

Matthew Thompson

There is something special about land, muses Brett Christophers, in his powerful exposé of its systematic privatisation in neoliberal Britain: “It is finite, but it is also ubiquitous, making it fungible at essentially a universal scale; and capitalism thrives on scalable fungibility” (page 34). This, coupled with its other unique qualities as neither replicable nor susceptible to counterfeit, as grounded in solidity and permanence and therefore extremely resistant to depreciation or inflation, as readily divisible and measurable in quantity, makes land – even moreso than money itself – the perfect financial asset in which to invest surplus capital, to speculate upon, use as collateral for buying debt or simply as a store of value. This specialness of land, Christophers identifies early on in the book, drawing on the work of theorists from the two Karls, Marx and Polanyi, to David Harvey and Doreen Massey, makes it extraordinarily attractive for capital accumulation when all other avenues of profitable investment have been exhausted.

And so it is especially the case in the UK, where, Christophers documents, the single biggest contributor to economic growth since the beginning of the 1990s – larger, even, than banking and finance – has been the rental of dwellings, as part of the ‘rentier capitalism’ that parasitically dominates the British socioeconomy, the subject of his forthcoming book (Christophers, 2020). The rise of the landlord – or rentier – class alongside Generation Rent has been one of the most disruptive and regressive consequences of the neoliberal policy assault on public ownership of land, as denounced by the perceptive critics Anna Minton (2012) and James Meek (2014), who lay some of the groundwork for Christophers to build upon.

The book shocks with a litany of depressing statistics: around 2 million hectares of public land – or 10 per cent of Britain! – have been systematically sold off since 1979, representing approximately half of all land that was in public ownership when Thatcher came to power, and estimated to be worth at least £400 billion. Despite focusing on this contemporary period of financialisation and privatisation, analysed in fiercely forensic detail, one of the book’s most illuminating passages is its survey of the early modern past – situating the privatisation of public land within a wider historical frame from the Domesday Book to the enclosures of the commons. The commons, prior to enclosure, were of two main types: ‘common-fields’ for common agricultural use and what were called ‘waste’ lands, denoting any common land not used for cultivation, such as for gathering firewood and grazing animals, which was just as productive and “integral as common-fields to the self-provisioning, common-right peasant economy of the British countryside” (page 80). But the word ‘waste’, argues Christophers, has been turned against ‘unimproved’ commons, and indeed ‘surplus’ public land in more recent times, as ammunition in the war of enclosure, which finds its contemporary expression in what Hodkinson (2012) terms ‘the new urban enclosures’. One of the principal discourses mobilised by neoliberals in the assault on public land has been that of ‘surplus’. These striking parallels underline why Christophers decided to call the book *The New Enclosure*.

Essential reading for scholars of housing, *The New Enclosure* charts how, by the early twentieth century, local authorities were using powers of compulsory purchase to buy up large swathes of peri-urban land, in the interwar period, and after 1930 increasingly urban land for the clearance of inner-city slums and the development of council housing – thereby expanding state ownership to around 12–14 percent of British land by WWII. An impressive figure next to the finding that

in 1875, in the only comprehensive survey of British land ownership since the Domesday Book, there was an almost complete absence of state ownership. In the postwar period, the state dramatically expanded and pluralised its holdings through the nationalisation of utilities and key industries, and by the 1970s its land holdings had grown to 20% of Britain's total. Housing remained a substantial component due to continued council housebuilding as well as the establishment of 32 new towns across the UK, such as Milton Keynes in 1967, which alone involved the public acquisition of 7,300 hectares of agricultural land.

When set in this context, the attack on public housing in the subsequent decades appears all the more depressing. With large numbers of council houses sold off to their tenants under Thatcher's popular Right to Buy programme, councils today, many faced with huge waiting lists and homelessness epidemics, are forced to buy back properties at full market value – massively inflated by property bubbles under rentier capitalism – that they had earlier sold off at a heavily discounted rate. To rub salt into the wound, these properties were often very quickly sold on to speculative buy-to-let landlords, who profited immensely from inflating land values, and who would swell the growing ranks of the rentier class – a class with powerful influence and close connections with Tory governments in particular. Citing Meek's (2014) important investigatory journalism, Christophers notes that the state now spends 20 times more on housing benefit – much of it going to buy-to-let landlords – than on building new affordable housing. By 2017, 40 percent of all council flats sold under Right to Buy were being rented out privately – with the highest figure nationally recorded at 71 percent in Milton Keynes, a “deeply ironic finding” (page 272) considering the new town's origins in visionary public planning and state ownership.

