

FOOD AND FARMING

Shared assets: inclusiveness, agroecology and municipal ownership in land use

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Local authorities have an exciting role to play in supporting rural regeneration, but they need to escape the trap of seeing land purely as property. Through new forms of land use, local authorities can pioneer more inclusive, diverse and nature-friendly ways of thinking about the rural.

The countryside is having a moment in the policy spotlight. Our departure from the EU, the pandemic-induced interest in rural living and the climate crisis are all putting more focus on our rural areas. Yet, as the Royal Society says, recent policy commitments around net zero, the national nature recovery plan and the national food strategy represent ‘a range of competing and sometimes contradictory demands on agricultural land use’.¹

Decisions made now and in the next few years about rural policy will define the future of the country as a whole. When we talk about rural policy, we are mainly talking about land use policy, much of which is nationally set. What’s often over-

looked in these discussions, however, is the role of local authorities, both as landowners and enablers of change in their local areas. I argue that local authorities should be a focus of rural policy, and that they should be empowered to use their assets and influence to build a new rural municipalism.

First, though, we have to unpick some underlying assumptions around the way we think about land.

Reimagining land

Land is a funny thing. On the one hand, it's plainly obvious what it is: the tangible stuff underneath all our feet, the thing 'they're not making anymore', as the oft-quoted Mark Twain is alleged to have said. On the other hand, land, and especially the ownership of land – when it almost magically converts into 'property' – is a deep abstraction, a legal concept that brings with it huge power.

You can own land without ever having set foot on it. Trade it without it ever moving. And when you think about it, that's a deeply strange concept – and one that is comparatively recent in human history. It's also very culturally specific. As Andro Linklater says in his magisterial book, *Owning the Earth*:

Most inhabitants of the Western world live in a private property society and are consequently prejudiced in its favour. But across the globe people have evolved myriad means of owning the places they live in ... The differences affect the way we look at ourselves and the world.²

At Shared Assets, the social enterprise I co-direct, we work to reimagine what we can do with land together. We support models of land use, stewardship and governance that create shared, common, benefits, as opposed to private benefits. We work with landowners, community groups, councils and researchers who work with land in ways that are simultaneously pioneering and inventive, and also deeply rooted in community as well as more ancient knowledge: they run community-owned farms and cooperative forestry enterprises; they create mutual and collective approaches to animating parks and public spaces; and they reinvigorate old infrastructure to meet twenty-first century challenges.

Almost all of them are butting up against the concept of land as property, and the capitalist logic that that entails.

Despite the vibrancy of this emerging sector of common good land stewards, we have always struggled to talk about 'land' as a general concept, especially to people who aren't working with it. The slipperiness of the idea of land both as a tangible thing and an abstraction – as property – partly contributes to this, but we wanted to explore it further.

In November, we therefore published a report with the Future Narratives Lab, *Power in Place*, exploring the dominant narratives about land in UK contemporary culture.³ In essence, we found an underlying narrative that centres the active role and voice of some groups (such as landowners, property developers and homeowners) at the expense of others (including tenants, travellers, young people, landworkers, people of colour), whom the narrative treats as passive or absent.

Through workshops and media analysis, we identified five frames through which narratives justify the land system as the natural, finished outcome of historical processes – ‘it’s just the way things are’. That leaves us all facing a system where land is perceived to be scarce, and the only realistic way to find security is to join the scramble to compete for ownership, which is in turn perceived to offer control. This framing then implies that any change to the system is either dangerous and destabilising, or unrealistic and utopian. At the heart of this framing is a sense that land is vulnerable to people. It also embodies deeply held values around power, wealth and freedom.

In our current system, land is too often treated as a resource to be exploited, to be used as intensively as possible, whether in new urban developments or industrial farming. For local authorities, it is commonly seen purely as an asset on the balance sheet that can be sold off. If it is not a resource, then it is something to be conserved and protected, often frozen – like many of our national parks – at a particular, arbitrary moment in time. This way of thinking is particularly apparent in the recent planning ‘reforms’; it underpins a lot of recent policy and betrays a deeper worldview.

