Reflections on the ‘Dispossessed’

The story of modern human history has been the dispossession of working people and the concentration of wealth in fewer hands, now transformed into a system of cradle-to-grave debt, writes Nicolas J S Davies.

By Nicolas J S Davies

After centuries of hard-fought but limited progress, human society seems to be reverting to the law of the jungle. For many of our international neighbors, this means leading lives defined by aerial bombardment, guerrilla warfare, militia rule and displacement as refugees.

For half my neighbors in the U.S., it means living paycheck to paycheck under a corrupt “inverted totalitarian” political and economic system designed to funnel ever greater concentrations of wealth and power into the hands of a greedy and unsympathetic ruling class, exemplified at the moment by Donald Trump, Hillary Clinton, the Koch brothers and Wall Street.

For people everywhere, the fragile collective systems of law, civil and human rights, social welfare, progressive taxation and public services that painstakingly evolved to provide human beings with basic rights and longer, healthier, happier lives are disintegrating into something closer to Thomas Hobbes’ Seventeenth Century nightmare of a violent and chaotic world in which most people’s lives will be “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.”

If we understood more of our own history, we might grasp a little better the fragility of the improving quality of life we or our parents once took for granted, the competing forces of progress and greed that have shaped the world we live in, and the mechanisms by which greed keeps rearing its head to undermine progress in spite of all our efforts.

Until I read Eric Hobsbawm’s quartet of books that begins with The Age of Revolution: 1789-1848 and ends with The Age of Extremes: 1914-1991, I did not know that my own great-great-grandparents in newly industrialized Dudley in England’s Black Country were born with an average life expectancy of only 18 years.

I also learned from Hobsbawm that, when I was born in a British dockyard hospital in Sri Lanka in 1954, at least half of my fellow human beings still lived as subsistence farmers in societies that had evolved for centuries with less radical change than they have now experienced in my own short lifetime.

Loss of Communal Rights
In the bat of an eyelid in the sweep of human history, traditional ways of life based on communal rights to land and centuries of accumulated wisdom about how to live on it have been shattered and discarded.

On Friday, Consortiumnews reported on the crisis of landlessness and poverty that has led to decades of resistance and repression in the Philippines. Throughout the “developing” world, a billion poor, landless people have been herded into new megacities ringed by endless slums and shanty-towns, to lead lives defined by low-wage labor, street life, extreme poverty and insecurity, and unsanitary and toxic environments – not unlike Dudley in the 1830s.

The predicament facing our fellow creatures is even worse than our own. The World Wildlife Fund reported recently that the Earth’s total population of wild animals, birds, fish, amphibians and reptiles has declined by 60 percent since 1970, and that the decline has accelerated in the past five years despite current conservation efforts.

The shattering of relationships between people, communities and the land they live on is in large part the culmination of a process that began in England 500 years ago. In medieval times, English peasants were forced to work their feudal masters’ land, but they also had access to common land where they could build homes, grow crops and graze animals.

Then landowners began to “enclose” formerly common land in what we would now call a privatization of land, the most vital resource in an agricultural society. Feudal lords gradually became “modern” landlords and employers, scattering their former vassals to the wind with no right to land on which to build cottages, grow crops or graze animals.

As Thomas More wrote in Utopia in 1516, greedy landowners discovered that grazing sheep could be more profitable than sharing land with other human beings: “…the nobility and gentry, and even those holy men, the abbots, not contented with the old rents which their farms yielded, nor thinking it enough that they, living at their ease, do no good to the public, resolve to do it hurt instead of good. They stop the course of agriculture, destroying houses and towns, reserving only the churches, and enclose grounds that they may lodge their sheep in them…

“[Ordinary people] are put in prison as idle vagabonds; while they would willingly work, but can find none that will hire them; for there is no more occasion for country labor, to which they have been bred, when there is no arable ground left. One shepherd can look after a flock which will stock an extent of ground that would require many hands if it were to be ploughed and
reaped. This likewise in many places raises the price of corn.”