The book demolishes the powerful myth propagated by developers and their political allies that the planning system is the biggest barrier to new house-building. Even in a system in which local authorities are pressured by government policy to sell land to developers with all possible impediments to development already removed – often with planning permission *already granted* for new housing – the evidence shows that only half of the permissions granted had been completed or commenced three years later. Christophers then breaks down what, precisely, are the biggest impediments to housebuilding, circling in on the extraordinarily imperfect, opaque and neo-feudal UK land market, one dominated by “modern-day land barons” (page 295) and rigged by information asymmetries to favour landowners and speculators – exacerbated by the notorious lack of tax, making all land value gains completely tax-free. This means the local state has no way – other than meagre development agreements such as S106 – of capturing for the wider community the unearned social increments arising from development. With no penalty for sitting on land, this effectively incentivises ‘land banking’ while disincentivising housebuilding. The so-called ‘market’ pays more to limit supply, to buy and sell and speculate on rising land values, than it does to build houses desperately in demand.

Little wonder so few community groups have been able to successfully exercise their new-found rights – such as the 2011 Localism Act's Community Right to Reclaim Land – to trump private bidders for public land coming up for sale. Christophers believes that the various policy initiatives to encourage public land to be transferred into community-owned and not-for-profit organisations are “hollow” (page 229), “false promises” (the title of his penultimate chapter), “little more than a sick joke”, “a cruel trick”, for which “deep cynicism seems like the only reasonable response” (page 237).

While housing is a central issue in the book – building on previous work on the housing question (Aalbers & Christophers, 2014b) and centring housing in political economy (Aalbers &

Christophers, 2014) – the focus here is squarely on land; the book’s aim is to re-centre the marginalised issue of privatisation of land in critical political economy. One of its significant contributions is in reconceptualising neoliberalism beyond familiar definitions as a class project of rule through markets, as Harvey (2005) has it, or as the incursion into everyday life of competitive over cooperative rationalities and logics, as Will Davies (2014) characterises it, towards a political project founded on the privatisation of public goods and services, notably land.

Christophers sidesteps tricky questions around the instrumental role of rentier and capitalist class interests in suggesting that the “evidence that would be necessary to make such an argument is simply not available” (page 125). This gives him the license to steer clear of getting sucked into deep structural analysis of global capital accumulation and crisis dynamics or of the hegemonic role of finance capital – perhaps left for the next book (Christophers, 2020) – and to instead concentrate on scrutinising the available empirical evidence on land privatisation as an evidently *state* rather than *class* project.

This, however, is not to tar the state in its entirety with the neoliberal brush. Christophers identifies the elite echelons of central government – in particular the Treasury, Cabinet Office and Number 10 Policy Unit – as “the principal source and driving force of Britain’s land-privatisation programme” (page 244). Local authorities and other public bodies at different tiers and scales are thus presented as being on the receiving end of harsh disciplining programmes for privatisation concocted in Whitehall, but as capable of behaving differently, for the public interest rather than financial interest, if enabled to do so.

In an animated voice that alternates in tone between a sceptical, dispassionate documentation of the evidence and an outraged, sardonic mocking of the motivations behind questionable decisions, Christophers lays bare the hidden political coups, legislative changes, policy reorientations and dodgy deals that have successively stripped the state of its land assets. The central chapter of the book dismantles the dominant discourses of ‘surplus’ and ‘efficiency’ seen to rationalise and legitimise land privatisation. At their base is the familiar idea that land is most effectively managed by the private sector, and most efficiently allocated through competitive markets, while the public sector tends to needlessly hoard and waste land that is therefore surplus to its requirements because it is not driven by market imperatives, namely to put land to *profitable* use. Public land is thus often found to be underused, lying idle, and that such ‘hoarding’ should be disincentivised and ultimately sanctioned through a number of ‘carrots and sticks’ (the title of chapter 4) – new laws, policies and programmes which Christophers then dissects in often exasperating detail. Even the very process of privatisation is shown to have been privatised – outsourced to the usual suspect consultancies, because the public sector cannot be trusted to divest of its own assets as efficiently as the private sector.

Rather amusingly, Christophers highlights the absurdity of trying to deliver simultaneously on both objectives – divesting of ‘surplus’ land *and* driving up ‘efficiencies’ of land-use. A public body that owns very low levels of surplus unused land can be critiqued by government for being “horribly inefficient”, for using more land per staff member than is strictly necessary, and when it attempts to find additional surplus land, it can then be critiqued for being a “wasteful hoarder” (page 136). “In other words”, Christophers surmises, “for British public bodies, it genuinely has been a case of damned if you do, damned if you don’t.” Such perverse logic runs through successive governments’ attempts to tighten the noose, ever more tightly, around the neck of every public body with identifiable land assets, from the Forestry Commission to the Ministry of

Defence and the NHS. Under austerity, particularly affecting local authorities since 2010, Christophers shows how the hangman's logic constricts public ownership still further: "assets, including land, become surplus to requirements not because no use can be found for them, but rather because there are not enough resources to occasion any meaningful use" (page 148). Turning 'surplus' on its head, Christophers notes (page 196) how government calls for what are patently surplus land assets – the huge number of unoccupied empty homes bought as 'safe deposit boxes' to store and accumulate wealth, particularly in London – to be put to actually 'efficient' and 'productive' use in resolving the homelessness crisis, or even temporarily housing the victims of the Grenfell tragedy, have been so strangely silent.

