnessing the notion of ‘wilderness’, understood as the ‘forgotten third’ of the town–country antagonism (Vettese and Pendergrass, 2022; Vettese et al., 2022). A socialist reinterpretation of E. O. Wilson’s notion of half-earth (see Seymour, 2022), this implies rewilding massive tracts of terrestrial land – half the earth’s surface – to protect biodiversity, spatially restructure renewable energies, reduce carbon emissions and restore natural buffers against new zoonoses (Vettese et al., 2022: 117). This is a vision for a *land-sparing* ‘half-earth socialism’ in which half of the earth is ‘used for renewable-energy infrastructure and nature preserves to sequester carbon and pathogens, and protect biodiversity’ (Vettese et al., 2022: 117). Much of this freeing up of land depends on returning farmland to wilderness by ending animal husbandry and shifting towards a ‘mass veganism’ supported by urban agriculture, and allowances for ‘indigenous hunting’ (Vettese et al., 2022: 117).

According to critics, however, the half-earth framing is far from innocent, implying the confiscation of Indigenous territories and the resettling of much of the planet’s population within designated areas (see Kellam, 2022; Schmelzer et al., 2022: 245–6). The ecological conservatism with which it is associated also implies subordinating, if not erasing, local knowledge-practices through technocratic forms of planning (Heron and Heffron, 2022: 126). A different, potentially more radical, relationship to wilderness can be found in the histories of *marronage*: the fugitive practices of enslaved peoples that escaped from plantations into the wild as a space of refuge and rebellion. Malm (2018: 12) writes that ‘while the plantations were confines for the tyranny of the masters, beyond them now lay a relative wilderness. The masters detested that space as not-yet-cleared, untamed, savage – And in exactly the same proportion, slaves cherished it as a land of freedom’. These

‘maroon’ communities and ecologies held the promise of a world without domination, ‘where the curse of exchange-value has been lifted and all sorts of other generative forces are given free reign’ (Malm, 2018: 28).

This episode in ‘the people’s history of wilderness’ (Malm, 2018) counters conceptions of wilderness as untouched by forms of human habitation (Cronon, 1996) – views of nature that have written people out of landscapes and informed racialised and colonial forms of land conservation and rewilding. While the category of wilderness is absent from Heron and Heffron’s (2022) theorisation of the town–country antithesis and its communist synthesis, such wild ecologies arguably have a place within their vision of the postcapitalist countryside. Nonetheless, Heron and Heffron (2022: 126) find much agreement between their land-sharing eco-communism and Vettese and Pendergrass’ (2022) land-sparing half-earth socialism. Aspects of the latter’s socialist recuperation of half-earth are also comparable to notions of planned degrowth (Foster, 2023), when understood as a democratically planned programme of ‘un-building’, against the capitalist abstractions that lead to the domination of nature. So what would a postcapitalist countryside – bringing together agroecology and democratically planned degrowth – look like in practice?

### Towards agroecological commoning and land stewardship

An agroecological transition implies the radical greening of cities and the (re)peopling of agricultural lands, such that urban and rural are synthesised in more equitable and sustainable terms. A major component is the growth of urban agriculture, of ‘farming the city’ – knowledge-intensive urban farming, self-provisioning, community gardening and cooperative market gardens in cities and suburbs; food growing re-centred in urban everyday life (McClintock, 2010). Another is the transformation of planetary supply chains and capitalist logistical infrastructures into more localised and socialised systems that support agroecology – through the development of municipalist supply chains (see Thompson and Nishat-Botero, 2023) and ‘community-supported agriculture’ (CSA) networks (Bonfert, 2022). Such democratically planned systems of provisioning would require regionally federated structures of cooperating assemblies and cooperatives, organised perhaps on the principles of municipalist ‘confederalism’ as practised in Rojava (see Bookchin, 1987), whereby democratic delegates could coordinate production and distribution at various scales with the help of Big Data and computing technologies (Thompson and Nishat-Botero, 2023).

Municipalist federations and CSA networks may provide the kind of organisational infrastructures needed to connect agroecological systems translocally, coordinate cooperative supply chains and build postcapitalist countrysides at scale, while reducing material throughput for degrowth (see Colombo et al., 2023 on post-growth scaling). This also implies a transformation of the territorial and institutional form of the state – from one based on national sovereignty over imagined communities of the capitalist nation, to bioregional territories organised, perhaps, around the socio-ecological infrastructures for managing biomes and water-basins and governed by cooperative confederations of directly-democratic municipalist bioregions (Bookchin, 1987). Hence the next (fourth, postcapitalist) agricultural revolution will be an urban revolution – and so too a logistical revolution (Bernes, 2013, 2018; Clegg and Lucas, 2020).

Such a transition is only possible through the dissolution of capitalist social relations and their reconstitution as new forms of mediation. First, the feudal-capitalist separation between landlord and tenant and the domination of the latter by the former must be abolished in law. Just as, for instance, the residual layer in property rights hanging over from feudalism – landlord–tenant relations – was rearticulated within capitalist forms of private property (Blomley, 2004), any transition to postcapitalism will necessarily occur through the innovation of new social relations and their expression as property regimes. In common law countries, this means instituting a ‘third estate’ – a ‘common’ form of property beyond freehold and leasehold, landlordship and tenancy, that can express the currently contradictory idea of cooperative stewardship, of all individual stakeholders being simultaneously both collective landlords and individual tenants, and neither (see Thompson, 2020).

Common property regimes such as limited-equity cooperatives and community land trusts (CLTs) may provide the transitional measures for reconstructing the countryside beyond capitalism. Co-ops and CLTs, among other forms of common ownership, can be seen as articulations of the commons – imperfectly expressed within the constraining coordinates of capitalist law, founded on the residues of feudalism (Thompson, 2020). CLTs, in particular, present a promising institutional form for common land sovereignty and the stewardship of agroecology, in separating the ownership of land from that of the buildings, improvements or activities upon it, and bringing the land under a form of collective and democratic *stewardship*, or trusteeship, rather than property ownership *per se*, through various covenants and constitutional mechanisms. Through its broad-based tripartite governance structure and emphasis on stewardship over ownership, the CLT model partly overcomes the

problem of simply reproducing inward-looking enclosures attributable to other forms of common property, notably co-ops, seen as collectivised but nonetheless private ownership. Common property regimes, therefore, need embedding within wider structures for democratic decision-making and cooperative coordination, such as the municipalist federations and CSA networks outlined above.

Such common property institutions imply a central role for the state through a re-orientation towards ‘public-common partnerships’ – in, against and beyond the prevailing neoliberal public-private model (see [Thompson, 2020](#): 284) – as vehicles for socio-ecological reparations and development and co-articulation of struggles over land, labour and ecology for the transformation of the urban agrarian everyday ([Shattuck et al., 2023](#): 500–2). They also imply other important transitional measures to be taken by the state, especially with regards to land tax. If the role of rents and rentiers in capitalism is to regulate capitalist land markets and coordinate capital accumulation by ‘taxing away’ the excess profits made at favourable locations, eliminate unfair advantages and equalise profit rates to intensify inter-capitalist competition and incentivise innovation (see [Castree et al., 2022](#)) – but thereby leading to extractive rentierism, speculative property bubbles, and continued domination by financiers and landlords – then the transition to postcapitalism would necessarily appropriate and redirect this function of land rents for socially and ecologically beneficial ends.

An important step towards breaking this ‘value-rent-finance nexus’ ([Purcell et al., 2020](#)) is through a land value tax (LVT) – an annual tax on increased market value of land accruing through unearned locational advantages and public investments in surrounding infrastructures (see [Ryan-Collins, 2021](#)). The CLT movement describes this as the ‘unearned social increment’, which is appropriated by CLTs for community benefit ([Thompson, 2020](#)). However, this kind of common stewardship is not nearly sufficiently numerous nor replicable fast enough to tackle the issue of financial speculation, rentierism and land banking at the speed and scale required for an agroecological transition. For this, we need an LVT levied by the state on all private landowners alongside the socialisation of land and other structural ownership reforms ([Ryan-Collins, 2021](#)). But the state would need democratising; revenues from such taxation would need to be channelled into democratic economic planning bodies, composed by the public and common institutions outlined above (see [Sorg, 2023](#)).



## Conclusion

In this chapter we have shown how the countryside emerged as a spatial analogue to townscape in the transition from feudalism to capitalism, bound up with pastoral imaginaries of the commons and common rites. With the capitalist agricultural revolution, the developmental trajectories of the town and country became divided like never before, with the countryside transformed into an industrialised and depopulated landscape through violent enclosures dispossessing peasants and forcing them into wage-labour in cities. This was accompanied by the eclipse of pre-capitalist forms of personal, political domination by capitalism's novel forms of impersonal, economic domination by markets and the imperatives of surplus value. The ensuing process of depeasantisation, industrialisation and toxification of the countryside has gathered pace through a planetary urbanisation that has subordinated rural life to urban accumulation and opened potentially irreparable planetary metabolic rifts.

We suggested how it is only by unifying struggles against the incursions of capital in both urban and rural spaces – and wilderness – that we will ever begin to heal the metabolic rifts causing the climate emergency and food crises now destroying human and more-than-human ecologies. Agrarian and climate movements are today beginning to combine forces and point towards a radical alternative in our treatment of urban and rural landscapes. This potential synthesis of the town–country antithesis combines elements of agroecology and democratically planned degrowth, mobilised differently by two prominent visions of the postcapitalist countryside – a land-sharing eco-communism or a land-sparing half-earth socialism. Each represents the forgotten third relation to town and country, wilderness, in radically different ways. We problematised naturalised renderings of wilderness, suggesting how the wild has historically provided spaces of refuge and rebellion for people escaping capitalist-colonial slavery and today remains laden with communist possibility.

The narrative presented in this chapter – of the transition between feudalism and capitalism and, potentially, capitalism and postcapitalism – is one of shifting social relations, ownership structures and property regimes with respect to land and landscape. Drawing on Political Marxism and the agricultural revolutions literature, we have argued throughout that the social relations of each mode of production are more fundamental than the productive forces (technologies). However, each constitutes the other; they are dialectically related. Social relations take

form through specific technologies of organisation and coordination that can also be subjected to democratic appropriation, repurposing and political re-mediation (Arboleda, 2017). To bring about a communist countryside we therefore need to experiment with new legal and political technologies for organising, owning, and managing land.