Orwell’s Dim View

George Orwell echoed More’s dim view of property owners and the enclosure of common lands in a column in Tribune on Aug. 18, 1944:

“...the so-called owners of the land ... simply seized it by force, afterwards hiring lawyers to provide them with title-deeds. In the case of the enclosure of the common lands..., the land-grabbers did not even have the excuse of being foreign conquerors; they were quite frankly taking the heritage of their own countrymen, upon no sort of pretext except that they had the power to do so. Except for the few surviving commons, the high roads, the lands of the National Trust, a certain number of parks, and the sea shore below high-tide mark, every square inch of England is ‘owned’ by a few thousand families. These people are just about as useful as so many tapeworms.”

The proportion of common land in England shrank from a third in 1500 to 27 percent by 1600, and has kept shrinking ever since. A series of parliamentary “Inclosure Acts” codified and regulated this process in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth centuries, and the newly dispossessed provided a captive labor pool for new factories in places like Dudley, where women and children worked in conditions previously imposed only on convicts.

Before the Second World War, hundreds of “commoner” families still grew crops and grazed animals in Ashdown Forest, the largest remaining area of common land in southeast England (and the setting for A.A. Milne’s Winnie-the-Pooh stories). The commoners won a famous court case to uphold their rights in 1881, but half the remaining commoners lost their rights by failing to re-register under a new law in 1965. There are still 730 registered commoner families living in the forest, but reportedly only one family still makes its living grazing cattle on the common land. The others lead “modern” lives like the rest of us.

After the Jacobite rebellions of 1715 and 1745, Scottish clan chieftains followed the example of the English lords, turned their lands to sheep farming and ethnically cleansed their clan members – their own extended families – from the highlands.

The haunting emptiness of that landscape today is the result of a crime against humanity, well documented in John Preble’s classic, The Highland Clearances. Memories of burned-out crofts live on across the sea in place names like Ben Lomond in California, named for the last Scottish mountain the dispossessed highlanders could see from the decks of migrant ships sailing down
the Clyde.

Destroying the Mayans

In the highlands of Guatemala, where indigenous Mayan peoples have fought fiercely to save their land and their culture for 500 years, girls at American mission schools are forced to exchange the beautiful traje (traditional clothes) hand-woven by their mothers and grandmothers for Scots tartan uniforms, cheap factory-made imitations of the traje of another highland culture who were banned from wearing it themselves after the Jacobite rebellions. The irony seems to be lost on their American benefactors.

As Europe’s rulers and landowners emptied their throwaway people into the Americas and other settler colonies, they spread the privatization of land and the destruction of traditional societies to new regions, leading to genocides of indigenous people and their cultures across the Americas and the world.

Colonial and post-colonial rulers alike have pitted the dispossessed of Europe against indigenous people in elemental struggles for survival in which the ultimate winners are always the wealthy few who can take advantage of the commodification of the Earth to claim ownership of more and more of it.

Across the world, legal concepts that evolved out of medieval English property law now serve as mechanisms to dispossess hundreds of millions of people: either because they have no paper title to land their families may have lived on for centuries; or because the extra land they would need to support a growing extended family has already been expropriated by wealthy landlords or agribusiness companies; or because neoliberal government policies force small producers to compete with transnational companies in global markets, where prices of food and basic commodities fluctuate dramatically without regard for their impact on real people’s lives; or because, as many Americans have experienced, they are swindled into debt and foreclosure by greedy bankers, wealthy investors, corrupt governments and courts.

The foreclosure crisis in the U.S. then dumped millions of its victims into newly inflated rental markets to be exploited all over again by other investors who are now their landlords.

Privatization on Steroids

Now these concepts of private ownership and property rights are expanding into new areas of life under novel legal constructs like intellectual property law, “free” trade and investment agreements, corporate personhood, binding arbitration, investor-state dispute settlement and global patent law.
These create new opportunities for privatization and profit, leaving ordinary human beings farther adrift in captive markets where more and more of the basics of life, from food to medical care to housing to education, must be bought at a premium from increasingly monopolistic corporations. The cradle-to-grave welfare state promised to the men who marched home from World War Two has metamorphosed into cradle-to-grave debt for their grandchildren.

