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The New Enclosure. The appropriation of public land in neoliberal Britain. Brett Christophers, *London, Verso, 2018, 362 pp, £20.00, ISBN 9781786631589*

Buy land, Mark Twain famously advised - 'they're not making it any more'. As investment advice, it's an adage that has been turned on its head by successive UK governments, which since 1979 have sold national asset after national asset.

The extraordinary thing, as Brett Christophers notes in his comprehensive and astute study, is that the scale of these sales has gone largely unnoticed. He calculates that land sales, cumulatively, dwarf all other UK privatisations, amounting to assets worth £400 billion and space equivalent to one tenth of the British land mass.

Unlike other privatisations, however, it has been drip-fed over four decades, often appearing in the small print of the sale of utilities such as electricity, water and railways. The consequences, far from being the efficient and productive use of land that was sitting 'idle' under state control, have been land-hoarding by private interests, speculation, and the growth of a rentier economy.

Christophers' approach to this under-explored facet of British neoliberalism is weighty, comprehensive, and outraged. His depiction of this process as 'The New Enclosure' consciously echoes historic anger at the injustices of the first enclosures of the early modern period.

In five substantial chapters, topped and tailed with a shorter introduction and conclusion, he sets out why land ownership in the UK matters, how it has developed, the discourses and incentives used to dispose of public land, and the harmful consequences.

Chapter 1 sets the theoretical scene, positioning land acquisition and ownership within the development of capitalism and explaining its distinctive links with economic and political power: 'In deciding, within the bounds of state oversight, how and by whom her land is used, the landowner shapes all of our ecological, as well as social, economic and political futures' (p36). Land thus assumes a value that is disproportionate to its actual use; within such a context, the planning system itself becomes a locus of speculation rather than an effective means of regulation.

Christophers moves on to outline the history of landownership in Britain, noting its sudden disappearance from English political debate in the 1980s. He charts how the acquisition of land by the state over the course of the twentieth century was dramatically reversed as depictions of government land as 'surplus' became more common and financial institutions turned their attention to property assets.

The initial chapters form a long but necessary preamble; in Chapter 3 the author picks up the theme of the discursive preparations for privatisation through rhetorics of surplus and wastage. Central to these arguments are claims that land held by the state is economically unproductive, while logics of disposal are reinforced by persistent attacks on the planning profession as bureaucratic and anti-

entrepreneurial. He explains how such discourses have been reinforced by austerity policies that, in his words (p148) create surplus land 'not because no use can be found … but rather because there are not enough resources to occasion any meaningful use'.

Chapter 4 is a forensic analysis of the methods used by governments to persuade the holders of public land - from NHS bodies to local authorities and Whitehall departments - to sell it to private interests. Christophers outlines the carrots and sticks deployed to free up public land and then sell it on, from guidance and instructions through to incentives such as making capital receipts available to fund frontline services. He highlights the role, too, of private sector advisers in the process of land disposals, which he neatly terms 'the privatisation of the process of privatisation'.

The fifth chapter is the most telling. It painstakingly details how the promises of efficiency, value for money and community benefits from the sale of public land have not only failed to materialise, but have been eroded through the very land sales that were supposed to deliver them. As Christophers notes, not achieving value for money was a fundamental premise of the biggest land sale of all, the right to buy council housing; and the cost to the state has been compounded through the subsequent sale of former council homes to private landlords who then let them out to people who depend on housing benefit to pay the rent.

In a nation where political rhetoric has suggested for most of the last 40 years that planners have been over-powerful, it is striking how unable planners have been to resist land privatisation. To read this book as a commentary on town planning is to recognise how vestigial planning has become to much public policy.

This perhaps helps to explain the rather cursory sketch of alternatives in the conclusion. In an era where planning and the capacity of local authorities has been denuded, the signs of hope are limited. Community land trusts, co-ops and experiments in creating new 'commons' are exciting and laudable, but marginal: even an optimistic assessment would place such activities within the prefigurative politics of 'not not but not yet' (Swain, 2017). Meanwhile the more informal and transgressive routes of squatting and self-help that challenge the concept of landownership at a more fundamental level (Ward, 2012; Berner & Phillips, 2005) fail to attract the author's attention.

For planners, *The New Enclosure* may be an uncomfortable commentary on the powerlessness of their profession. But if the trajectory it depicts is to change, it is a necessary one.

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