This chapter has outlined a few of the transitional measures we see as important first steps, from agricultural organisational innovations such as CSA networks and common property regimes constituted by legal instruments – notably CLTs subjected to public–common governance arrangements – to policy measures for taxing land and redistributing the unearned social increment through an LVT that can be channelled through democratic planning bodies. Other chapters in this book explore these and many more in greater depth. The challenge remains to accelerate such institutional innovation and bring these technologies together with social movements for political change that may, under the right conditions, materialise the kinds of postcapitalist countryside about which this chapter can only possibly speculate.

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# Achieving a socialisation of rent through land value taxation

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## Introduction

Land reform, outlined in the previous chapter, would create new opportunities to bring land into common ownership, enhancing social use value. The effects of such reform are likely to be incremental, gradually upending centuries of private ownership, and reversing the impact of enclosure. Tax reform, on the other hand, offers the potential to more rapidly socialise land rent. This penultimate chapter will therefore consider whether such tax reform – specifically a shift from uniform taxes on production (income or salaries tax and social security contributions) and consumption (sales taxes) – to taxes on the annual rental value of land, would be a practicable means of furthering the transition to a postcapitalist countryside. It will examine what such a tax would mean for rural areas and the potential pattern of benefit to communities.

Countries in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) – a group of 32 developed economies – collected, on average, 5.7 per cent of total revenue from property taxes in 2020, 32 per cent on sales of goods and services, and 50 per cent from personal taxes and social security contributions.<sup>1</sup> While not all property taxes are levied on land value (few of them are), these statistics indicate the general pattern and focus of taxation in developed economies.

Land value tax (LVT) has been presented as a game-changer, reducing or even ending the private appropriation of rent, and therefore removing the incentive to grab and hoard land – processes that deprive communities of its beneficial use. One important insight from Henry

George, and more recent LVT advocates, is that marginal (rural) land has low (taxable) value relative to land under urban use. It therefore follows that levying national taxes according to productive potential, usually reflected in land values, would lift the burden of taxation from marginal land, lowering costs for existing rural businesses and encouraging new business start-ups. If the economic rent of all locations (the annual rental value of land only, excluding improvements) were collected as LVT, other taxes could be lowered or removed altogether. In time, new productive activity would raise some land values, but a cessation of speculative rent-seeking would create new openings for social and community enterprise to advance a range of projects focused around housing, new infrastructures, energy and community-led business. Ending the private appropriation of rent would be a significant step towards addressing the inequality, noted in [Chapter 1](#), that arises from that appropriation. Such a tax shift is *conceivable* in any economy, but for illustrative purposes this chapter focuses on the UK.

Before embarking on this illustration, it is important to note key features of the rural land market and recent tax debate in the UK. First, while much rural land is marginal, some areas are likely to be affected by higher values that reflect spikes in demand for land in certain locations. In the UK, those higher values are reflected in higher house prices, especially in green belts on city peripheries, National Parks, National Landscapes (formerly ‘Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty’) and many coastal locations. Prices have been elevated by a combination of planning constraint (housing can only be built on specific ‘allocated sites’) and new demands on a limited stock of homes. Retiring households release the equity they have accumulated (untaxed) in urban homes, enabling them to outcompete local families in the rural housing market. Second home buyers, on higher urban salaries or with wealth extracted from homes elsewhere, bid against one another for ‘trophy’ properties in the most desirable amenity areas. These demands on a limited rural housing stock help explain why housing is often less affordable, relative to in-area earnings, in rural than in many urban areas ([Gallent et al., 2022](#): xi). It is not only land for housing that has increased in value. Farmland prices have soared since the Global Financial Crisis, for reasons unrelated to productive potential. With interest rates at record lows for the 13 years after 2008–9 (and central banks buying up government bonds via the *Asset Purchase Facility* in the UK, otherwise known as quantitative easing or QE), investors scrambled for alternative assets on which to secure at least some capital gain. Fine wine and spirits, artworks and classic cars were all targeted, but because agricultural land in the UK can be held tax free (with no business rates liability), offering

some rental return, it made an attractive alternative investment as well as an effective tax shelter. Moreover, farmland and farm buildings have been subject to 100 per cent inheritance tax relief, devised to ensure farm viability after they are inherited; however, there are no stipulations about maintaining the integrity of the farm business after inheritance (Monbiot et al., 2019), thus providing a tax efficient means of transferring wealth from one generation to the next. Farms valued at more than £1 million will be subject to inheritance tax after April 2026, but at a lower rate than other assets and with a number of retained reliefs.

Second, other rural areas across the UK – particularly those that have been labelled ‘left behind’ – may be blighted by post-industrial scarring, characterised by flat uninteresting geographies, and often dominated by large extractive ‘agribusinesses’ that need few workers and offer little direct support to rural economies or communities. Land values are mixed in these areas, gaining far less support from external sources of housing demand but potentially attracting investors in either the agribusinesses or lucrative, carbon-credit generating, set-aside schemes. What is clear is that any LVT implemented would act upon contrasting land markets and landowner types, interacting with housing, business and farmland investment in different locations.

Third, much of the UK research on LVT has been limited to possible adjustments to existing taxes (for example, local *council tax* on housing and *non-domestic business rates*) (Gwilym, Jones and Rogers, 2020) or mechanisms to capture the value uplift from land permissioned for development (that is, through planning conditions). This limited focus is perhaps explained by the failure to agree a mechanism to comprehensively tax development land values after the Second World War and therefore a narrowing of ambition that has proven useful to powerful landowning interests. Vejchodská and colleagues (2022) note the way in which ‘land rent theory’ (see Chapter 2, this volume) has been jettisoned from land tax theory, which has been left with an ungrounded preoccupation with ‘value capture’, often through development planning. Researchers no longer ask the challenging questions, rooted in land rent theory, and practitioners have forgotten the broader economic and social context for taxing rents. An otherwise well-researched paper on the potential impact of an LVT on the UK’s discretionary planning system is a good example (Morgan and Shahab, 2023), concluding that ‘LVT is not a quick fix to the widespread issues of the current property tax regime’ without venturing into the efficiency or equity debates opened up by classical economics (see again, Chapter 2).



This chapter attempts a broader coverage. It begins with an analysis of the existing structure of taxation in the UK, drawing attention to well-known inefficiencies and regressive regional effects. It then details the contribution of economic activity typical in rural areas (for example, agriculture) and how this might be affected by tax reform. The chapter ends with a review of how the current system of taxation relates to observed inequalities and with a brief account of how alternative models, from other jurisdictions, might impact on the UK if applied.

## The existing structure of taxation in the UK

In 2022–3, UK government revenue was £1,017 billion – equivalent to 40 per cent of GDP. Income tax (levied on payrolls), national insurance contributions (for social security), and sales taxes (that is, value added tax) contributed three-fifths of all revenue (£587 billion) with corporation tax, the next biggest contributor, raising a further £83 billion. Existing property taxes – council tax and non-domestic business rates – raised £42 billion and £25 billion respectively.<sup>2</sup>

The Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) (Delestre and Miller, 2023) highlights a number of features of UK taxation, repeating many observations from the seminal Mirrlees Review (Mirrlees, 2011), in which the IFS recommended wholesale tax reform. First, capital income is taxed at a lower rate than employment income. Second, ‘returns to wealth tend to be undertaxed relative to labour income and, in some cases [including the capital gains made on main homes], are completely untaxed’ (Delestre and Miller, 2023: 4). And third, council taxes are regressive, with assessment values remaining unchanged for more than 30 years, meaning that liabilities are no longer aligned with property values. Three reasons are given for a redesign of the tax system: to increase productivity; to make the system fairer by harmonising tax rates for all income types; and to change behaviours (particularly those relating to carbon net zero goals).

References to regional inequalities tend to focus on the regressive design of council tax: more valuable properties in London and the South East pay less, as a proportion of their value, than less valuable properties across the North and the Midlands. Other reports and papers have drawn attention to the uneven regional impacts of particular taxes, often linked to population density and travel. ‘Fuel duty’, for example, ‘costs people in the East of England £502, but people in London just £201’ (owing to lower densities and inferior public transport) per year and ‘industrial

climate change and environmental levies are different again, falling most heavily on poorer regions' (and the industrial cities) (Blagden, Groom and Tanner, 2021: 7).

Analysis by the Centre for Cities (McGough and Swinney, 2015) in 2013–14 showed that 64 per cent of taxes were raised across (their definition of) 'primary urban areas', reflecting their *significantly greater* productive capacity, on only 9 per cent of the total land area. However, tax raised *per worker* (from labour, consumption and property) averaged £18,400 in London and the South East compared with £15,300 in less productive areas, such as Swansea Bay and Lancashire. The lower figure is 83 per cent of the higher figure, suggesting that the *per worker* tax take does not fully reflect area-based productivity differences. The report asserts that overall, large cities 'are punching below their weight' in the taxes raised, which by implication suggests that rural areas are paying more than they should be, relative to productive potential. This is because a portion of productive value resolves to land (concentrated in the smaller areas of cities), which is undertaxed (see Delestre and Miller, 2023) relative to labour and consumption – in part because of the regressive nature of council tax and the broader under-taxing of land value.

No research, as far as we are aware, has been undertaken on the different capacities of rural and urban areas to generate revenue, nor on the actual revenue raised in rural versus urban areas, per worker, from different taxes. However, the broader misalignment of area-based tax revenues with area-based productivity, partly because of the under-taxing of value resolving to land (as rent) in more productive areas (that is, London), provides one explanation of growing income and wealth inequalities *across areas* and also *between groups*, that is, those groups benefiting from beneficial interest in high-value property and landless renters.

## The rural contribution to the economy

The population of England doubled, to 8.5 million, between 1000 AD and 1800. It then rose exponentially to more than 30 million by 1900<sup>3</sup> and 56 million by 2020. Some 17 per cent of the population lives in rural areas, although the figure for older people, over 65 years of age, rises to 25 per cent and the figure for 20 to 45-year-olds falls commensurately (DEFRA, 2022). Just 8.3 per cent of land in England is in 'developed use' (of which 1.1 per cent is residential), leaving 91.7 per cent in 'non-developed use', which includes residential gardens (4.8 per cent), land in agricultural

use (62.8 per cent), and 21 per cent comprising forest, open land and water (MHCLG, 2018). The population in England, along with the rest of the UK, is predominantly urban, but has a sizeable non-productive retired population in its rural areas. One might imagine that Wales is significantly ‘more rural’ than England, but Ordnance Survey has shown that agriculture, forestry and ‘land in its natural state’ covers 92 per cent of the country (Gwilym, Jones and Rogers, 2020: 53). The patterns of land use, and the level of ‘under-utilisation’, is the same across England and Wales, underlying similar urban–rural economic contrasts.

