

LETTERS

TO THE EDITOR

Land ownership

To the Editor:

In several editions of the *Welcomat* during the past year I have presented a theory of justice built on the acceptance of two premises. The first is that the earth is the birthright of all mankind; the second, that natural property must be produced by human labor and capital goods.

The first statement simply means that because we are all human, we have a natural right to equally access nature in order to nurture our survival. What we then produce by our efforts is our property, to which we have total and inalienable rights.

From this central theory of justice, I have attempted to show where our own and other societies have succumbed to positive law inconsistent with these principles. I have argued that land ownership, which is static and produces nothing, has no basis of legitimacy under just law.

Land ownership is, therefore, a privilege (in the form of a license to use) rather than a right associated with natural property. As a license to use, land ownership should bring its return to the entire citizenry rather than any individual user.

Importantly, what is produced by the individual after paying for such a license must, if just principles are to be followed, be treated as property. Any attempt by the state or other parties to confiscate such property by taxation or force violates the principle of justice and is theft. This restates my position as succinctly as I can.

You suggest in response to my recent letter (July 23), published under the heading "Libertarians," that my presentation "degenerates into rhetoric." What is most intriguing is that you do so not on the basis of principle or fact, but on an apparent lack of historical perspective. The history of how the territory we now occupy was acquired and settled should be example enough.

It took the native tribal groups a while, but they eventually came to understand the danger to their culture and very survival in the presence of the European. The first major attempt to thwart the westward advance of the whites was made by the great Ottawa chief, Pontiac. His own people were disorganized, technologically backward and numerically inferior.

Historian Allan Eckert, in his narrative *The Conquerors*, writes that Pontiac "did not think it was possible that any of the tribes could fail to fall in with him when he explained to them how the English destroyed the forests and fields, killed the game, laid waste wherever they went, spread sickness and hurt and, most of all, drove the Indians from their own land and took it as theirs."

As Pontiac then knew, and as other Indian chiefs would learn, "the (whites) were all the same—give them one tree and they took the forest, give them one foot of ground and they took acres. Give them acres and they took the country."

Pontiac had reason to fight against the massive denial of rights he and his fellow tribesmen experienced; but he too

would have kept the land for his own people had he been able to do so.

There has rarely ever been a period or place in history where the principle of equal access to nature has been the rule. Politics has always stood in the way of justice. The tribes of North America often used land commonly amongst themselves, but they fought to maintain exclusive control over territory against all others. History is an endless series of attempts to monopolize nature.

So while I commend your willingness to print ideas with which you do not agree, I cannot help but feel sorrow that you can respond, "So what?"

to the knowledge that control over the world's land and natural resources is becoming more and more concentrated.

Moreover, land and capital ownership in the United States have become concentrated in the hands of a rapidly decreasing number of corporate and government entities.

While there is no distinct land-owning class or capitalist class, our society is experiencing a growing maldistribution of wealth ownership. The ownership of stocks, bonds and government securities (representations of physical wealth) is also highly concentrated.

Over time, it has become more and more difficult without heavy state intervention for the landless or the capitalless person to compete in such an arena. The situation in most other countries is far worse.

The tragedy is that far too many of those who are genuinely concerned about the global maldistribution

of land and wealth ownership are unquestioning statisticians. They want to nationalize industry, nationalize land, nationalize education, nationalize medicine and nationalize equality of distribution.

The Marxists would do so without regard to individual contributions to production.

If those on the left win, we end up with state socialism; if those on the right win, we end up with state capitalism; if we do nothing we will continue to experience a deterioration of respect for natural property and a society existing in a condition of strife between the haves and the have nots.

Either way, in the end, we will lose our freedom unless we stop confiscating natural property and begin collecting for redistribution the values attached to the granting of licenses to access nature.

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Editor's comment: How can you bring about a redistribution of land ownership without some form of compulsion—that is, statism? And how can you be sure that such a distribution would be more fair than what we have now? And what would you do about all the people like me who would just as soon forego the responsibilities of land ownership and focus our talents and energies in other directions?