



Book review:

The New Enclosure: The appropriation of public land in neoliberal Britain

Brett Christophers, 2018

Joe Rees

Swansea University

Abstract

In this book review, Joe Rees discusses *The New Enclosure: The appropriation of public land in neoliberal Britain* by Brett Christophers. The book gives detailed evidence on the privatization of land in the United Kingdom over the past four decades and offers a valuable critique about its supposed benefits for the nation.

Keywords

Land, neoliberalism, social housing, privatization, rentier capitalism

Joe Rees is a PhD student in Geography at Swansea University. His research is funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council and Coastal Housing. He is investigating the growth of PBSA developments in South Wales and beyond. Joe has engaged stakeholders from the PBSA sector, local authorities, universities and students in his research with the aim of understanding what comes next for the student housing market and the cities where these markets are centred.

Contact:

998548@swansea.ac.uk

Why should we care about declining public land ownership? In *The New Enclosure: The appropriation of public land in neoliberal Britain*, Brett Christophers (2018) illustrates how the privatization of British land—a whopping two million hectares, equivalent to around 2.5 million football pitches—since the end of the 1970s has actively “closed down and constrained practices and possibilities of social, economic and political development” (p. 29). Christophers uses case studies such as the sale of council houses (Chapter 4 and 5), school playing fields (Chapter 5) and land previously owned by the Forestry Commission, the National Health Service and the Ministry of Defence (Chapter 4) to explain the impact that the sale of land by the state has had on the United Kingdom (UK).

The sale of council housing is perhaps of greatest significance to the readers of the *Radical Housing Journal*. Since the number of council houses peaked in 1979 with approximately 6.6 million, Christophers explains how around 4.6 million of these dwellings (approximately 70%) have since been sold (p. 255), and many of these houses have been bought by landlords, rather than remaining owner occupied.

Christophers discusses how one of the consequences of council housing sell-offs has been the practice of land banking by private developers, where house prices are kept artificially high by accumulating large pieces of land and holding them back from development. In some instances, local authorities have even had to buy back properties at the full market price, which they had earlier sold off at a discount, in order to ensure that there is enough housing. London's Islington Council for example, had spent more than £6.2 million pounds buying back homes it had sold for less than £1.3 million. This demonstrates how the privatization of land and housing since the 1980s has partially led to the housing crisis we see today. A crisis that has been further exacerbated by the rise of housing prices in comparison to wages over the past fifty years (Piketty, 2014).

Reflecting on a passage by Adam Smith (1871) about the tendency of landlords to reap where they never sow, he discusses the concept of 'rentier capitalism', which he develops further in his more recently released book with the same name (2020). Rentier capitalism is the idea of capitalists earning large profits merely due to ownership of an asset, without having to work or contribute anything for it. Christophers argues therefore that the privatization of land has allowed landlords to now earn more income from squeezing the rent out of the land without contributing to society.

Through private developers holding onto land, housing has become scarce and thus landlords are able to demand more rent. With recent plans to build a mandatory 300,000 homes a year scrapped after 50 Conservative MPs came out against it (Martin & Hope, 2022), one can only expect local authorities to build even less affordable housing in the coming years, pushing more people into the private rented sector.

In a comparison of 35 European countries, the UK now ranks among the lowest 20% in terms of home ownership (Spratt, 2022), putting to bed the myth that the British are a nation of homeowners. Until now, such comprehensive analysis had been severely lacking, particularly as issues of land rent tend to be black-boxed by researchers who have turned away from political economy approaches (Ward & Aalbers, 2016).

Another surprising statistic of the book comes on p. 122, with the statement that approximately one fifth of all MPs and 30% of Conservative MPs are themselves landlords. This means that many of those in government are personally motivated to continue the cycle of privatization of land and property which we have seen since the 1980s. This has continued to occur as elites have used neoliberal policy reforms to gain financially from the privatization of land, resulting in housing and economic inequalities for the masses.

A further significant contribution of the book is its detailed explanation in chapter 2 of government policy and legislation which has forced the privatization of land in the UK. While the chronological explanation begins with the enclosures of the 13th to the 19th century,

it is the more recent analysis (1979 onwards) which links most significantly to the current land and housing shortage, including Thatcher's Right to Buy in 1980. He also highlights the 2016 Housing and Planning Act that may, in due course, compel English local authorities to sell their most valuable council homes when they become vacant. Ultimately, the idea of this law is to use the income generated from sales to fund the extension of 'the right to buy' to housing association tenants, and to subsequently replace higher value homes with more affordable homes. However, local authorities will have to draw on their own scarce resources if replacements are to be built.

The book ultimately achieves its aim of making visible the extent of public land that has been lost in Britain, asking as well why the privatization of land has received such little opposition. As a point of contrast, Christophers draws on the provocative case of Sweden (p. 69), where challenges arising from tenants over rising rents and overcrowding has led to a state-reversed privatization of land. This argument could have been developed further by making clearer suggestions about how such an opposition could be formed in the UK. Should this be achieved through a combination of the critical work of academics such as himself, Anne Halia and the late Doreen Massey (whom he cites heavily and dedicates the book to), political opposition and public resistance?

Despite this omission, *The New Enclosure* thoroughly elucidates the history of land privatization in the UK. As in his previous books such as *Banking across boundaries* (2013), Christophers masters here the details of archival records related to the historical ownership of land in the UK. Its rich statistics and qualitative analysis make it a valuable tool for housing scholars, or indeed anyone interested in the processes of privatization of land and housing.

References

- Christophers, B. (2013) *Banking Across Boundaries: Placing Finance in Capitalism*. (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell).
- Christophers, B. (2020) *Rentier Capitalism: Who Owns the Economy and Who Pays for It?* (London-New York: Verso).
- Martin, D., & Hope, C. (2022) Tory rebellion forces Rishi Sunak to put house-building target on pause. *The Telegraph*. November 22. Available at: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/politics/2022/11/22/fifty-tory-mps-tell-rishi-sunak-ditch-housing-targets-planning/>
- Piketty, T., & Goldhammer, A. (2014) *Capital in the twenty-first century*. (Boston: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press).
- Smith, A. (1831) *An Inquiry into the nature and causes of the wealth of nations*. (Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson/Peter Brown).
- Spratt, V. (2022) *The People on the Frontline of Britain's Housing Emergency*. (CITY: Profile Books Limited).
- Ward, C., & Aalbers, M. B. (2016) 'The shitty rent business': What's the point of land rent theory? *Urban Studies*, 53(9), 1760–1783.