Median workplace-based earnings in rural areas (£22,900) are only marginally below the figure for predominantly urban areas, excluding London (£25,400), while earnings in London (at close to £40,000) are significantly higher. Home-based working (often contracted to employers located elsewhere) is twice as likely in rural areas, boosting rural incomes. Areas in England defined as ‘predominantly rural’, which are home to 21 per cent of the population, contributed 15 per cent of the country’s gross value added (GVA) in 2020 (DEFRA, 2022). Despite land ‘under-utilisation’, rural areas come close to holding their own in terms of GVA. In fact, reports suggest ‘there is no distinctly “rural” economy’ in England given the fact that broadly, the split of economic sectors in rural areas mirror those in urban areas with a few notable exceptions (agriculture and finance) (OECD, 2011: 74–5). And yet, visually, extra-urban areas appear to be ‘agricultural’ and specific policies to support agriculture remain in place. Agriculture’s contribution to the UK economy in 2022, however, was just £13.9 billion, or 0.62 per cent of gross domestic product, despite its large land take. Total income from farming, after deducting depreciation and the net value of salaries, rent, interest, taxes and subsidies, was £7.9 billion. Similarly, within a European Union (EU) context, a 2006 OECD study highlighted that in the 25 EU countries (pre Bulgaria, Romania and Croatia joining the EU), 96 per cent of rural land use is agricultural (including forestry), but only 13 per cent of rural employment is in agriculture, producing only 6 per cent of gross value added in rural regions (OECD, 2006).

But while GDP contribution in the UK appears modest, the balance sheet presents a different picture. Net assets in the agricultural sector are valued at £322 billion, with the value of land (£277 billion) making up 86 per cent of that total. In 1984, land comprised only 60 per cent of the net assets of the sector.<sup>4</sup> One might conclude from these high-level data that a large part of the UK – about two-thirds of its total land – is being devoted to an activity with low productivity. Of course, the gains from farming cannot be reduced to a percentage of GDP: the cultural and

landscape role of the sector, as well as its contribution to food security, is far broader. However, there are inefficiencies in the sector that warrant scrutiny. Figures from DEFRA (2022) show that average UK farm size is 81 ha (200 acres) and 66 per cent of farmers, either owners or tenants, are over the age of 65 while just 2 per cent are under 35. A little over half (54 per cent) of all farms are worked by their owners and 14 per cent are wholly tenanted; the remaining third are farms comprising a mix of owned and rented land and buildings. The average farm profit is £50,999, before re-investments, salaries and taxes.

The UK's agricultural sector is characterised by an imbalance between high asset value, in fixed capital and land, and low income. The sector has an ageing workforce, with farmers holding onto assets that they hope to pass onto their children, tax free (for all farms until April 2026, and for the majority thereafter). But many of those children have little interest in the sector, owing to its low incomes, precarity, and post-Brexit uncertainties. Twenty years ago, Colin Tudge (a UK-based journalist and campaigner for 'real farming') lamented what he saw as the short-termism and industrialisation of the global food industry, arguing that 'we need again to see farming as a major employer' and that agriculture is not 'just a business like any other'. Tudge argued that rather than trying to cut food prices at any cost, the mission of the sector should be to return to 'good husbandry': 'we need not contemplate anything so dramatic or unlikely as the overthrow of capitalism: just a different model of capitalism from the abstracted, overheated aggressive form that now demands the maximisation of cash efficiency on a global scale' (Tudge, 2003: 2–3).

He went on to offer his own vision of a postcapitalist future, characterised by a new focus on horticulture, on mixed farms, on minimising the use of artificial fertilisers and a return to human input in place of mechanisation, which should be confined to routine tasks and genuine heavy lifting. A central part of his vision was a *return to the land*, a re-integration of people and human activity in the rural landscape, with glimpses of how local returns might be engineered (through land reforms and supportive planning, for instance) offered in the earlier parts of this book.

But what could a re-integration of people really look like? Much of the precapitalist rural landscape was swept away during the enclosures and clearances, but with some notable exceptions. The village of Laxton in Nottinghamshire, for example, was never enclosed and its open field system partially survived. This was down to historical events and circumstances, described by Beckett (1989). As well as maintaining an

allocated strip method of farming, the village's 'court leet' (manorial court) sets grazing rights for common land and has the power to levy fines on rule-breakers. Laxton's three open fields cover an area of 216 ha (534 acres), which is a quarter of the area that would have been farmed in this way in the early seventeenth century. Remarkably, the village's population has been fairly constant through the centuries. It was recorded as 496 in 1603, reached 659 in 1851, fell back to 264 in 1971, and then recovered to 410 in the 2021 UK Census. Relative to national population growth, Laxton's population is smaller than it might otherwise have been, but in absolute terms, the intensity of activity has been largely maintained.

Laxton's settlement pattern is particularly interesting. It covers a large area, with its 14 remaining farms connecting directly onto the high street. Each typically comprises a barn, a byre (cowshed), a farmyard and a substantial farmhouse (most of which were built in the mid-eighteenth century), all contained within rectangular plots. The farmhouses tend to have a few modern buildings behind them, as well as vegetable plots or orchards of around 2 ha. Laxton is a village of mixed and relatively intensive farming activity: all farms are within walking distance of the Church and Inn, where the court leet meets, and all the fields are close by.

The preservation of Laxton owes much to the inability of its mid-eighteenth century owner, Earl Manvers, to reach agreement with his neighbours over the detail of potential enclosure. An 1861 report from the Earl's surveyor conveyed significant frustration with the situation:

Until enclosure, no improvement is possible, the ...present miserable waste of time, labour, and money must continue. It is quite melancholy to see so fine a property as this capable of being made one of the best estates in the district, comparatively unproductive, and left subject to tithes and usages so barbarous that their origin is lost in antiquity.

(quoted in [Wood, 1980: 231](#))

The thinking at the time was that only enclosure and the replacement of workers with modern machinery could deliver the estate's potential. The suggestion here is not that the pre-enclosure pattern of farming is a blueprint for a postcapitalist future but merely that Laxton has some good features. Its land use remains mixed, and it sustains a vibrant community of people working the land in different ways. The settlement is compact and walkable and it resembles, in some respects, the One Planet Developments now being supported by planning policy in Wales (see [Chapter 9](#)), albeit without contemporary 'post-carbon' thinking.

Like One Planet Developments, Laxton presents the possibility of new 'land-based communities' replacing today's isolated farms sitting amidst depopulated rural landscapes.

## Effecting change through land value taxation

How might the taxation of land values support a shift towards more productive use of land and away from private accumulation through asset holding, with those assets comprising housing and under-worked land? Land values have been driven upwards through a transformation in the investment function of housing (see [Chapter 19](#)), manifest in second home buying in many rural areas, and through low intensity and financialised use of farmland, for carbon-credit set-aside or similar.

Rural house prices have been inflated by a combination of planning constraint and the removal of taxes on imputed rent (in 1963) and capital gains on primary residences (in 1965), alongside the relaxing of capital controls on bank lending (in the 1970s) and the creation of a housing-finance cycle that feeds demand for housing and exerts upward pressure on housing and land prices. These factors, causing an assetisation of houses and driving price, were detailed in [Chapter 19](#). Reflecting on the potential of LVT to dampen house price inflation, Gallent et al. observe that the effect of such a tax 'on villages could be much smaller [than elsewhere] given that scarcity probably impacts on value ... to a far greater extent than tax liability' (2022: 158). But of course, the desire to invest in housing is likely to be greatly diminished if the source of price appreciation (the private accumulation of land value) is removed. Theoretically, land price is a function of annual rental value. If 100 per cent of the annual rental value were collected each year then the price of land would fall to zero, removing at a single stroke the idea that wealth arises merely from *owning land* rather than from exploiting its use value. Land is not wealth and only by working land is wealth created (see [Chapter 2](#)). Therefore, the impact of LVT over time would be to reduce that part of wealth inequality rooted in the assetisation of land. In rural areas, speculative residential development, setting land price, would no longer be 'best use' for all land (it currently drives 'hope value' even in places where residential permissions are unlikely to be granted), potentially opening up opportunities for new productive uses (that generate wealth, and community benefit, from working rather than merely holding land).

It is unlikely that a 100 per cent tax will be levied on land values. More incremental or targeted reforms (on particular forms of land use)

may, however, be possible. Second home investment, for example, has interested planning and tax authorities across numerous jurisdictions as it is viewed, by critics, as a source of market distortion (that is, elevated house prices) that erects a barrier to housing access. There have been calls to ban second homes in parts of the UK and, where market distortion is proven to undermine community well-being, local authorities have been granted the power to substantially increase the level of council tax on homes that are not occupied full time (a 300 per cent surcharge has been possible in Wales since April 2023 and it will be possible to levy an additional 100 per cent in England from April 2024). Critics of bans and additional tax liabilities have argued, however, that by scaffolding house prices, second home investors support the spread of wealth to local homeowners – through the *housing channel*. Wealth begets spending, which means more money circulating in local economies and more jobs created (Hilber and Schöni, 2020). The argument is that private accumulation is good, even if it stands in the way of productive use. It undermines the latter in rural areas where housing affordability, because of investment pressures, prevents working families from taking up jobs in the rural economy, creating labour shortages and suppressing productivity.

Some means of controlling second home numbers appears desirable, and actions to that effect are now being taken across the UK and elsewhere. But a broader approach to LVT and housing could effect positive change across the market. For example, higher taxes on all housing (reversing the decisions taken in 1963 and 1965), would suppress asset price inflation and cause a gradual realignment of house prices with earnings. It would de-incentivise inessential consumption and limit the amount of equity accumulating in London homes, which is often released to fund the purchase of second homes in the countryside. Even without reinstating tax on imputed rent or capital gains on principal homes, there is a case for updating council tax bandings (set in 1991) or introducing proportional property tax rates that are more closely aligned with land values, hence levying more from higher value homes that draw that value from a combination of natural benefit and societal investments in infrastructure. The lobby group Fairer Share have detailed the impacts and benefits of substituting council tax with a ‘proportional property tax’.<sup>5</sup>

Although the asset function of housing has shaped land prices in many places, it is not the only driver of land value in extensive rural areas. It was noted earlier that farm productivity is out of step with agricultural asset values, with productivity affected by the ageing of the farming workforce and asset values shaped by tax rules, creating incentives to hang onto assets so they can be transferred, tax free, to the

next generation. Inheritance tax (IHT) is implicated in inter-generational private accumulation and rising house prices. Rules protect the ‘un-earned increment’ derived from land value rises from tax liability: home-owning couples can pass on a house valued up to £1 million to their children, tax free; non-owners face a ceiling on cash and other assets that can be passed onto their children, without IHT, of £650,000. Working farms – comprising farm buildings and land – have attracted 100 per cent ‘agricultural relief’ from IHT (but, as noted above, this will change for higher value farms from April 2026). Rules stipulate that a farmhouse must be ‘of a nature and size appropriate to the farming activity that is taking place [and] any value over and above this “agricultural value”, such as the market price of a country residence, does not qualify’.<sup>6</sup> It is possible that land is retained, and not sold for another more productive use, because agricultural relief acts as a tax incentive for retention. That said, farms are not only assets but places of livelihood (unlike houses) and therefore interruptions of succession brought about by a reduction in tax relief could have a profound effect on rural economies. And in any case, that relief is not the main driver of land retention, potential under-use, and rising value.