The doom and gloom is contrasted by bright insights into what the state – before being quite so co-opted by rentier capitalism – was capable of. The book celebrates early gains in planning legislation, not least the 1947 Act itself which inaugurated town and country planning as we know it (or at least once did, until the 2020 planning reforms). Effectively nationalising land development rights, the Act originally also included measures for a development tax, the 'betterment levy', which captured any increases in land value associated with the granting of development permission for reinvestment by the state – until it was undone by the incoming Tory government in 1953. A similar story of radical reform and swift counter-reversal is told of Labour's 1967 central-government Land Commission, which sought to nationalise development land itself – abolished in 1970; and the 1975 Community Land Tax and 1976 Development Land Tax, both gone by 1979. Such political innovations in land value capture deserve to be better known and understood by planning and housing professionals whose vocational education, at least in the UK and as far as I've experienced it, rarely strays this far from more superficial contemporary regulatory concerns. This book deserves to be on course reading lists.

One explanation why land privatisation – and its policy solutions in the form of land value taxes and the like – are so far removed from planning education and submerged beneath more fashionable issues in academic urban studies is that it has been forcefully driven under by neoliberal political agendas. Massey's seminal research into land ownership in the 1970s at the Centre for Environmental Studies (CES) was, Christophers quotes Robert Home, "linked politically to post-war Labour governments' attempts to control development land" (page 328); Thatcher cancelled state funding for CES within a year of taking office and its work "largely sunk without a trace". The withdrawal of political interest in land ownership – to cover the tracks of privatisation – "helped drive it off the academic agenda", suggests Christophers, which in turn made the issues increasingly invisible to policymakers, lacking academic studies to base policy upon. *The New Enclosure* makes a conscious move towards re-establishing the issue of public land ownership in both academic and political agendas.

Although broadly lamenting the loss of state ownership, Christophers acknowledges that the state – including the local state – is not always the best guardian of public ownership or common interest, and that, following Massey, for state bodies to function as public owners – that is, "a different type of owner" that refuses to "ape private-sector approaches and values" (page 141) – "they also have to be enabled to behave as socially-conscious landowners" (Massey, quoted page 141). The key tension here is between promoting the state as a "landowner that deploys 'cold logic' to generate precious income from public land for the government and its delivery of public services" (page 342) – what we might call *leaning in* to neoliberalism, as a form of 'municipal entrepreneurialism' (Thompson, Nowak, Southern, & Davies, 2019) – "or one that eschews financial logics in leveraging this asset base" and moves us towards a different conception of value, based on social use rather than financial exchange. It is clear that central government, over

the past half century, has systematically bent the rules to force local authorities to behave like profit-driven property companies. Christophers' (2019) related research into councils' for-profit special purpose vehicles for developing market housing to cross-subsidise affordable and for investing in commercial property ventures such as shopping centres in order to generate alternative sources of revenue to plug gaps in statutory budgets opened by austerity certainly attests to this. But this leaves hanging the question of, if not the state, then what kind of public body is capable in the current conjuncture of reconstructing public ownership?

Returning once more to Polanyi's concept of the 'double movement', Christophers concludes that "there have been no concerted and broadly based moves to de-commodify the land, to 're-embed' it in non-market institutions" (page 324). All resistance has indeed been highly localised and relatively disconnected from becoming a coordinated countermovement. Those instances he cites of more positive proposals for alternatives to privatised developments include tentative projects for state-supported Community Land Trusts (CLT) in places such as Bristol, and Haringey and Lewisham in London. Hinting at their radical potential, the book nonetheless stops short of exploring promising-if-problematic possibilities for public-common partnerships, in which the local state supports the transfer of public (and private) land into common property regimes such as CLTs, or indeed the broader relationship between public ownership and the commons (Thompson, 2020).

From my own perspective, Liverpool presents an interesting laboratory for such possibilities. Not only is the city home to two celebrated CLTs that have pioneered the use of the model for common ownership and regeneration of disinvested public land (Thompson, 2020), now supported by a city-regional Community-led Housing Hub, but the Liverpool City Region Combined Authority is also the first to establish a Land Commission explicitly tasked by the Metro Mayor with proposing "radical recommendations", including public-common partnerships and CLTs, for "how to make the best use of publicly-owned land to make this the fairest and most socially inclusive city region in the country" (Liverpool City Region Combined Authority, 2020). This brings together a collective of local and national land reform experts – including some cited by Christophers, notably Guy Shrubsole, as well as representatives of inspiring organisations and initiatives presented in the book such as Shared Assets and the Scottish Land Commission. In a more hopeful register in the final few pages, summarising the "radical ideological break" (page 346) the latter makes with Scotland's entrenched feudalistic land history, Christophers could just as easily be writing about the Liverpool City Region Land Commission when he remarks: "Of course, these may ultimately prove to be empty words; it remains to be seen whether the Commission can deliver on its promises. But at least there *is* a Commission, a body with a bold vision and the promise of change." Having determinedly demonstrated the utter bankruptcy of land privatisation, *The New Enclosure* clears the way – without disclosing its contours – for more hopeful experimentation with, and theorisation of, public alternatives.

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