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Book Review

The New Enclosure: The Appropriation of Public Land in Neoliberal Britain, by Brett Christophers, London: Verso, 2018, 362 pp., £12 (paperback, ebook)

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Eagerly waiting to read his forthcoming book *Rentier Capitalism*, this is a good opportunity to look back at Brett Christophers' latest research monograph *The New Enclosure: The Appropriation of Public Land in Neoliberal Britain*. In *The New Enclosure*, Christophers critically examines the dynamics involved in the massive transfer of public land into private control in Britain since the 1980s. He estimates that around 2 million hectares of land have been appropriated by the private sector, representing 10% of the British landmass and likely to be worth in the order of £400 billion. This makes it the biggest privatization to date, worth more money than the privatization of state-owned industries and council houses.

The significance of the book lies in the presentation of how and how much land has been appropriated. Landownership matters because it is associated with political influence, power, wealth and pleasure. So far, however, it has been poorly documented in the academic literature. This is largely due to the lack of publicly available information: the 'British system of disclosing information about private landownership is [...] profoundly undemocratic' (189). Critically engaging with the political implications of the appropriation of land cannot do without the democratization of knowledge. Christophers key aim is therefore to render visible: first, the extent of public land that has been privatized; second, the extent of land that remains; and third, 'the problems that commonly arise from privatizing such land' (331).

The book sheds light on the importance of land transfer for understanding neoliberalism in the areas of planning, development, and land economy. Christophers' claim that 'there is no "neoliberalism" without privatization/enclosure' (19) poses important questions. Is neoliberalism an extreme, an exception, or the new norm – a 'never-ending nightmare' (Christophers, 2018: 452) – of capitalism? Is the trend towards privatization, therefore, continuing without hindrance or can it be decelerated, stopped or reversed? Engaging with these questions requires a broader historical perspective. One promising way of intervening in neoliberal land privatization and the raising inequalities that it contributes to is by means of a critical historiographical approach that

breaks up a singular historical narrative and refuses any certainties such as the 'there is no alternative' slogan in order to search for divergent elements, gaps and tensions in history.

Christophers frames neoliberal land privatization as a form of enclosure. In so doing, he leads readers back to the 'original' enclosure that was fundamental to the transition from feudalism to capitalism. Of particular relevance here are, however, not only similarities but also differences between the two because the original enclosure was not about the privatization of land ownership per se but about the 'extinction of common rights to open fields and waste' (81). Although Christophers does not include a detailed discussion of socio-economic and political implications of different ways of enclosing land – refusing access, denying use rights, changing ownership structures – in this book, the relationship between who has the right to use land in what ways and who owns land lies at the heart of his discussion.

The book is of interest for a diverse readership. Written in a clear and accessible style it is structured in a linear way. In five substantive chapters, readers are being moved up from a conceptual discussion, to an historical framing, to a presentation of the 'why', the 'how', and the consequences of land privatization. Such a linear structure has its benefits. One chapter leads seamlessly to the next and readers can feel in safe hands. In this way, Christophers develops a convincing critique of the neoliberal claim that the public sector 'possesses vast swathes of unused and thus "surplus" land' and that its use of land is 'inherently inefficient' (126). He unpacks the idea that 'existing forms of use and ownership are wasteful, and that private use and ownership are more productive' (323) and argues that privatization means a loss of public goods and services from land because the private sector typically does not deliver them.

Given Christophers' powerful critique, there are also dangers inherent to the book's linear structure and the reading it suggests. Separating rather than entangling theories, histories, statements, processes and outcomes of land transfer can encourage a seemingly critical yet self-complacent engagement with the text in support of a coherent narrative. Yet, Christophers' account also allows for a different sort of engagement that is politically significant. In addition to providing information, he opens up a space for critical questions and alternatives by means of aligning historical analysis with political critique. Planning historians might be particularly interested in relating the dynamics of neoliberal land privatization to land-use policy measures that were introduced after the WW II and before Thatcher came to power, which Christophers mentions only briefly. A critical historiographical approach, then, can work in two directions: first, it can explore past arrangements and relate them to present conditions to give fresh impetus to the search for alternative policies; and second, it can scrutinise how present conditions that hinder the search for alternative policies are the result of past arrangements.

Neoliberals claim that privatization will energise house building and tackle the housing crisis if there were not the cumbersome British planning system that creates barriers for the private sector. Christophers counters that 'councils are approving almost half a million more houses than are being built, and this gap is increasing' (170). It pays for the private sector to hoard land. Given the absence of a land tax, Christophers' note that land-use and landownership have been two sides of the same policy coin since WW II is particularly relevant. The 1947 *Town and Country Planning Act* gave local authorities greater control over patterns of land-use and development. It also allowed them to 'stop private owners capturing the unearned land-value uplift that would follow the granting of planning permission' (110). A development tax was dismantled in the 1950s, reintroduced in different ways in the 1960s and 1970s before it was finally binned by the Thatcher administration. Different ways of taxing land and (non)development are not only necessary but also possible. Planning historians could help Christophers out with a detailed examination of policy measures including the 1976 *Development Land Tax*.

The alternative to land privatization that Christophers promotes is the model of community land trusts where the ownership of houses is decoupled from that of land, the latter being in community ownership on a non-profit basis. His references to Massey and Catalano (1978), however, push readers to consider ways in which 'the question of who owns the land is perhaps less important than how and why' (37). Readers are asked 'not to reify ownership status' (37) in order to examine relationships between ownership structures and public benefits. When neoliberal governments allege that '[p]rivate ownership is better ownership' (139), then a critical historical account does not only show that this claim is erroneous; it also points to the failure of utilizing the potential of delivering demonstrable public benefits of publicly owned land. Public landownership presents only 'the possibility, but never the guarantee, of better outcomes than under private ownership' (338). Planning historians could speak back to Christophers by pushing towards a more detailed examination of the ways in which policy measures that pre-date the neoliberal era have failed to fully understand and to make a convincing case for public benefits. Indeed, they could show how these policy measures have prepared the ground for the reduction of the value of land to monetary value alone, which is the order of the day.

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