Thirty years ago, the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (RICS) noted a ‘rule of thumb’ with farm values: these are typically 20 times the annual rental value of the land. The quality of farm buildings and the farmhouse added a little to the price but were incidental to the valuation. A farmer purchased two different farms in Yorkshire in 1975 and Scotland in 1992 (Pickard, 2016). In each case, the farm was bought for 20 times the rental value of the land. However, today the value of the farm purchased in 1992 has risen to 200 times the rental value of the land while the purchase value (of farmland) has reached £24,500 per ha (or £9,908 per acre) (RICS, 2022). This typical farm (in Fife) is now valued at £5 million – and the ‘farm affordability crisis’ is remarkably similar to the housing affordability crisis. It is no longer possible to buy a farm on the expected cashflow of a farming business. Indeed, the farmer making the 1975 and 1992 purchases estimated, in 2015, that the price of wheat would need to be more than double the then market price to account for the price of land. While commodity price should determine rent, this link now appears broken. This is partly explained by speculative behaviours (holding UK land for investment, sometimes by foreign owners and international investors) and by new demands on land that may remove it from production, for example, for carbon offsetting. Farm subsidies also have a role in setting land values: subsidies arising from the EU Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) accrued ultimately to the landowner, rather



than tenant farmers, who simply passed them to the owner through higher rent. The UK's replacement for CAP will inflate land values in the same way.

The broken link between productivity and land values, manifest in the farm affordability challenge, is problematic. It incentivises land holding and unproductive use; it also crowds out new patterns of land use and prevents greater diversity in landownership, including community ownership. In Scotland, a decline in the number of farm workers has been commensurate with increasing land values and farm sizes (RICS, 2022). It is only existing landowners who buy farms, sometimes selling old farmhouses to private amenity purchasers and centralising their farm operations. The lack of land tax, and the exemption of agricultural land from business rates (noted earlier), appears to drive this concentration in ownership, which has more recently attracted international investors in farmland to the UK. LVT could have a crucial role in tackling the farm affordability challenge if the tax on land were to replace other liabilities. Pickard (2016) notes that for an ordinary farmer, working land, it is *productive value* that determines rent and therefore LVT will always be affordable if taxes on earnings and profit are removed. This supposes that productive value is reinstated as the determinant of rent, which will happen if speculative rent-seeking behaviours are eliminated by the tax. There will be a return of 'marginal' land, on which production is possible but from which an insufficient surplus is generated for rent, if land is no longer held for tax shielding purposes. But what can be learnt from other jurisdictions concerning the effects of land tax on the pattern of land use and ownership?

## Lessons from elsewhere

In a broad analysis of the effects of reducing property taxes – by 40 per cent on both land and buildings – in the USA after the Great Depression, followed by increased taxation of labour and consumption in the period to 1993, Mason Gaffney observed the following: an increase in farm size and price, making it difficult for new entrants, or anyone without significant wealth, to fund the purchase of a farm from business income. This resulted in growing inequality within the farming population (cited by Wunderlich, 1993). He also observed that new larger farms had fewer buildings (or improvements), suggesting that they were 'oversized stores of value, held first to park slack money and only secondarily to produce food' (Wunderlich, 1993: 131). One might infer, as Gaffney does, that

an increase in property taxes would have the opposite effect – realigning the price of farms and of farmland with its productive capacity, thereby attracting new entrants to the industry and potentially new patterns of ownership.

In Australia and New Zealand, a relatively small number of people had acquired vast estates by the end of the nineteenth century, often by simply occupying land. They enjoyed great wealth and considerable influence over government. However, the case for LVT – as not only an aid to economic activity but also a means of reducing social inequalities – had been popularised across the English-speaking world during that period in Henry George’s *Poverty and Progress*. A progressive LVT was introduced, alongside property taxes on improvements and progressive income taxes. Although LVT rates were low – and exemptions, including for family owned smallholdings, were gradually introduced – they did work to break up the large estates (Woodruff and Ecker-Racz, 1965), creating new opportunities for ownership. Over time, LVT rates in Australia and New Zealand have fallen, meaning they are less significant taxes than they were at the time of introduction. However, their potential to open the land market to productive use were demonstrated.

Such taxes are of course the direct opposite of tax reliefs on landownership, which have become the norm in the UK over the last 60 years. They each reflect a different view on the functioning of economies. Tax reliefs promote private accumulation and asset price growth, and are justified by reference to trickle-down: private wealth is ultimately beneficial to all. LVTs seek a pattern of land use that supports greater productivity, by ‘destroying’ rent-seeking behaviours that remove land from production. There is also an argument that they can address spatial inequality. The logic here is that LVT is a relatively simple means of lifting the burden of taxation from rural and left behind areas and concentrating it in more productive locations, where land values (and proposed corresponding tax liabilities) are higher. One of the arguments pitched against LVT is that accurate and up-to-date land value calculations are tricky because it is difficult to separate the value of land from the value of improvements. But newer valuation methods, combined with spatial analytics, are allowing ever-finer grained analysis of land values. It has been shown, for example, that land values in the Welsh local authority of Blaenau Gwent (a former mining area) are 21 per cent of property values, compared with 63 per cent in the Vale of Glamorgan (an area to the west of Cardiff, sometimes referred to as the ‘Garden of Wales’, that is popular with retiring households). There are also huge variations within cities: some parts of Swansea, for example, have negative land

values (the cost of developing new buildings would exceed their gross market value, meaning that there is a 'viability gap' expressed in negative values) while other parts exceed £1,500 per square metre (Gwilym, Jones and Rogers, 2020: 76). The implication is that tax rates would be highly variable, suggesting variation in derived public revenues. However, the resolution of productive value to land, in aggregate, would ensure sufficient revenues overall.

Taxes on land value are considered by economists to be non-distortionary (Stiglitz, 2015; Kalkuhl and Edenhofer, 2017; Kalkuhl et al., 2018) and therefore the productivity benefit would be seen everywhere (and amplified where LVTs resulted in commensurate tax reductions on wages and profits) while some of the diseconomies of scale seen in cities (long commutes and pressure on the environment and on key infrastructure) would be ameliorated by a shift in population and economic activity to the countryside. This would be made possible by the combination of land becoming available for new productive activity, potentially community-led, and housing costs (which are currently a barrier to labour mobility) coming to reflect a calming of the residential land market.

Although this chapter has focused on the UK, economic dislocation (as capital is directed to areas of lower cost production) and inequality (as capital movements raise land prices) are global challenges. Thomas Piketty has proposed a global wealth tax to address the latter issue (Piketty, 2014), but a hypothetical *global LVT* would be far easier to design and administer, given that land cannot be moved and hidden. While such a tax (and any move away from unfettered private accumulation) is unlikely, a few jurisdictions – including Hong Kong and Singapore – demonstrate the potential of turning land rents into public revenues as a way of prioritising use value for their citizens, particularly in the provision of affordable housing. Phang (2018) details the Singapore case: a city-state where 80 per cent of the population lives in leasehold homes built by the state-owned Housing Development Board. Generous public subsidies ensure an income to price ratio of 1:5. Foreigners can buy 'open market' homes in Singapore, but the stamp duty rate was increased from 30 per cent to 60 per cent for 'additional' purchases in April 2023 – perhaps signalling a desire to prioritise the everyday needs of citizens over the interests of investment.

Hong Kong and Singapore collect a high proportion of their public revenues, 30 per cent and 52 per cent respectively, through state ownership of utilities, investment income, and the leasing of state-owned land. Leasing delivers up-front premiums, ground rent, lease

modification premiums, as well as betterment levies on redevelopment (Purves, 2019, 2023). The collections of rents through these mechanisms are balanced by lower rates of income tax (up to 20 per cent) and either no consumption taxes, in Hong Kong, or consumption tax rebates for lower earners, in Singapore. The systems are far from perfect, and both jurisdictions still encounter unresolved housing stress, but they illustrate the possibility of raising productivity (and earnings) and lowering asset prices through LVT mechanisms, suggesting that a departure from the OECD taxation norms summarised at the beginning of this chapter are possible. There are no perfect tax systems to replicate, but the deficiencies of the UK, identified in the Mirrlees Review (2011), and illustrated by the housing crisis and inefficiencies in land use, require urgent attention.

## Conclusion

This chapter has tried to imagine a postcapitalist future for the countryside, facilitated by radical tax reform; but with few empirical examples upon which to draw, much of the analysis has been speculative. Apart from the inherent resistance to change from powerful elites, there is always some inertia, and scepticism that the economy and system of taxation could be structured in any other way.

Recent studies challenge that scepticism. Gaffney (2009), for example, proposes that socialised rent would be a sufficient source of public revenue, arguing that critics give a false impression of potential revenues by limiting the scope of rent and land values. Empirical studies in Australia (Fitzgerald, 2013) and Canada (Earle et al., 2023) seem to confirm this reality, although further research is needed in the UK to quantify the taxable value of land rents, and associated revenue sources. But the case for rethinking rents is growing. Literatures addressing financialisation (underpinned by rent extractions) and rentier narratives (for example, Christophers, 2020; Christophers, 2023; Mazzucato, Ryan-Collins and Gouzoulis, 2023) are gaining traction in economic research. Two-thirds of global wealth is now sunk into land values (Woetzel et al., 2021) perpetuating the inequalities noted in Chapter 1 and effectively blocking essential investments in social infrastructure such as housing. The land on which to build that housing is too expensive and the revenues, that is, rents, that could fund that building support private rather than public interest. Indeed, the ‘capitalist mode of production’ that emerged in the eighteenth century, ostensibly replacing the feudal power of landowners, has merely absorbed their rent-collecting practices.

