
Usufruct: End Private Property to Solve the Financial Crisis and Create Food Security

Contributed by Chuck Burr
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Locking up the land has been a great way to concentrate wealth, and for a minority to dominate the majority. In England .28 percent of the population owns 64 percent of the land. In the United States the top one percent of the population now owns more than the bottom 95 percent. But it is time to end private property.

We know that the needs of the natural world are more important than the economic system, but privatization sees it the other way around. Privatization of land implies the right of the "owner" to use the land in any way he/she/it sees fit including despoiling the land to "make a profit" at the expense of the local community and all other species. Native communities know this and do not voluntarily give up their common resources on which their communities depend until their communities have been destroyed.

Privatization has led to land use "for profit" and not "for community." Our suburban system is at the heart of our economic problems and is the single greatest waste of resources in the history of the world. Privatization has led to a living arrangement with no future.

Usufruct

Usufruct is an old Roman term for the legal right to enjoying the replenishable fruits or profits from property owned by another. This includes the ability sell or let the enjoyment of the usufruct. But what if the owner was your local community? This would end private property.

In tribal communities usufruct means the land is owned in common by the tribe or community, but families and individuals have the right to use plots of land. Most native tribes owned land as a tribal group and not as individuals. The family never owned the land; they just farmed it. In a usufruct system, absentee ownership is not permitted. Modern usufruct examples include Cuba's successful agricultural system, the traditional Mexico ejido system, and the right of native Canadian people to hunt and fish on Crown lands.

Cuba

Cuba has already experienced "peak oil" when the Soviet Union collapsed in 1990. How can a community survive and eventually thrive after a loss of 80 percent of its oil and fertilizer inputs? The answer is community interaction, urban organic agriculture, and usufruct land rights to small farmers.

Today more than 50 percent of the vegetable needs of Havana's 2.2 million people is supplied by local urban agriculture. There are over 1,000 kiosks in Havana selling locally grown food. In smaller cities and towns the rate is between 80 to 100 percent. Farmers are now among the highest paid workers.

When the “special period” began in the early 90s, every vacant lot in the city was turned into a farm or an orchard. People cleaned up the land and started growing food. They just did it by trial and error. In 1993 the first Australian permaculturists came to Cuba to start the first train-the-trainer course. Today over 400 permaculture instructors have been trained in Cuba.

To increase food production the government worked with local farmers. The result was smaller farms and coops with a high degree of privatization and autonomy. Forty percent of large state farms were divided into privately owned cooperatives. Decision-making was localized with fewer regulations.

Tens of thousands of acres of land were leased rent and tax-free to small farmers. The only two requirements are that you grow food on the land and the land is delivered in usufruct. If however you stop growing food or another community need develops, you have to give the land back to the government. As a result, thousands of families moved to rural land with land rights guaranteed as long as you farmed.

Credit and service coops were expanded to allow small farmers to buy seed and rent equipment collectively, but also to allow the farmers to keep their land independently. This gives the benefits centralizing and yet being decentralized at the same time.

Some in the U.S. would dispute Cuban success. They say, “If we do not have 1,000 acre farms in Nebraska and Iowa run by eight wheel 375 horse tractors, we’ll all starve.” Give me a break. First, any permaculturist can tell you that a locally maintained polyculture out yields a monoculture by far. An individual crop within a polyculture will yield less, but when you stack multiple crops in the same space, polycultures out yield monocultures every day of the week. Second, breaking large absentee-owned farms into smaller family-sized plots creates jobs and builds local communities.

Community Land Trust

There is a way to start eating the private property monster from the inside out today: a land trust. Create a virtual patchwork community with you and your friends by contributing all or part of your land to a land trust for the benefit of the community and give yourself usufruct rights. People are also more likely to stay in community long-term if you can offer a way to transfer usufruct to their children.

You can also get real estate tax free non-profit status for lands open to the public for community service such as a church, an auditorium, or a conference center. You still have to pay real estate taxes on housing, gardens, and other properties not open to the public. Living on the property at the convenience of the employer enables a community to provide housing as compensation without paying employment taxes on the housing. Capitalize the savings on community infrastructure. Why should every household have a separate well, laundry, parking, and trash facility? Consult your local tax accountant for more information.

End the Financial Crisis Overnight

You could solve the financial crisis overnight if we forgave mortgages and rent. Landlords would not be happy, but they

could have a free apartment. You would have to pay your association dues and utilities of course. A lot of large banks would go away; but deposits are insured, and the banks created the money for the mortgages out of thin air anyway, so what is the difference? This only other caveat I would add is no more new construction. This would hopefully incentivize people to minimize their family sizes.

Support Your Local Secession Movement

One way to speed up land reform may be to break up large nation states. I have advocated for some time now redrawing maps by watersheds and bioregions instead of squares or just one side of a river. The State of Jefferson and the Vermont Republic are two U.S. secessionist movements. Whether it is to fight corporate tyranny or recognize a unique geographical region, secession movements are growing as our modern culture collapses. One other point I frequently make is that hierarchies have great defenses to attacks from below, but they have none from abandonment.

The Point

What is private property? Nothing actually. Private property is simply a social organization in which enough people agree to enforce the system of protection of land "owner" rights. The land knows nothing of ownership. Nature will sweep away our generation and its clinging to possessions like so many leaves blowing in the wind.

It is just cultural, artificial, temporary: private property is a house of cards. If enough people don't go along with the system, the whole house of cards falls down. The glue that holds privatization together is fear. Locking up the food and property causes fear. "If you don't follow our system and get a job, you don't eat and you don't get a home." The bottom line, is to start building self-reliant communities so you are not dependent on modern cultural systems. Our culture has no defense against abandonment. Learn how to walk away.

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to learn more about Culturequake the book and the online magazine. ©2009 Chuck Burr LLC

Notes:

Community Solutions's 2005 documentary:
The Power of Community: How Cuba Survived Peak Oil
powerofcommunity.org

Equity Trust, Inc.: equitytrust.org

Evergreen Land Trust:
evergreenlandtrust.org

Institute for Community Economics: iceclt.org

National Community Land Trust Network: cltnetwork.org

Oregon Sustainable Agriculture Land Trust: osalt.org

Chuck Burr:
Watershed vs. Bioregion: Get to Know Yours

The State of Jefferson:
jeffersonstate.com

Second Vermont Republic:
vermontrepublic.org

Vermont Commons (and Culture Change's article from there):
vtcommons.org

,
Ian Baldwin's
"Secession: Why I Support A Second Vermont Republic"

La Cuba del Espiritu Cubano - Atenas de Cuba People to People Program (farm close-up photo above):

ibike.org

Organic Cuba Without Fossil Fuels - The Urban Agricultural Miracle (cityscape farm photo above):

cityfarmer.info