Two worldviews

There’s another binary that comes up when thinking and talking about land and the environment: land-sharing vs land-sparing. Fred Pearce clarifies:

It is one of the biggest questions in conservation: Should we be sharing our landscapes with nature by reviving small woodlands and adopting small-scale eco-friendly farming? Or should we instead be sparing large tracts of land for nature’s exclusive use – by creating more national parks and industrializing agriculture on existing farmland?⁴

The Ecomodernist Manifesto is the starkest articulation of the land-sparing idea, which clearly sets humanity apart from nature, and relies on densification, intensification and technology as the ways forward:

We affirm one long-standing environmental ideal, that humanity must shrink its impacts on the environment to make more room for nature, while we reject another, that human societies must harmonize with nature to avoid economic and ecological collapse. These two ideals can no longer be reconciled ... Intensifying many human activities – particularly farming, energy

extraction, forestry, and settlement – so that they use less land and interfere less with the natural world is the key to decoupling human development from environmental impact.⁵

This sits firmly on the side of the dominant land narrative, revealing a worldview that sees the land – and the environment more generally – as at risk from and vulnerable to humans, and therefore humans as separate from nature.

The land-sharing worldview, on the other hand, sees humans as part of nature. It does not disagree with the need for some land to be protected, or rewilded, but it recognises that the answer to biodiversity loss and climate collapse cannot be found by separating humans and our activities from the non-human world. Rather, the answer is to be found in changing the way we manage ‘working lands’, creating biodiversity-bolstering methods of producing food, fuel and fibre. This opens up a world of land management that centres local communities and local community knowledge, creating more jobs, more connection to nature, and more resilient local economies. Conservationists Claire Kremen and Adina Maya Merenlender explain further:

Biodiversity-based land management practices are knowledge- rather than technology-intensive. They are well adapted to empower local communities to manage their natural resources. One of the most exciting emerging trends is community-driven initiatives to manage working landscapes for conservation and sustainability. By linking up through grassroots organizations, social movements, and public-private partnerships, these initiatives can scale up to create collective impact and can demand changes in government policies to facilitate the conservation of working lands.⁶

This ‘knowledge- rather than technology-intensive’ approach puts humans and our relationship with the land at the heart of the solution. It recognises that – like it or not – we are entangled with the more-than-human world, but in a way that requires looking at land differently from the ‘protect or exploit’ binary that is so common in our dominant land narrative. Despite the tendency of policies (especially land use policies) to separate things into silos – housing, food, transport, health – we are all interdependent.

One way of describing this form of management of working lands is *agroecology*. This is an umbrella term that encompasses organic farming, permaculture, and regenerative farming – describing farming practices that seek to balance the needs of natural systems, wildlife, communities, and farmers. Agroecological principles include recycling, supporting biodiversity and other unsurprising ‘environmental’ principles, but crucially they also support the co-creation of knowledge, fairness, land governance and participation.⁷ The liveliest expression of this movement can be found at the annual Oxford Real Farming Conference, which brings together ‘all those who support agroecology, including organic and regenerative agriculture and indigenous systems’.⁸

Agroecology is a system that recognises our entanglement with and interdependence on the more-than-human world. It is ‘an auspicious and credible way to tackle the multiple challenges presented by the nature, health, economic and environmental crises facing us today’.⁹

Towards a new land narrative

We have been working with Land in Our Names (LION), the Future Narratives Lab, and a multitude of landworkers, food growers of colour, travellers and other people marginalised by the current land system, to sow the seeds of a new land narrative. This Emerging Land Voices project is pulling together what is actually a very old narrative, but newly amplified to give voice to our entanglement with land, nature and each other. Our aim with this emerging narrative is to highlight the outcomes of the current system that we can all agree are undesirable – food waste, litter, empty homes – and to begin to paint a picture of land as something we all share, the common basis of our future. Given how embedded and effective the current narrative is at the moment, we think that what a new narrative needs to do at this stage is to crack open the way the topic of land appears to be frozen, and make it seem a subject of creativity and possibility and optimism.

This work will only be the first step, and it will need to evolve. The abstraction of land into property is the basis of our entire economy and so deeply embedded in our culture that we cannot see its strangeness. How can we, from this position, create a land system that truly works for everyone, and not just the lucky few who currently benefit from it?

Aurora Levins Morales, the Puerto Rican Ashkenazi writer and activist puts it (as always) beautifully: ‘How do we hold in common not only the land, but all the fragile, tenacious rootedness of human beings to the ground of our histories, the cultural residues of our daily work, the individual and tribal longings for place?’.¹⁰

Local authorities, both as landowners and planning authorities, have the opportunity to sidestep the private property trap. If they can escape the pressures of austerity, then they can be the body that holds in common the land and enables some of those social relationships and ‘cultural residues’ to thrive, especially in rural areas.