Postcapitalism is centrally concerned with challenging those practices and, we would suggest, with reducing the tax burden on workers and community-controlled capital in support of new models of work and community enterprise, of the type detailed in [Chapter 14](#) and elsewhere. Of course, the practice of communities buying land that was previously under private monopoly ownership (see [Chapters 7 and 8](#)) is also a way to challenge rent appropriation under capitalism, but buying land is expensive, public resources are limited and private owners may simply extend their portfolios elsewhere using community land-sale revenues. There is a lot of positivity around community ownership: a recent paper on the Scottish experience by Mike Danson concludes that this method of socialising rent delivers ‘sustainable land management’ which ‘empowers and strengthen(s) local community resilience ... helps build local economies, support(s) business growth and improve(s) local incomes’ while helping to ‘address depopulation’ and supporting ‘local community wealth building’ (2023: 3).

Such positivity is not new. Community ownership, or returns to the land that involve smallholding practices that actively create wealth (Skelton, 1923), have long been presented as beneficial social and economic forms. Diversity in landownership will be an important part of any postcapitalist future, but how can that diversity be achieved in a private market in which land has taken centre stage in financialised private accumulation? The answer offered in this chapter is a socialisation of rent through LVT. This is not a simple or easy answer, but the case for such taxation is likely to strengthen in the years ahead as wealth concentrations, in rural and urban areas, become more pronounced and the central role of land and rent extraction in fuelling inequalities becomes undeniable.

## Notes

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- 2 M. Keep (2024) ‘Tax statistics: An overview’, House of Commons Library research briefing. <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-8513/CBP-8513.pdf> (accessed 5 September 23).
- 3 Our World in Data (2016) ‘Population of England over history’. Bank of England. <https://ourworldindata.org/grapher/population-of-england-millennium> (accessed 6 September 2023).
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## Towards hopeful postcapitalist futures?

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### Introduction

In this book, we have brought together writings that question the capitalist norms of enclosure, rent extraction and private accumulation; that address the social benefits of common resources; and that offer glimpses of hopeful postcapitalist futures in different rural places around the world. The contributors have varying views on the state of capitalism, whether its current crises mark terminal decline, or whether the status quo will persevere, albeit with increased demands to replace enclosure and extraction with community control over land, and with new opportunities for social enterprise. Those demands and opportunities are generally rooted in the energy and resistance of communities; in a desire among many groups to share resources and find alternate forms of socio-economic organisation, which are more sustainable and equitable, rewarding work and ingenuity rather than sustaining entrenched patterns of private property ownership and advantage.

While attempting to chart postcapitalist futures, we have also sought to advance the wider rural studies literature, specifically relating to how rural conflicts are conceptualised and how rural futures might be reimagined. Since the 1990s, two key literatures have advanced understanding of rural struggles and conflicts. The first has explored rural conflicts through the lens of discourse, exploring social representations of rurality and the cultural symbolism used in the construction of the rural (for example, [Halfacree, 1995](#)). This has provided a new understanding of rural conflicts, with researchers showing that the very notion of rurality



has become deeply contested, underpinned by latent social conflicts and a transformed 'politics of the rural' (Woods, 1998, 2003). The second has drawn attention to (uneven) processes of rural restructuring and its impact on resetting the role of rural areas and in underpinning different development trajectories across rural space. Analysis of the shifting role and function of agriculture has provided a platform on which to examine rural transformations and the (re)regulation of rural space (for example, Murdoch et al., 2003). Increasing attention has also been given to the influence of external actors in shaping rural localities – including capital, consumers, and regulatory bodies – against a broader backcloth of economic globalisation (for example, Brunori and Rossi, 2007) and the increased significance of neoliberal ideas, policies and practices to the unfolding of social and spatial life in rural areas (for example, Dibden et al., 2009; Shucksmith and Rønningen, 2011).

While making significant contributions to the literature, these studies seldom challenge the conventions of capitalist production, rentier capitalism or the increasing financialisation of assets. These are socio-spatial processes with specific rural dimensions centred on (though not exclusively) land, rural assets and natural resources, and are illustrative of how global circuits of capital penetrate rural space. Within this context, this book has provided both a postcapitalist critique of the political economy of rural places within contemporary capitalism and also charted possible alternative trajectories.

The purpose of this concluding chapter is to return to the questions posed at the end of Chapter 1, to offer answers where possible and also to consider the broader contribution of this volume to detailing the nature of postcapitalism in the countryside – which is overviewed in Table 22.1. Our definition of postcapitalism has been inclusive, extending from early land struggles, through the emergence of social forms of enterprise, to a range of commoning practices across numerous domains – from food production, through housing, to key rural assets such as energy infrastructure and heritage. Local challenges and resistance to private extraction and accumulation have generally been presented as postcapitalist – as alternative economic and social configurations that seed positive benefit, even if they operate alongside capitalist transactions and tensions.

The first part of the book, Chapters 2 to 4, sought to contrast postcapitalist pathways with the conventions of capitalist production. The starting point for Chapter 2, *focused on land and rent in capitalist production*, was to question the legitimacy of private claims on rent: to argue that a more complete understanding of the orthodoxies of capitalism, and the

**Table 22.1** The postcapitalist countryside and its constituent elements

Postcapitalist elements	Illustrative examples	
Postcapitalism as <i>resistance</i>	<i>Resisting ...</i> Enclosure ‘Rent theft’ Inequalities Commodification Private interests Unsustainable consumption Colonialism Heteropatriarchy and hierarchical identity constructions	
Postcapitalism as <i>practice</i>	Socialisation of rent Postcapitalist lifestyles Solidarity and empathy Decommodification of assets Social forms of enterprise Postcapitalist aesthetics Transformative resilience Reparations Spaces to ‘common with’	<i>Commoning of ... (examples):</i> Surplus value of land Food production Housing Renewable energy infrastructure Heritage Digital platforms Multispecies Struggles
Postcapitalist <i>structures</i>	Land reform – from land trusts to land gifting Tax reform Restoring customary practices Regulation Socialising rent through planning reform	
Postcapitalist <i>outcomes</i>	Shared prosperity and reduced inequalities Community wealth building and ownership of assets A social economy Socially valuable work Green transitions Sustainable living Post-pastoral (constructions of) rurality An ethic of more-than-human socio-ecological care	

centrality of rent, is a prerequisite for detailing postcapitalist alternatives. Hence, the chapter sought to unpack the origin of wealth in land, and the mechanisms through which that wealth concentrates in private hands (‘rent theft’ is the term used in [Chapter 5](#)) versus the possibility

of its socialisation, given that rent is a product of social agglomeration (investments and activities off-site) rather than private action (on-site). [Chapter 2](#) also introduced the concept of 'primitive accumulation': early enclosure and the privatisation of capital. [Chapter 3](#) expanded that introduction, noting that such accumulation is a continuing process under capitalism rather than a historical event, evidenced in a range of new enclosures – 'from intellectual copyright and patenting to land and water grabbing to corporatisation and securitisation of urban space' – and in capitalism's general tendency towards 'accumulation by dispossession' ([Harvey, 2005](#)). From this starting point, [Chapter 3](#) explored the 'co-construction of the commons', comprising 'alternative forms of social re-production' centred on collective property and new forms of 'doing'. It presented active and ongoing 'commoning' by communities as a riposte to Hardin's *Tragedy of the Commons* (1968). The idea of the commons being naturally undermined, and over-exploited, by private interest (that is, an inclination towards private accumulation, noted in [Chapter 6](#)) was said to ignore the reality of commoning being a community undertaking: attacks on the commons, through processes of enclosure, begin with attacks on community, their destruction and fragmentation. Acts of enclosing and re-commoning are therefore understood as exchanges of power and episodes of class struggle. Citing Dyer-Witheford (2006), it was proposed that postcapitalist futures might replace 'commodity' with 'commons', and that Marx's 'circuit of capital', linking money to capital and onward to money, can be substituted with a 'circulation of the commons', linking association (in place of money) with commons and onward to association. A theorisation of how this can happen offered broad cues for the rest of the book.

That theorisation began by highlighting criticisms of 'capital-centric accounts of the world', which do not give sufficient regard to models of social reproduction that are not in fact rooted in enclosure. These might include customary tenure (see [Chapter 5](#)) and fundamentally different conceptions of land, country and property (see [Chapter 11](#)). Ignoring different worlds suggests a false 'totalisation of capitalism', whereas those worlds might powerfully inspire new models of production. However, where capitalism has hitherto prevailed, 'prefigurative projects' provide the means of creating 'alternative imaginaries' and challenging neoliberal hegemony. Another important observation in [Chapter 3](#) was the lack of comprehensive attention to the countryside.

Having introduced enclosure and land rent in [Chapter 2](#), and having extended the discussion to ongoing primitive accumulation (i.e. 'new enclosures') and commoning in [Chapter 3](#), the fourth chapter sought

to locate resistance and prefigurative actions against capitalism in rural contexts. It took as its own starting point Shucksmith's (2018) notion of the 'good countryside' which, it was argued, aligns with postcapitalist imaginaries and with local practices that target community well-being (by bringing about the 'repair' of infrastructure through community ownership) and social justice (through 'relatedness' and an 'ethic of care'); that advance 'rights' centred on community agency and neo-endogenous governance; and bring about 're-enchantment' through the celebration of rural culture and through resistance to the banality of global capitalism. Linking to extant rural literature, the chapter argued that in the face of rural challenges, including unsustainable consumption and rising inequality, the commoning and de-commodification inferred by postcapitalism offers a means of realising a better countryside.

The second and third parts of the book, focused on land and on various domains of resistance, collectively addressed the first three of the book's guiding questions: what happens when surplus value, normally captured as private rent, is commoned and harnessed in support of collective prosperity and well-being? What particular benefits from commoning accrue to rural communities, across those various domains, against the backcloth of known challenges and vulnerabilities? And how does the challenge to private accumulation impact on entrepreneurial energy? These questions, presented as concluding themes, are addressed in the main part of this chapter.

The question of 'structural supports' for hopeful postcapitalist futures is also explored. Although rooted in energy and resistance, what is the case for land and tax reforms that incubate new opportunities and incentivise different ways of managing resources and different forms of enterprise in rural areas? This question was addressed in the fourth part of the book, which began, in [Chapter 19](#), by considering whether structural supports for homeownership in Britain have corrected property-based inequalities. [Chapters 20](#) and [21](#) rounded more broadly on questions of land reform and taxation. The insights gained from those chapters, and earlier contributions, are reconsidered in the final part of this conclusion.

