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LAND REFORM, AMERICAN STYLE

CHARLES C. GEISLER & FRANK J. POPPER, EDS. Totowa NJ:
Rowman & Allanheld. 1984. Pp. \$

The thesis of this collection of essays is stated on the dust jacket:

As American Land becomes concentrated in fewer and fewer hands, land reform—once thought to be an issue only in Third World countries—increasingly claims the attention . . . of Americans.

This book confronts land use questions often overlooked in more conventional works. Its general bias is “populist,” concerned with the equities of land distribution and with policies affecting tenants, the dispossessed, and the landless. The book pays almost no attention to land as a factor in production, to efficiency in land use, to the elements of farm management, and to the wide range in climate, precipitation, and soils. The complexities of marketing and importance of capital (investment) are barely touched upon.

Chapters on urban land problems also dismiss economic factors (interest rates, construction costs, returns on investments, risk factors) and perhaps most importantly do not discuss demographic factors. Often expressed concerns over the abandonment of central cities slight the fact that from 1945 until now the U.S. population has grown by about 80 million. Clearly no significant portion of these millions could have been housed in central cities. Old and deteriorating housing did not satisfy the demands of newly affluent middle class citizens who perceived suburban life as attractive. The present restoration of older dwellings and the conversion of apartments to condominiums also reflects a market response and in some cases the high costs of housing. But the number of housing units involved in renovation and conversion to condominiums is small compared to the millions absorbed by the suburbs. That inequities, dispossessions, and other forms of maldistribution of housing resources evidenced themselves is not surprising. But dealing constructively with such dislocations requires a more sophisticated approach than simple land reform.

For this reviewer, *Land Reform, American Style* is too loosely knit. Its eighteen chapters all deal with land problems, but even the six subheadings fail to give a degree of unity to the work. Unfortunately, space does not permit a detailed critique of each chapter. At the risk of oversimplification, therefore, a few significant flaws will be illustrated as typical of the entire book which is, nevertheless, worth reading even though one differs with much of what is said as well as with some of its major premises.

The editors have recognized the lack of cohesiveness in the book, stating in the "Introduction" (p. 4):

There is today [in the United States] no politically unified, self-aware land reform movement. What . . . exists is a set of insurgent groups that share two characteristics with their Third World counterparts: they are economically disadvantaged, and they are trying to gain power over what they consider their land. . . .

Later in the "Introduction" the editors assert: "The land reform movement is only one aspect of the increasingly political allocation of land." One might comment that with the deep and widespread regard for property rights among Americans, and with the dominant form of decisionmaking resting on majority rule, the increasingly political allocation of land will be slow in maturing!

In eighteen chapters the severity and/or importance of the identified problems is asserted but data indicating the need for public or political intervention is sparse. If all of the problems discussed in this book were somehow solved, it seems doubtful that land policies in the United States would be much different, partly because these problems have their roots in more pervasive economic conditions and partly because the number affected in each situation is relatively small.

Most of the chapters offer conclusory statements, but little analysis of how solutions would work. A legacy of the NEPA process has been a greater awareness among government agencies and others of alternative ways of dealing with particular problems. This focus on alternatives has been accompanied by a deeper analysis of probable consequences (effects, impacts). It seems a modest intellectual standard to expect scholars proposing reforms, especially those dealing with environmental and resource issues, to display a similar concern with alternatives and consequences.

To use one example: one can agree that the Bureau of Reclamation has been ignoring the 160 acre limitation, and has thus contributed to the development of California's large, specialty farms. We can also agree that these large farms often exploit migrant workers. But chapter three, which deals with this topic, presents no data which suggest how a return to 160 or 320 acres would mitigate the problems listed, particularly the farm labor situation. Nor is there a discussion of other impacts which might occur. Clearly changes in structure and ownership would contribute little to a solution of the problems of the "illegals," and it might worsen them. In addition, changes in size and ownership could impact levels of farm management, change the use of capital resources, and have a negative effect on production, marketing, and ultimately from the consumer's point of view on product availability. It seems reasonable to insist that such alternatives and their possible consequences require identification and analysis.

Similar treatment of "The Right to Stay Put" (ch. 17) could indicate that one result might be to create twentieth century ghettos. Clearly the ghettoized Jews of the Middle Ages would have welcomed a chance to respond to market conditions which would have allowed them to move elsewhere.

It is not clear whether the authors of Chapter Fourteen are more concerned with the failure to enforce the Mine Land Reclamation Act, or simply with the poverty and apparent degradation of most of the residents of Appalachia. Several states, including Ohio and Wyoming, apparently have performed reasonably well in implementing the Mine Land Reclamation Act. Perhaps the basic question in Appalachia is why the political forces are unable to demand effective administration. To answer such a question would require in-depth research into the power structure of the region. It is perhaps too simple to assert that big business, including absentee coal company landlords, controls the region so as to be able to ignore environmental laws like the Mine Land Reclamation Act. If countervailing forces are important, what about the United Mine Workers? In any case, proof of who has power would be desirable.

Land use and living in Appalachia was first identified as a problem in an Extension Service Report in the 1920s. Government at all levels has confronted the topic many times since and numerous aid programs have been tried. Thus, again, it would seem reasonable that someone writing on Appalachia's present problems might be expected to discuss why previous efforts to raise the economic status of the region have not been successful. It hardly seems that the core of the problem lies in disparities of land ownership between coal mining companies and yeoman citizens, although such disparities may be among the symptoms of maladjustments between people and resources.

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