On the side of entanglement

We are seeing the future of the countryside emerging in all sorts of ways and places; I explore three of these ways below. All, in different ways, embody the land-sharing, entangled, relationship-based worldviews that I have outlined above, and illustrate ways out of the binary choice between exploiting and protecting land. These ways are like messages from a potential future, and might act as counterbalances for local

authorities, and particularly for elected members, when faced with decisions about land use and strategy. The land-sparing worldview can produce some seemingly easy fixes, but by embracing land-sharing, local authorities can be promoting and encouraging land use that actively builds towards a better world rather than reinforcing the dynamics of the dominant system.

(1) The rural is for everyone

A key challenge for those of us with roots in the UK is that, as Andro Linklater says, we are steeped in the logic of a private property society, and it can be hard to imagine alternative ways of relating to land. Indeed, rural Britain is an overwhelmingly white space: just 2 per cent of people who live in rural areas identify as being from an ethnic minority,¹¹ and both overt and subtle racism is common in the countryside.¹² But, as the work of Corinne Fowler (explored elsewhere in this volume) and others shows, Black people have had an active presence in the British countryside for centuries.¹³

The legacies of British colonialism and imperialism also mean that many Black people and people of colour in the UK are systemically disadvantaged, experiencing significant wealth gaps, and poorer access to green space and nature, on top of institutional racism. Many also come from families with a much more recent history of connection to the land than many white British families. Within the UK's diverse communities, there is a huge untapped well of knowledge about the land, including knowledge of different approaches to being in relationship with the land. A 'knowledge-intensive' land-sharing future must be one that centres diverse ways of knowing.

LION – a 'grassroots Black-led collective committed to reparations in Britain by connecting land and climate justice with racial justice' – is important here.¹⁴ It connects Black landworkers and landworkers of colour with each other, working to change the narrative about land in Britain and to work towards healing the 'colonial-rooted trauma that separates us from the land'.¹⁵ As visionary 'actionist' and thinker Dee Woods says: 'This is not about building back better. This is about justice, this is about healing and repair ... this is about us going forward from a place of joy and love and respect for each other, the elements, the earth'.¹⁶

The future of the countryside cannot only be conceived of by the people who are currently comfortable there. We need to embrace the uncomfortable and difficult conversations that come with recognising the UK's colonial legacies in order to reimagine all our relationships with the land. A key opportunity for local authorities here is to join up their various different streams of work; integrating local land use policy with the needs of the broader local population. That could take the form of connecting schools with farms and council-owned heritage assets; connecting people on the housing waiting list with co-ops and community land trusts welcom-

ing newcomers from all places; or actively seeking diverse groups to support with access to land.

(2) Agroecology and ruralisation

The movement for agroecology is intertwined with the movement for racial justice and reparations in the land system. From the Food Farming and Countryside Commission's call for an Agroecology Development Bank, to the Ecological Land Cooperative's work helping new entrant farmers access land, there are vibrant and growing assemblages of people, organisations and farmers taking this whole-system approach towards a productive relationship with the land.

As part of the Europe-wide 'Ruralization.eu' project, we have been working with academics, and practitioners from the Access to Land network, to explore the different conditions across Europe for newcomers to rural areas and new entrants to agriculture.

Despite being one of the least rural parts of Europe, the UK's countryside shares many challenges with our European neighbours. Our farmers are aging; farms are increasing in size, and are increasingly reliant on technology, leading to fewer jobs and a more homogenised landscape; and land prices are rising, making owning land out of reach for those without substantial capital, or those not expecting to inherit a farm.

A key part of our project has been looking at sixty-four 'innovative land practices' across Europe, which are all in some way involved in getting, enabling and maintaining access to land for new entrants to farming and agroecological practices.¹⁷ These innovative practices include OrganicLea (a workers' cooperative growing food on council-owned land on London's edge in the Lea Valley), Lurzaindia in France (raising money to buy farmland), and Per l'Horta in Spain (working to preserve farmland around Valencia).

