

An Anarchist View of the Land Problem

Mark A. Sullivan

1984–85

The land problem is one of apparent scarcity: The supply of land appears to be insufficient to meet the demand. Many individuals who seek access to land — whether in rural or urban areas — find land values (rents and prices) too high. This apparent scarcity is an illusion — an illusion created and perpetuated by the state.

The state creates the illusion of land-scarcity by: (1) TAKING land away from some people (like Native Americans, small-scale farmers, and low-income inner-city dwellers); (2) creating and protecting TITLES TO ABSENTEE-OWNERSHIP over land, which it grants to non-using individuals and legal (i.e., fictitious) “persons” or corporate “entities”; and (3) levying compulsory tribute or TAXES upon the use of the land. All these methods tend to transfer control of land away from those without sufficient money (i.e., power) to hold on to it. To these, then, we may add (4) the monopolization of money, the means of credit and exchange: the current legal-tender/banking scam.

If you do not have enough money to buy land (for a house, business, etc.) you must either borrow some at exorbitant rates of interest, or pay for the mere USE Of land — i.e., RENT. Usually the poor, who cannot get credit approval from the banks or afford high interest rates, pay rent all their lives only to be thrown out of their homes at the whim of landlords and the so-called “market” — with the state, of course, upholding the landlords by force if necessary. The killing of Eleanor Bumpers clearly illustrates the function of “police protection” in a confrontation between landlord and tenant.

Titles to absentee-landownership allow for the non-using title-owner to collect monopoly rents from the non-owning users. (A building-owner who does not own the land must collect enough in building-rent to pay the land-rent — thus acting as a “middleman” in the process.) Absentee-owners can also speculate and hold their land out of use while they wait for someone to come along willing and able to pay a monopoly rent for use, or a monopoly price for title.

Taxation and monopoly interest rates penalize those who would put their land to more efficient use. Thus they prevent land from being used to accommodate larger numbers of people. This can be seen in cities with slums and acute housing shortages. In both urban and rural area poorer “marginal” land is thus forced out of use, raising monopoly rents and prices on other land, encouraging land speculation, raising the costs (thus prices) of commodities, and disemploying workers and lowering wages. Rent, interest, and taxation are Monopoly tributes paid by the user

of land to non-users who have legal claims upon a percentage of the wealth produced by the user.

The title of the absentee-landowner is a LICENSE to collect tribute as a sub-monopoly granted by the supreme monopoly of tribute over the land, the government, or more exactly: the state. And the state is nothing but a group of people who have got away with CLAIMING a “right” or mandate from “the people” to exercise force over everyone within certain geographic boundaries. The sub-monopoly which the state grants to absentee-landowners (and similar privileges to others) is protected or paid for out of the taxes collected from land-users (i.e., workers or producers). Thus folks are paying the state to protect their-own exploiters! Naturally, in the irony of the problem lies its ultimate solution.

One false solution — because only a half solution — to the land problem is proposed by many “free market” libertarians who advocate abolishing taxation while leaving monopoly titles to absentee-landownership intact. Some even suggest these titles should be made virtually absolute. They regard the state as interfering with land titles — not creating them. Of course, one may ask how the state is to protect these titles, if taxation is abolished — or even greatly reduced? The great amount of taxes needed to fund “welfare” benefits are spent to protect absentee-landownership and other privileges. “Welfare” is but a way to take care of the dispossessed — as compensation and to quell dissatisfaction which could otherwise lead to violence, expropriation, even revolution.

Other market libertarians do acknowledge the role played by the state, historically, in granting monopoly land titles to a favored few. Absolute absentee-landownership is only legitimate, to these libertarians, if based upon “first come, first served.” The first person to use a piece of “virgin land” can claim a “natural right” to own it — used or unused — in perpetuity. Libertarians such as Murray Rothbard have called this the “homestead” principle. I call it the virgin theory of property. (it is similar to the treatment patriarchal societies have imposed upon women: a woman should preserve her virginity until the “right man comes along”; then she should “surrender” her virginity and belong monopolistically in obedience to him until death do them part. The parallel can be extended with polygamy, where a man can accumulate “titles” to more than one woman, perhaps as many as his money will allow, owning them as slaves.)

The fallacy of the virgin theory of property is that it allows the homesteader to retain ownership even after he (or she) ceases to occupy and use it. It even proposes the “right” of a homesteader to abandon “his” land for a period of years and then return and remove from the land anyone else who may then happen to be occupying and using the land. But is it reasonable to expect people to honor such a “right” on the part of the previous user? Would not the neighbors rally to the defense of the current user? Or, if they did honor the claim of the previous user, keeping others off the land over the years, would they not demand something in exchange for this service — a fee for protecting his claim to idle land against those who may desire or need to use it? And would not those who must bear the cost of being deprived the use of the idle land demand compensation for the sacrifice of part of their freedom?

These are some questions raised by GEOISM: the theory “and” practice of equal freedom to use the earth. Geoists propose that the rent or annual use-value of land be put into a common fund — to finance necessarily-public services and/or to redistribute in equal shares to all community members. All taxation would be abolished and communities would be defined by the free movement of individuals seeking to satisfy their desires with the least effort. Direct democracy within such voluntary communities would ensure that the land rent-fund not be wasted on boon-

doggles — which no one would support as they would diminish the amount of rent available for direct redistribution.

Since it can be expected that landrent will be voluntarily paid to the common treasury — in return for protection of title to the site — there is no need to resort to compulsory taxation. Those who don't wish to pay (even after, say, appealing to a randomly selected jury) will naturally have to provide their own protection of their land-claim as well as bear any ill-will of neighbors who do pay to keep up the common-services.

