

# Antipode

A Radical Journal of Geography

**A. Fiona D. Mackenzie**, *Places of Possibility: Property, Nature, and Community Land Ownership*, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012. ISBN: 978-1-4051-9172-2 (cloth); ISBN: 978-1-4051-9171-5 (paper); ISBN: 978-1-118-27875-8 (ebook)

The Outer Hebrides, a chain of islands that sweeps along the west coast of the Scottish Highlands, is remote and lightly inhabited. It is wind-swept and rocky and seems an unlikely place to find an existing and fully worked-out alternative to the neoliberal rationality of private property and the commodification of nature. But as Fiona Mackenzie demonstrates in her important new book, *Places of Possibility: Property, Nature, and Community Land Ownership*, the Highlands and Hebrides have become, in recent years, the center of a sustained effort to construct “an alternative, place-based and more generous politics to that of a neoliberal imaginary” (p.3).

This contemporary re-commoning movement in the Hebrides and Highlands comes generations after the enclosures ushered in a period of population decline in the area. Today fully one-third of all land in the Outer Hebrides is held as common property and more than two-thirds of the population lives on community-owned trust land.

Mackenzie focuses on these contemporary land reform efforts and skips almost entirely the history of enclosure and privatization. Her emphasis is not on the injustices of neoliberal globalization in the Hebrides and Highlands, or the history of enclosure in the region, or the patterns of resistance. Instead Mackenzie examines community land trusts in order to chart a more open and liberatory path - “to further a geography of hope” (p.17) - than a future foreclosed by the totalizing narrative of neoliberalism, which forever reserves nature as resource for private enterprise.

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The book has two primary goals: first is an exploration of specific land reform efforts in the Highlands and Hebrides and the work of a series of remarkably successful community land trusts, such as the North Harris Trust, whose members collectively own more than 60,000 acres in the Outer Hebrides; second, she is interested in understanding how these efforts at re-commoning the land have interrupted the neoliberal “ownership model” of land as property. Property in the Highlands and Hebrides has been reconfigured in ways that have awakened a “communal subjectivity” (p.16) and thus have remade social and political life. Drawing on Foucault, J.K. Gibson-Graham and Judith Butler, Mackenzie argues that this is not merely a story of resistance to a depoliticizing neoliberal rationality of land as commodity, but rather is a story of how radical new subjectivities have opened up real alternatives to neoliberal globalization. These newly formed, durable common property relations have disrupted historical processes of enclosure and privatization and conjured new categories of property, community and nature. To Mackenzie the Highlands and Hebrides are “unmapped terrain that calls forth a new ethics of political decision making” (p.16).

As Mackenzie shows these new ethics and political subjectivities emerged from contemporary land reform struggles but are animated by traditional modes of production and social relations that made life in a region constrained by rocky soils and an oceanic climate possible. This is explained through the term *dùthaich*, which the historical geographer Charles Withers defines as “the expressed collective belief in the inalienability of the land; not in the sense of its formal appropriation through law as property or as a materially measurable commodity, but in the sense of land as *their* land, an inherited occupance, a physical setting with which Highlanders were indissolubly tied through continuity of social and material practices” (quoted on p.39). The particular

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mode of agricultural production that gives material expression to *dùthaich* is called crofting. Like *dùthaich*, crofting is a complicated idea that brings together agricultural practices and social relations rooted in common property. In local humor a croft is “a small area of land surrounded by regulations” (quoted on p.31). Mackenzie explains it as a mode of agricultural production that defines arable land and grazing pasture and distributes tenure rights to those lands to individual crofters. Crofting - both the practice and the social relations it requires and sustains - links the political struggles of today’s Highland and Hebrides communities to the history of the clearances and enclosures, and in Mackenzie’s telling it is the wellspring from which a real alternative to neoliberalism has emerged.

Mackenzie takes up this idea to examine how various community land trusts have drawn on this common history in order to rework the concept of property. This has been a disruptive process that has undermined the idea and practice of land as a fungible commodity and redefined the rights and relations of property as imbued with the “power to negotiate inclusion” (p.71) rather than as the means to violently define exclusive privilege.

Mackenzie traces this transformation in property through the rest of the book with a focus on the ways in which this re-commoning has made possible new “material and metaphorical inscriptions” of nature and place. In chapter 3, and the one that follows it, the book shifts into a brilliant political ecological analysis of the co-production of the social and the natural and an examination of how property thus reconfigured allows for a dramatic renegotiation of “people’s subject position with respect to the land” (p.81). Chapter 4, for example, offers a wonderfully nuanced examination of wind development in the Hebrides and Highlands, where community land trusts sink or swim on their ability

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to generate income in order to finance land purchases, fund affordable housing developments or pay for needed infrastructure. These efforts require revenue and wind development has emerged as a new and lucrative possibility. This means that land trusts find themselves suddenly jockeying with global energy firms over rights to build wind farms along Scotland's west coast. It's a fascinating struggle and one whose outcome Mackenzie convincingly argues has everything to do with the complex reconfiguration of property relations by community land trusts. These changes in property have helped to redefine socio-natural boundaries in ways that have transformed nature-society relations. Re-commoning, she argues, has not foreclosed the possibility of nature as a source of use values, but rather has meant that choices over how to define and use nature are now understood as "mediated by a collective ethic" (p.149).

*Places of Possibility* is about community land trusts but not limited to them; about neoliberal globalization but not preoccupied by it. Mackenzie does not examine the political and economic histories of neoliberal globalization or the particular histories of dispossession and its consequences in the Highlands and Hebrides. There is much important work in these areas - work that Mackenzie nicely summarizes - but critiquing neoliberalism, or summarizing histories of its consequences, is not the purpose of the book. Mackenzie is more interested in making visible actually existing alternatives to neoliberal globalization and directing our attention towards just alternatives to a world animated by exchange value and organized around private interest. Mackenzie has written a book that is thrilling in its optimism and hopefulness. She convincingly explains in compelling detail the hopeful possibilities of the re-commoning in the Hebrides and Highlands. This is rarely the stuff of academic study but is at the heart of *Places of*

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*Possibility's* profound ambitions and most important contribution: anticipating “more socially, environmentally and economically generous ‘postneoliberalisms’”(p.220).

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