As traditional communal land ownership was replaced by new systems of private property across the world, the rise of socialism and communism in the Nineteenth and Twentieth centuries was an attempt to restore social justice, community and communal ownership through new forms of political and economic organization. It should therefore be no surprise that the collapse of the U.S.S.R. and the resulting expansion of the neoliberal world led to an unbridled global acceleration of privatization and the accumulation of all forms of wealth in fewer and fewer hands.

In the Western world, the prior gains of movements for labor, environmental, civil and human rights have fallen victim to a rampage of neoliberal political and economic policies, backed by triumphalist claims for the “magic of the market” that have more in common with religious dogma than social science. But the laws of economics have not really changed since the 1930s, when an apocryphal saying attributed to J.M. Keynes defined this kind of laissez-faire capitalism as “the absurd idea that the worst people, for the worst reasons, will do what is best for all of us.”

The parasites who Orwell called the “so-called owners” of the world think they have built an impregnable legal fortress on the equally absurd idea that they own everything and that the rest of us therefore come into the world with nothing and must pay them for the privilege of living here. This is not the way that human beings have lived throughout our history on Earth, and it is not an improvement.

These so-called owners now threaten our very existence with their insatiable greed and genocidal behavior. So let us make sure that this disastrous experiment is short-lived, and that it ends, not in a nuclear holocaust, nor with a society destroyed by climate change, but with a peaceful, sustainable world that we will all love, share, and safeguard for future generations.

Castro’s Death

With the death of Fidel Castro, the world has lost the most prominent world leader of his generation to clearly and consistently challenge the immorality and absurdity of allowing the world to be ruled by such a parasitic and dangerous ownership class. China’s Xinhua news agency rightly called him, “a
pioneer in battling the current international economic order, particularly against the capitalist system, neoliberal globalisation, foreign debt and exploitation of natural resources.”

With his passing, to quote another leader of his era, “The torch has been passed to a new generation.”

The Republican sweep in the 2016 election presents this generation of Americans with challenges that should be familiar by now after several decades of neoliberalism, notwithstanding the surprise rebranding of Donald Trump, a bigoted billionaire and TV game show host, as our new president.

In the conclusion of his masterwork, Century of War, historian Gabriel Kolko proposed a formula for a pragmatic way forward that is just as pertinent today as when he wrote it in 1994.

“In the last analysis,” Kolko wrote, “how means and ends are defined (is) constrained only by a quite simple dedication to being on the side of the oppressed, the disadvantaged, and the people who really work to earn what they spend, whenever the basic criterion of who should gain or lose in a society is applied. In the most basic sense, when the question of ‘whose side are you on’ is asked, this is ultimately the only response to it that makes the entire historic tradition of reform, the improvement of society, and socialism both meaningful and consistent… And it complements an equally necessary devotion to the prevention of war.”

Kolko’s prescription remains a rational political response to the global crisis in which we are living. Its relevance has not been diminished by anything that has happened under the Clinton, Bush or Obama presidencies, and it will remain a solid basis for principled opposition and united resistance to whatever further madness the Trump administration unleashes on the world.

As Kolko prophetically concluded, “...there are no easy solutions to the problems of irresponsible, deluded leaders and the classes they represent, or the hesitation of people to reverse the world’s folly before they are themselves subjected to its grievous consequences.

“So much remains to be done – and it is late... While the prospects for essential and sufficient changes are very uncertain at the present moment, allowing the world’s drift since 1914 to reach its inevitable destructive culmination is a course that our natural desire for human survival instinctively rejects...

“Dispelling the myths of history, dismantling the pretensions of conventional wisdom and of leaders who claim omniscience, and discarding the shibboleths of ideologies that have betrayed their followers are all preconditions for escaping
from the fatal illusions and errors that [the Twentieth] century has bequeathed to us.”

Nicolas J S Davies is the author of *Blood On Our Hands: the American Invasion and Destruction of Iraq*. He also wrote the chapters on “Obama at War” in *Grading the 44th President: a Report Card on Barack Obama’s First Term as a Progressive Leader*. 