Ostracism and boycott, voluntarily organized, is far superior to the violence of compulsory taxation which is a monopoly of force as insidious as the absentee-landownership it supports. You are forced to pay taxes whether you have consented or not. Whether you have voted for public services or not. Whether the government represents your wishes or not. While ostracism and boycott exercise the freedom to associate or DIS-associate, taxation DENIES this freedom.

It is one thing to voluntarily contribute to a common fund to supply common services you desire, including the protection of the land and possessions you occupy and use. It is quite another to pay taxes to government because, if you don't, "it" will not only deny you services and protection, it will TAKE your land and possessions AND your freedom as well — which is what government DOES AND HAS ALWAYS DONE! Government does not give you the option of refusing its services — rather "it" threatens all manner of Disservices. Government was well defined by Benj. R. Tucker as "the subjection of the non-invasive individual to an external will."

Since Taxes are now used to protect monopoly land titles, the abolition of taxation is the key to the abolition of land monopoly. Imagine the following scenario: due to overspending and massive tax-resistance, the state goes bankrupt and collapses. All special privileges are no longer respected — including monopoly land claims. Imagine the consequences. First, this leaves land "in the hands" of the actual occupant-users. Illusory DE JURE property has dissolved, leaving DE FACTO property: everyone thus can claim ownership of the land she or he uses.

Those needing others to help them work the land, or those with apartment dwellings to offer, have to share the benefits of ownership or offer other benefits to keep "their tenants" from going to unoccupied sites free for the using (and with interest-free credit from the local "mutual bank" to purchase the capital needed to start from scratch). In the absence of building taxes and monopoly interest-rates, occupant-owners of "prime locations" are likely to put their sites to better use — providing housing and employment to others less well situated — in competition with other "prime locations.")

But land speculation — the buying of land to hold out of use for a later profit — would be a losing proposition: you would have to provide for your own protection, keeping others off the site at your own expense. (And given no building taxes, there is no reason to not put the site to its best present use.) Land ceases to be a "collector's item" and loses its speculative value. Untaxed buildings also cease to be collected, and sell or lease at competitive prices determined by production costs minus depreciation.

While title to absentee-ownership rested upon state domination, title to occupant-ownership now rests upon MUTUAL CONSENT for mutual benefit. Neighbors agree to look after your home while you're away on holiday — as you agree to look after theirs. Some who travel a lot form time-sharing networks and have rotational occupancy-and-use of their dwellings. Others wishing more formal protection join the local Occupancy & Use Defense League. The League insures occupant-property — for an annual fee based upon an OWNER-assessed value. The profits of the association are distributed in equal shares to members at the end of the year. The League

does not have a territorial monopoly, but rather competes with other associations in providing the best combination of low fees, good service, and high shares. While members get low annual rates, non-members can get temporary traveller's insurance 'for their occupant-property — for a higher rate based upon the amount of coverage they want and for how long. Long absences would cost more, discouraging leaving property unoccupied for long periods, and encouraging its transfer to others — at prices which, under these conditions, could not include monopoly rent or profit. Of course, a seller would benefit later on AS A BUYER from these low prices. The privilege of holding property in absentia for long periods is thus abolished: land and buildings now change hands on the basis of their use and occupancy value as determined by eager sellers and willing buyers. The test of a really free market is met: the cost of protecting property falls upon the proprietors themselves — not shifted via taxes upon others.

Common services such as roads and sewers are also provided -where they wanted enough to be paid for voluntarily, since taxation is abolished. But it is in the interests of occupant-owners to have these services provided: for their own ease and comfort, and to attract others to use their buildings, services, and products. Neighbors see themselves as cooperative occupant-owners of the streets, parks, and other services they support and share in common. Those who spoil the environment (the common property} or refuse to pay for common services WHICH THEY ALSO USE (thus at the expense of others) are dealt with as invasive individuals: by economic boycott and social ostracism on the part of those who feel imposed upon or taken advantage of. And those who do not wish the amenities of community life can find plenty of free land on the outskirts of town. And while some communities would offer more benefits (but costing more to live there), others would offer little or no benefits (to each one's own). In the absence of the state, then, various forms of mutual1st GEO-ANARCHY could well arise both out of necessity and spontaneity: with common services supported by the site-users who receive them — and sites occupied by those willing to support the common services.

Unlike the state, geo-anarchy leaves land titles — “occupancy and use” — to be DEFINED BY THOSE CONCERNED. By direct action, not indirect legislation. Much like “age of consent,” “occupancy and use” cannot be determined by law but only in actual practice. Differing as persons and circumstances differ. No pre-defined limit need be put upon the amount of land a person may occupy and use undisturbed by others.

For example: Is a family in a house on a twenty-acre estate “occupying and using” all twenty acres? “Let the free market decided”, we can now boldly declare. Let those who want to “own” twenty acres pay themselves for its protection — to the local Occupancy & Use Defense League or, if they (quite likely) refuse, against them.’ The “war of each against all?” Not quite. Once their idle surplus acres are needed, goodwill offers will be made by those wishing to take up occupancy. If the offers are refused, direct action would be taken to occupy the land, perhaps supported by the local Occupancy & Use Defense League, economic boycott, and social ostracism. Without the state to come to their aid, most landholders would see the foolishness of trying to hold on to land they cannot or will not put to good use satisfying the needs of others. They would let the squatters have the land. The alternative is an ever-increasing “carrying cost” to protect their monopoly: the Geoist dynamic — not imposed “from above” by the state — but generated by the needs and desires of people acting for themselves at the grassroots level. After all, the grassroots are IN THE LAND.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Mark A. Sullivan
An Anarchist View of the Land Problem
1984–85

Retrieved 10/08/2026 from cooperative-individualism.org
Originally published in the *The Storm!* (Issue 14/15 – 1984/'85)

theanarchistlibrary.org