## From private rent to collective prosperity?

The Ricardian view is that private accumulation, rooted in the freedoms of property and entrepreneurialism, drives broader prosperity. Wealth that is privately accumulated trickles down. In contrast, challenges to private property risk Hardin's (1968) 'tragedy of the commons': conflict

with neither progress nor accumulation. What do the chapters say, in broad terms, about collective prosperity arising from commoning? [Part I](#) of the book dealt with land questions and began, in [Chapter 5](#), with one of the ‘different worlds’ noted above: land gifting in Africa and Asia, as a foundation for ‘co-operative, inclusive, and ecologically sound living’. It was noted that the act of gifting land (and hence distributing) redirects imputed rents (arising on land not needed by a land donor) to productive activity (undertaken by the recipient). Non-reciprocal gifting ensures productivity and collective enterprise in place of passive rent capture. In the Global North, the ideas of gifting and commoning are bound together and sometimes spearheaded by community land trusts which, although viewed in some quarters as tokenistic and difficult to up-scale, pursue essential prefigurative actions against capitalist enclosure. Accounts of such actions, across different domains, began with [Chapter 6’s](#) focus on food. Here, the tension between notions of ‘green transition’ and retained land relations was highlighted: ‘empowered by broad calls for environmental sustainability, private capital has seized new legitimacy to take control of assets and make them green’, resulting in the continued accrual of wealth to ‘minority interests’. In relation to food, it was argued that shared prosperity is dependent on new land relations that give power to collectives and smallholders, enabling them to target ecological and food quality goals (or ‘enoughness’) over rent extraction.

Mechanisms with the potential to bring about new land relations were examined in [Chapters 7 and 8](#), both focused on Scotland in light of its twenty-first century programme of land reform. The first of these chapters introduced the background to ‘a reform of land tenure seldom seen in advanced Western democracies’. While community buyouts have not challenged the country’s highly concentrated pattern of landownership – rooted in its feudal past – they have reshaped communities’ interest in land and led to a pattern of control of land-based activities, including property ownership and local energy production, which means that ‘surpluses do not accrue to any individual but are rather remitted’ to the community. Moreover, there is an ‘emotional impact’ that arises from communities’ renewed beneficial interest in land that can be measured in ‘community motivation, cohesion and empowerment’. It is these outcomes that underpin collective prosperity.

However, community ownership in Scotland is not ‘commoning’. It involves a transaction with a willing landowner and the payment of a fee that reflects the ‘hope value’ attached to the land or asset by the private owner.

Community buyouts are expensive and only happen where a landowner is choosing to rationalise their holding, perhaps offloading marginal land, and possibly wishing to reinvest (through new purchases) elsewhere. Therefore, it is a regular transaction that sustains the cycle of private investment and extraction. Only through entirely new tenure arrangements, underpinned by the valuation of land at current productive use, might it be possible to achieve commoning. The trajectory of Scottish experience was said to have considerable potential in this respect, which might be enhanced through adjustments to the ‘broader fiscal and policy framework that maintains a private-centric landownership model’.

It is through commoning that rent extraction is confronted. However, other models may seek to limit that extraction in support of new patterns of rural land use. [Chapter 9](#) showed how this has happened in Wales, largely by challenging the statutory planning system’s role in supporting the enclosure of land and advancing a preservationist ethic. The significant message in that chapter concerned the planning system’s place in the machinery of private accumulation through rent capture, revealing a way in which, through ‘exceptions’ to conventional planning, the value of land *can* be socialised in the sense of being opened up to lifestyles that challenge capitalist enclosure and extraction. However, ‘one planet development’ (OPD) sites, to which private freehold title is attached, become assets that are exchangeable in the open market. On the one hand, this risks rising costs and exclusions; but, on the other hand, limitations placed on how the sites can be used (exclusively for codified low-impact living) significantly constrain land values and make OPD accessible to groups wanting to *work the land*. The goal of the approach is to facilitate land-based enterprise, which it has helped achieve at a modest scale across parts of rural Wales.

[Chapter 10](#) shifted context, taking commoning to mean property or practices that are collectively managed, and exploring the experience of women’s businesses in Mexico and Japan. The broader definition of commoning, as a process or object (the ‘more-than-human’ that includes land and multi-species) that is more widely accessed and used, and from which shared benefits flow, extended the discussion beyond private rent and, again, beyond the idea that commoning must be achieved through collective title. Drawing on feminist scholarship, the chapter challenged capitalist thinking in relation to identities of age, gender, class and ethnicity in the context of postcapitalist living. A similar focus, on what commoning can look like and on the nature of property, was offered in [Chapter 11](#) focusing on Indigenous identities and values that support postcapitalist praxis. The Australian context is one in which ‘Western

discourses' and realities of 'land titles and land use' have forcibly, and violently, disrupted Indigenous peoples' 'religious and spiritual attachments' to land and water. That land and water was never regarded as 'individual property' but as 'part of an ethical, spiritual, and legal matrix of rights, obligations and community relationships with and for their ancestral Country'. Against that backdrop, [Chapter 11](#) sought to 'explore a postcapitalist future embedded in a post-colonial countryside'. It was argued that the starting point on a path to 'shared prosperity' needs to be an admission that sovereignty over Australia's land and water was never ceded by its Indigenous peoples to the British colonisers, and while history cannot be undone, some justice can be achieved through reparations and 'new understandings of property' that build fresh connections between western and customary law. One proposal was that planning powers should be conferred on customary owners; this would not change the rights of freeholders, who are currently subject to planning, but it would reinstate Indigenous Australians prudent stewardship of their land and waters. Another was to institute a leasehold tenure arrangement, enabling traditional owners to 'control how others use and access their lands' and also receive land rent. The goal would be to create a system of mutual respect, reinstating traditional stewardship while socialising the rent arising from the new uses that a reformed approach to planning might permit.

The last of the chapters addressing 'land', [Chapter 12](#), held up collaborative art-making (including and extending beyond 'land art') as a means of inspiring and cultivating a 'postcapitalist aesthetics'— that is, a shift from an aesthetics grounded in elitism and individualism to one that is pluralistic and relational. The proposal was that, through artistic engagement, it is possible to shift value attachments and nurture relations, between subject and world, that are perceptual, sensitive, meaningful and temporal, yet firmly situated in postcapitalist living. The focus in the chapter was place-based relationships and a desire to contest 'romantic characterisations of rurality', thereby making space for 'post-pastoralism' and for a widening array of collective relations under the banner of commoning. More prosaically, commoning was taken to be 'an alternative to neoliberal individualism by working against privatisation of land and toward community ownership'. Aligning with [Chapter 10](#), commons are sites (and practices) of coming together, including with more-than-human objects. The ultimate significance of the arts, for [Chapter 12](#), was the co-creation of 'solidarity and community-based action with the land' and the (pre)configuration of planetary common 'wealth'.

Chapter 12 therefore provided a stepping-off point for examining specific domains of commoning and de-commodification in Part III. The sense of a shift from private rent to collective prosperity, flagged in Chapter 1, can of course be articulated in different ways: as a reconditioning of land to serve social rather than private interest; as a challenge to conceptions of property under capitalism; as a commoning process that extends beyond land; and as a shift in aesthetics and a re-evaluation of everyday relations. All of these perspectives were picked up in Part II, signalling different understandings and practices of ‘commoning’ that all, nevertheless, move in the same direction, away from exclusive and unsustainable resource use and towards inclusive and sensitive engagements with shared capitals.

## Critical inequalities challenged?

The land and thematic chapters also pinpointed specific inequalities across different domains. What do they present as the key benefits of commoning and de-commodification, across those domains? Are there any risks or downsides? In relation to the land gifting detailed in Chapter 5, it was suggested that this has tended to replace extractive plantation systems with a ‘social and solidarity economy’ comprising smallholders who engage cooperatively and, in urban areas, that same gifting has provided a platform for a ‘community based approach to urban development’. Systems of land gifting leave no room for the speculative use of land and therefore eliminate the siphoning of economic rent. New land relations were seen as central to the ability of smallholders and collectives to pursue radical food alternatives while preventing that same siphoning. How this might happen was addressed both in Chapter 6 and in more detail in Chapters 7 and 8, with the latter two contributions focused on broad processes and community outcomes. The lesson from the first of these chapters was that community land buyouts tend to support repopulation of rural areas, and also a shift in the demographic profile (more young people), in part because the surpluses from new activities are more inclined to support community well-being. Citing prior research, Chapter 8 noted that ‘community ownership has been found to facilitate the development of a framework for economic development, through access to land and assets in combination with enhanced ... community capacity’.

Co-living with a strong community ethos may have a similar effect in Wales, where development benefits from ‘one planet’ permissioning. It was noted above that OPD has supported land-based enterprise, although



it remains an ‘enclosure regime’ that is unconcerned with commoning. This is not the case in the examples of business-led commoning cited in [Chapter 10](#), although, as remarked above, the nature of commoning is questioned. It is considered to be an arrangement that brings about wider access and use, and therefore more broadly shared benefits. Applying that definition, even the retention of private title, as in the case of OPD in Wales, could be considered a beneficial commoning. [Chapter 10](#) focused squarely on critical inequalities, arising in the cases presented (of rural women collectively running enterprises) from a patriarchal tendency to exclude women from land-based economies and from access to common lands. The women struggled against these tendencies, responding with collective strategies, and bringing an ethics of care to their engagements with more-than-human objects of commoning. The critical challenge spotlighted in [Chapter 11](#) was the injustice and violence of colonial dispossession, which a redesigned approach to planning and a new land tenure system – handing control and land rent to traditional owners – would help redress.

Resistance, inspired by and expressed through land art, provided the book-end for [Part II](#). It also sought to challenge the hegemonic discourses of protection, pastoralism and property that sustain existing land relationships and patterns of admissible land use. [Part III](#) then shifted the focus to domains of resistance and to *pre-figurative actions* against capitalism. Attention was drawn, in [Chapter 13](#), to the notion of a ‘social economy’ (in which rural social enterprises locate) that either challenges capitalism or is a manoeuvre by ‘the system’ to placate those dispossessed by the current mode of production. The question posed was whether the social economy – comprising collectives, cooperatives, and other forms of organisation that seek to common resources and de-commodify assets – exists to ‘heal’ injustices or more fundamentally ‘subvert’ the status quo: to what extent is it *against* capitalism? The answer presented was that the social economy is not an end-point, but rather a movement premised on solidarity and resistance that is engaged in a search for new models of production, in opposition to neoliberal capitalism. Postcapitalism, therefore, is an ongoing *process*. And in that process, rural social enterprises can be instrumental in advancing entirely new value systems.