These innovative practices are all being undertaken by multifaceted, deeply embedded organisations, working in partnership with various different actors in the system. Across Europe, local authorities are some of the key enablers of agroecological growing. However, this is not always the case. As William Loveluck et al state:

Despite local authorities being a key actor in the land system, cooperation and partnership between local authorities and innovative practices can be difficult. Sometimes this is because the authorities want to support agroecological models but do not have the legal or financial means to do so. Sometimes it is because the authorities see these new models and initiatives as a threat, pushing the practices to look for partners elsewhere.¹⁸

We certainly recognise this in a UK context, and see great potential for local authorities to step into a more active role as enablers of rural renewal.

(3) *Towards a new rural municipalism*

Local authorities have had a hard time of it over the past ten years. Austerity-induced budget cuts mean that many have been cut to the bone, unable to do more than the statutory minimum, and sometimes not even that.

New municipalism, or community wealth building, which *Renewal* has done much to champion, has been one response to the shrinking of the state.¹⁹ As the thinktank Centre for Local Economic Strategies explains: ‘community wealth building is a new people-centred approach to local economic development, which redirects wealth back into the local economy, and places control and benefits into the hands of local people’.²⁰ It focuses on the role of anchor institutions (large organisations with ties to an area like universities, NHS Trusts and housing associations) and, crucially, local authorities.

One of the core principles of community wealth building is the socially productive use of land and buildings. Local authorities are important landowners, even in areas where they have disposed of many assets. With a renewed municipal approach to holding land and buildings for the public good, local authorities could hold the key to the future of rural areas.

In their role as landowners, they can lease land to people who are regenerating and renewing the countryside. Local authorities are custodians of land held in the public interest, able to take a strategic, long-term view. But holding this land does not mean they need to be managing it; instead, they can tap into the vibrancy of local communities and social enterprises, farmers and businesspeople, to manage and steward the land on their behalf.

One good example is the role of council-owned farmland. Many council farms were acquired at the end of the nineteenth century as a way of providing starter farms for young farmers coming out of an agricultural depression. Our research with New Economics Foundation and CPRE (the countryside charity formerly known as the Campaign to Protect Rural England) has shown that council farms are still one of the most significant ways that people without farming backgrounds are able to get into farming. We argue that they should be seen as a national public asset – they cover 200,000 acres in England alone. However, they are under threat, with their numbers having declined by half in the last forty years, and with an increase in sales in 2016-18.²¹

Our vision for the future of council farms is to reinvigorate councils with a new national narrative about the holistic value of public land.²² No longer under pressure to sell assets to make ends meet, they would be able to invest in and support a patchwork of farms in their local areas, hosting a new generation of tenants who could lead the way in agroecological farming. With the freedom to offer longer than average farm tenancies, and to see tenants as stewards of public assets, we could begin to see a reinvigorated local food economy, with children in

local schools eating locally grown food, and farming becoming a profession that you don't have to have a family history in to join; our countryside could become alive in all sorts of different ways.

Even for local authorities that don't own farmland, there's a lot that an engaged and entrepreneurial council can do. One great example of what can be achieved is the peri-urban food growing programme of the Argentinian city of Rosario, for which it has just won the 'Prize for Cities'.²³ In a UK context, we believe that creating the conditions for productive green belts around cities through proactive planning policy can support shorter supply chains and healthier food production, and can also support jobs in both rural and urban areas. For example, 59 per cent of London's green belt is agricultural land, but too often it is used for grazing horses, or simply held empty in the hope of the rules changing in the future and development becoming possible.²⁴ A productive green belt, with a patchwork of market gardens supplying the city, would also be a bridge between town and country, helping to break down some of the perceived cultural barriers.

Local authorities as planning authorities also have a role to play here, both in policy about what's allowed in the green belt, but also in terms of enabling smallholders to get planning permission to live on their sites – something that is currently very difficult in planning terms. Land is inherently multifunctional, and an agroecological land-sharing approach works with and celebrates that. Currently, much of our system is still stuck in the binary view of land. This can have very practical impacts, such as when a woodland enterprise that would like to run educational projects comes up against a system that refuses planning permission for the infrastructure needed for the education work, seeing it as 'beyond forestry'.²⁵

We need to release land from the deadlock into which the private property system has forced it. As part of this opening up, local authorities can move into a more generative, socially productive relationship to their land and assets, taking steps to really revitalise our countryside. Land – and our relationship to it – holds the key.

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Notes

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