In terms of leading and shaping pre-figurative actions, rural social enterprise is presented as a key part of the postcapitalist landscape and, in [Chapter 14](#), as something that can be encouraged and incubated through ‘hub’ infrastructures.

The chapters forming [Part III](#) each considered the ways in which specific inequalities are challenged through processes of commoning and de-commodification. Rural enterprise hubs have a role in supporting job-creation in the countryside and particularly ‘more meaningful and rewarding jobs’. They are an infrastructure for entrepreneurialism and innovation, where labour specialisation is often challenged and a return to artisanal or socially valuable work is seeded. They are also a framework in which enclosure, commodification and alienation are confronted: the infrastructure is community-owned; there are opportunities for sharing, repairing and re-using; and the hubs host work and activities that challenge work-based and social alienation.

It is perhaps counterintuitive that platform capitalism, which is at the frontier of financialised accumulation, might be redesigned to support commoning and decommodification in rural locations. [Chapter 15](#) started with a broad account of the emergence of the technologies and practices underpinning platforms before drilling into the rural dimension, examining the implications of online retail, platform-based short-term rentals (STR), the physical infrastructure supporting platforms, and the evolution of smart farming and precision agriculture. It was shown that rural areas are more vulnerable to the shift to online retail, that platforms supporting STR can exacerbate ‘long identified tensions between permanent residents and tourists’ in the countryside, that ‘data centres’ bring new energy-hungry and carbon intensive development, and that smart farming supplants farmers’ experiential and traditional knowledge with ‘sustained engagement with new digital tools’ that give agri-tech companies command over network monopoly rent. These sources of inequity can primarily be challenged through digital commoning, including cooperative platforms (that is, digital social enterprise, an online version of the hubs detailed in [Chapter 14](#)) and through local regulation that seeks to mitigate the harm of rent extraction through platform-based short-term lettings. However, technology, commoned and de-commodified, is a positive resource for rural places that can strengthen economic and social linkages and confront long-standing vulnerabilities.

[Chapters 16, 17 and 18](#) targeted three critical capitalist enclosures, affecting housing, energy and heritage. Housing projects taken forward by Community Land Trusts tend to challenge ‘individualised notions of property and ownership’ ([Chatterton and Pusey, 2020: 30](#)), restricting the exchange value of housing and socialising benefit to communities. Such projects were presented, in [Chapter 16](#), as a means of challenging the private rent extraction and accumulation that inflates land values and renders housing unaffordable in rural locations. They can be seen as

either narrow ‘technocratic housing solutions’ (that sometimes involve the building of private housing to cross-subsidise affordable homes) or instruments of a broader social transformation. Much depends on the motives of those leading CLTs, whether they understand projects to be responses to neo-liberal logic or merely pragmatic and incidental means of unlocking land for community need. However, *incidental everyday practice* tends to obscure the broader challenge that CLTs present to conventional development models: by holding land in trust and limiting wealth extraction, they closely align with ‘postcapitalist visions for de-commodified land and housing’ and play a part, albeit a relatively modest one at the present time, in meeting rural communities’ need for affordable homes.

In the same vein, models of ‘green capitalism’ that appear to be targeting an energy transition towards modern renewables, but which continue to treat energy as a commodity, are making slow progress. The contention in [Chapter 17](#) was that energy transitions must be social as well as technological, rethinking social relations with energy. The idea of the ‘energy commons’ was unpacked into four constituent realms, embracing actual resources, production technologies, exchange and consumption infrastructures, and related operations. The commoning of resources depends on establishing community property rights; the commoning of technologies on the formation of ‘energy communities’; the commoning of exchange and consumption on collective transmission infrastructures such as mini-grids, or the renationalisation of assets; and the commoning of energy operations (for example, mining in the upstream segment of the supply chain, and dealing with waste downstream) on challenging exploitative practices, which often hit poorer communities hardest, centred on mining or waste management. The ‘commodified energy system’ was said to ‘quintessentially [exemplify] capitalist social relations’. Each realm of the energy commons has tangible benefits, for directly affected communities, and for the planet as a whole as the transition away from fossil-fuels is accelerated.

Finally, [Chapter 18](#) focused on rural heritage’s transition from public good (in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries) to commodity, with heritage ‘reframed as a driver of economic development’ from the 1980s onwards. In response to that transition and reframing, the nature of heritage as a commons was explored, the starting point being that ‘heritage’ is often rooted in ‘shared tradition, cultural livelihood or, commonly, an aesthetic homogeneity stemming from a townscape ensemble or a cultural landscape’. In other words, heritage values (imbued in artefacts, traditions or processes), like land values, are created through

social agglomeration and hence form ‘collective assets’ or ‘inherited culture’. Commodification requires a claim over, and the enclosure of, uniqueness. However, it was shown that it is possible to challenge ‘how the market shapes our relationship with heritage’ through, for example, land trusts that assume direct community ownership of tangible assets – with potentially transformative effects. This may be seen as just another form of enclosure, although the surpluses generated from historic properties can, through local trust structures, be returned by communities, thus restoring and amplifying the social value of inherited culture. Heritage is recentred on people, whose role as custodians is strengthened. Of course, it is also possible to socialise revenues from heritage through local levies and taxes that seek to return the cash value, or ‘return of rent’, to communities.

The broad treatment of land, as private *or* common ‘property’, has significant social justice implications. Those implications extend to, and are further shaped by, activities that occur on land or in virtual rent-generating spaces. Progressive alternatives to capitalist enclosure do not challenge inequality in an incidental way; rather, that challenge is central to progressive, postcapitalist actions. Commoning was discussed in most of the [Part II](#) and [Part III](#) chapters, with additional nuance added by each of the contributors. Commoning and decommodification are processes rather than end-points. They are actions framed by solidarity, resulting in the pursuit of social enterprise; the design of collective platforms; attempts to eliminate wealth capture from the process of housing; and in the decommodification of other assets, including energy and heritage, through new social relations and patterns of interest.

## Innovation, entrepreneurialism, and postcapitalism

Returning to the Ricardian view, to what extent are commoning processes a brake on innovation and entrepreneurialism? What sorts of innovations are retained, supporting social accumulation? George did not wish to see the ‘entrepreneurial flame’ extinguished through the confiscation of land or capital, arguing that the social capture of rent (through his single tax or through commoning processes) need not be a brake on entrepreneurialism. To what extent does entrepreneurial endeavour survive and flourish, transcending the institution of private land/property ownership (or more specifically, the private capture of rent, as being distinct from private, or community, rights to direct the use of land)? Put simply, are postcapitalist land and commoning arrangements entrepreneurial?

Again, [Part I](#) began with the contention that a land gifting system promotes productivity and collective innovation over passive rent-seeking and large-scale extractive industry, for example in the form of plantations or ‘huge estates of mechanised farming’.

The innovation of land gifting also supports the provision of affordable social housing and, across different infrastructure domains, it provides what Herro and Obeng-Odoom (2019) have called the ‘foundations of radical philanthropy’. Land reform is significantly innovative: the gifting of land, including its transfer to cooperatives, can, as noted in [Chapter 5](#), ‘provide much-needed momentum towards transformative, postcapitalist, society, especially if combined with the pursuit of ‘making land common’. Moreover, gifts of land support productivity by ensuring that land, as a factor in production, is worked by active producers rather than held back for speculation. It was noted in [Chapter 6](#) that ‘exclusionary land relations’ under capitalism act as a brake on alternative food production because ‘dominant property relations’ are preoccupied with *innovations in rent extraction* over innovations in ‘useful doing’ or producing. This contrasts with ‘a small wave of ‘food commons’ projects’ engaged in farmland acquisition and redistribution in support of ‘good food’ initiatives built on collective land and asset ownership. Land reform in Scotland was held up as a means of shifting land relationships, reviving the interest of communities in good governance and in driving forward economic activities that deliver collective benefit. The re-peopling of land means a revival of productive activity. In Scotland, it has meant innovations around green energy production and a search, by the trustees leading community buyouts, for new income sources: new projects, new useful doing, that will further community interest in land. Following the broader look at the provenance of buyouts in [Chapter 7](#), that is, the longer history of dispossession and land struggles, [Chapter 8](#) focused mainly on the routes for bringing land and other assets into community ownership, and on outcomes, or ‘lived experiences’. Aligning with [Chapter 7](#), it noted that the ownership of assets has provided ‘access to capital, income and community self-esteem that has generated further community development’.

Development (and innovations in development, extending to new ways of doing) may be hampered, however, by the ‘preservationist rationality’ of land use planning. This was the focus of [Chapter 9](#), which began with the argument that the institutions of private property and planning conspire to facilitate the norms of capitalist production and accumulation. This is challenged by ‘experimental and innovative’ low-impact development predicated on a ‘back to the land’ ethos, supported

in Wales by ‘one planet development’, as discussed earlier. OPD supports rural enterprise by circumventing traditional land constraint and enclosure, often allowing single families to live on the land in locations from which they would normally be excluded. It has achieved success on its own terms and may evolve further in the years ahead, perhaps embracing collective models of land management. Such collective models enabled businesses run by women in Mexico and Japan to bring a new ethics of care to land-focused production. [Chapter 10](#) detailed the struggles engaged in by women to overcome patriarchal barriers to the use of common resources or the enactment of new business models. Ultimately, their collective businesses incubated new forms of social reproduction, or innovations in socio-ecological care. This was made possible through interactions with ‘structurally advantaged actors’, that is, male family members, in relatively permissive contexts. But it was noted that such innovations are difficult to realise in contexts that are ‘actively discriminatory’, including places of ‘indigenous land rights struggles’.

[Chapter 11](#) brought the focus to just such a context. In Australia, prudent land stewardship by Indigenous communities was destroyed by the Western belief that the working of land confers exclusive ownership rights. The ‘innovation’ in that chapter was not something new but something that existed for millennia prior to the arrival of British colonisers in 1788: protection and care for common resources, now for the benefit of settler and Indigenous peoples alike. The ethics of care, noted in the Australian case, of course resonates with other commoning experiences, notably in Mexico and Japan. It also featured strongly in the shift in aesthetics sought, through engagements with land art, in [Chapter 12](#). *Reconfigured* relations between subject and world were sought in the projects case-studied in that chapter while, in the case of Australia, a *restoration* of alternative (non-western) relations is targeted by those who believe in the restitution not only of land rights but of lost relationships with ‘country’.

Innovation and entrepreneurialism are narrowly defined under capitalism. In relation to land and land use, they are measured against the achievement of best economic use in support of private accumulation. The private owner is motivated, more than any other actor, to profit-maximise and secure greatest efficiency. Postcapitalism reframes and broadens innovation and entrepreneurialism, reorienting these concepts to the achievement of social goals (of inclusion and justice), and measuring success not merely in terms of extracted profit but sustainable resource use and, latterly, post- or de-growth agendas. Modern capitalism is adept at rent extraction. New financial tools direct rents to investors in a variety

of ways, delivering incomes underpinned by rent via financial channels (that is, financialised accumulation). However, where maximum rent extraction or the targeting of future rents is not the objective (where aesthetics and relations have been shifted), commoning and collective enterprise has the edge, bringing more people to the land and more land to productive use, creating (common)wealth by combining land with new ways of ‘useful doing’.

## Structural supports

Land commoning or de-commodification arrangements can be piecemeal or arise fortuitously, flowing from particular local circumstances or political initiative. They are seldom lent structural support by legal frameworks or systems of taxation. Indeed, capitalism has resisted challenges to private property, sometimes seeking to expand support for current arrangements (including through the expansion of homeownership examined in [Chapter 19](#)). George noted that land redistribution might assuage concerns about inequality in the short term, but private property-holding tends ultimately towards concentration, through inheritance and through unequal competition. Again, this tendency was confirmed in [Chapter 19](#), through the lens of homeownership supports in Britain. Political economies are sustained by legal frameworks, and the institution of property, and by taxation, particularly the balance of taxation on work, profit and rent. What can we conclude about the structural supports that might be needed to give greater momentum to the postcapitalist futures explored in this book, especially in more resistant contexts?

More radical resets contend with a belief in the ability of current political economies to deliver a different distribution of benefit. It was noted in [Chapter 19](#) that George (1879) put six alternative means of alleviating social inequality under the spotlight, concluding that each would be incapable of fundamentally altering the inequalities accruing from land enclosure and rent extraction. He reflected on reducing government expenditure, and therefore the tax burden; on increasing education, and therefore productivity; on unionisation in pursuit of higher wages; on co-operation between labour and capital, again in support of productivity; on welfare interventions that sought to redistribute the economic product; and on advancing the distribution of land, and thereby sharing private rent. Having noted George’s verdicts on the first five, [Chapter 19](#) focused on the experience of ‘asset based welfare’ in Britain, advanced through homeownership. It showed how post-war attempts to create a

common housing infrastructure were supplanted by a reconditioning of land to deliver private benefit. While homeownership was advanced as a 'social project', it evolved into a means of private accumulation. Even the council housing built after the Second World War became a target for investors, who sub-divided family homes into low-quality bedsits in order to maximise rent extraction. Today, those bed-sits in former council homes represent a low-point in housing policy but perhaps a pinnacle in the assetisation process. The short conclusion from [Chapter 19](#) was that homeownership, as a means of sharing rent and distributing welfare, has failed. Other structural supports are needed to address the unsustainable consumption and gross inequalities noted in [Chapter 1](#).

The task remaining for [Chapters 20](#) and [21](#) was to sketch futures beyond capitalism and the means of achieving those futures. *Domination* over people and land, a characteristic of feudalism and capitalism, provided an initial synthesising concept for [Chapter 20](#). Postcapitalism therefore supposes 'freedom from the domination of landlords and rents on nature of all kinds', achieved through the common ownership and collective management of land. It also supposes a reconnection of populations with nature, in place of the 'spatial rift' between town and country that arose from primitive accumulation, in the pre-history of capitalism, and enclosure. The capitalist countryside is a 'highly regimented, industrialised and technologically augmented environment largely evacuated of human and non-human life'. As with previous contributions, [Chapter 20](#) foregrounded its thinking on postcapitalism by drawing attention to the struggles and the social movements that are pushing back against domination by capital, resisting, for example, the advance of new commodity frontiers into wilderness zones. Actions of the type flagged in [Chapter 6](#), concerning the food commons, and [Chapter 10](#), concerning the pursuit of socio-ecological justice through an ethics of care and commoning, were presented as essential shifts. A more radical retreat from capital-intensive farming was also envisioned, alongside agroecological transitions that make space for community-supported agriculture.

But how might such transitions be achieved? The theoretical premise was that they must be realised 'through the dissolution of capitalist social relations' and through 'new forms of mediation'. Practical implementation requires a common form of property beyond freehold and leasehold, which breaks the subordination of landlord to tenant. In the interim, common property regimes such as CLTs are important, but these are constrained by 'capitalist law, founded on the residues of feudalism'. That constraint, as noted in [Chapters 7](#) and [8](#), means that such interim



arrangements struggle against the dominant private property regime. This means that much broader common property institutions are needed, to achieve socio-ecological reparation, and to end the domination of a neoliberal logic. Still, transitional arrangements are vital on this longer journey to a postcapitalist countryside, not only in the form of common ownership alternatives such as land trusts but also through the regulation of capitalist land markets and by ‘taxing away’ the excess rents than motivate extractive rentierism. [Chapter 20](#) therefore called for the ‘land value tax’ that is detailed in [Chapter 21](#).

Using the UK as a case study, the last chapter once again implicated land enclosures and rent extractions in critical inequalities, and particularly in challenges around housing affordability and the viability of farm businesses. A land value tax (or a tax on ‘ground rent’) would not target a particular ‘social class’, as Ricardo claimed in his response to Adam Smith’s support for a ‘tax on houses’ ([Ricardo, 1817](#): 131), but rather a particular class of surplus – the unearned increment. The analysis presented in [Chapter 21](#) showed that rural areas and rural businesses would positively benefit from a land tax that predominantly collected that increment from areas with higher land values. It would also dissuade landowners from engaging in speculative rent-seeking, therefore supporting a return to the land and a return to productive land-use. Speculation, or the inessential consumption of housing, has decoupled asset prices (homes and farmland) from earnings and commodity prices, driving a rural affordability crisis that extends beyond housing. Land value tax could return land to the communities that need it and foreground new forms of common property, realised within a social land market no longer dominated by the logic of private rent.

In reality, such structural supports – the institution of common property and the socialisation of rent – are difficult to implement. But the alternative, a continuation of the status quo, is at least as difficult, if not more so, for the billions of people whose lives and livelihoods are blighted by the injustice of ‘rent theft’, whether they are families struggling with high housing costs or communities dispossessed by land grabs or a denial of land rights.

## **A hopeful future beyond/with capitalism**

The wealth of nations, and of the planet as a whole, is not produced by any single class. That wealth arises from the sum of developments, investments and activities spanning generations. While the rewards to

individuals, drawn from this common pot, may to some extent reflect effort and ingenuity, they are also fixed and sustained, across generations, by frameworks that confer advantages on some while depriving others, individuals and communities, of the wherewithal needed to live well and receive a fair share of common resources. The editors and contributors to this volume have engaged with a range of literatures, from classical political economy to recent anti-capitalist and postcapitalist writings. These literatures link land enclosure to commoning aspirations and processes; private accumulation to social enterprise; and a belief in privatised land and capital to collective control over a common dowry. They bridge between opposing worldviews: one in which the pursuit of individual wealth, advantage and opportunity drives human progress; and another in which the direction of that progress is questioned, and only through commoning and de-commodification can society exist within planetary resource limits. The extremes of wealth and poverty are viewed either as inevitable or resolvable, depending on worldview.

There are of course some soft-edges between private and social accumulation: belief in a more humane form of capitalism, evidenced in the assignment of 'corporate social responsibilities' or increased expenditure on state welfare (dealing with the fallout from enclosure), but these soft-edges are a side-show, a cloak behind which business as usual continues uninterrupted. Postcapitalism is not soft capitalism or capitalism 2.0. Rather, it questions at a fundamental level the inner workings of economies and the institutions, of property and taxation, on which they are founded. To an extent, postcapitalism is an experiment of both thought and praxis, existing, even with the contradictions and tensions described in this book, in more radical or more practicable forms. It questions the efficacy of current political economy, not only highlighting critical inequalities but also inefficiencies: labour barriers arising from unaffordable housing, risks from unsustainable food production, or insecurities from reliance on corporate energy models. It is therefore a thought experiment that draws attention to a multitude of weaknesses and risks wired into modern economies. It is also evidenced in everyday praxis in the ways it delivers hopeful futures to communities around the world, including those retaining customary land tenure. Some of those practices pre-date Western conceptions of property and enclosure and so the full package of what might be labelled postcapitalism transcends both Western debates and literatures, and urban-rural binaries. There is much to be learnt from other places and cultures.

Ultimately, the modern and advanced economies which have been the primary focus of this book face critical challenges centred on inequality and unsustainable consumption. Each of the book's contributing chapters

have presented answers to these challenges, which collectively chart a pathway to a hopeful postcapitalist planetary future, urban *and* rural. The supports noted in the final chapters, common property and land taxation, suggest a goal or end-point for postcapitalism: a ‘mission accomplished’ moment. But as many chapters in this book show, postcapitalism is an ongoing process of resistance involving the design of pre-figurative actions that fit particular contexts. In that sense, the hopeful future for postcapitalism is already here, embodied in the many communities and individuals who refuse to be subordinate to modern capitalism’s continuing enclosures and pursuit of rent.

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'A comprehensive, wide-ranging and pioneering book, with a strong economics and planning emphasis, creatively foregrounding the place of our countryside today within debates about postcapitalism.' *Keith Halfacree, Swansea University, Wales*

'A critically important book that looks beyond the structural inequalities of capitalism in rural areas and answers the question of "what is to be done?". Drawing on evidence from the UK and other advanced economies, it argues for alternative postcapitalist modes of socio-economic organisation.' *Natalia Mamonova, Ruralis, The Institute for Rural and Regional Research, Norway*

*Postcapitalist Countrysides* explores the tensions that arise from the established conventions of economic production and private accumulation, as they affect life, wealth and work in rural areas. Its premise is that capitalism, as we experience it today, is incapable of solving key societal challenges – centred on social justice and sustainable livelihoods. By rethinking land, capital and labour relationships, postcapitalism offers glimpses of alternative modes of socio-economic organisation, achievable through local pre-figurative actions today and scalable through structural supports in the future.


Following an initial focus on land, rent and commoning, the substantive themes addressed in the book include, *inter alia*, the future of food commons; community landownership; community-led low impact development; business-led commoning; land art, resistance and land justice; the evolution and prospects for rural social enterprise; platform (post)capitalism; community land trusts and affordable homes; evolving energy commons; and shared benefits from rural heritage. The collection ends on the scalability of commoning actions and pathways towards postcapitalist countrysides.

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