

The features of money that I've discussed are not necessarily *bad*. By helping to homogenize or standardize all it touches, by serving as a universal means, money has enabled human beings to accomplish wonders. Money has played a key role in the rise of technological civilization, but perhaps, as with technology, we have barely begun to learn to use this potent creative instrument for its true purpose. Money has fostered the development of standardized things like machine components and microchips—but do we want our food to be homogeneous as well? Money's impersonality fosters cooperation over vast social distances, helping coordinate the labor of millions of people who are mostly strangers to each other—but do we want our relationships with the people in our own neighborhoods to be impersonal too? Money as universal means enables us to do nearly anything, but do we want it to be an exclusive means too, so that without it we can do nearly nothing? The time has come to master this tool, as humanity steps into an intentional, conscious new role on the earth.

CHARLES EISENSTEIN - SACRED ECONOMY

CHAPTER 4

THE TROUBLE WITH PROPERTY

What would be the result in heaven itself if those who get there first instituted private property in the surface of heaven, and parceled it out in absolute ownership among themselves, as we parcel out the surface of the earth?

—Henry George

Man did not make the earth, and, though he had a natural right to occupy it, he had no right to locate as his property in perpetuity any part of it; neither did the Creator of the earth open a land-office, from whence the first title-deeds should issue.

—Thomas Paine

THE URGE TO OWN

We have lived in an Age of Separation. One by one, our bonds to community, nature, and place have dissolved, marooning us in an alien world. The loss of these bonds is more than a reduction of our wealth, it is a reduction of our very being. The impoverishment we feel, cut off from community and cut off from nature, is an impoverishment of our souls. That is because, contrary to the assumptions of economics, biology, political philosophy, psychology, and institutional religion, we are not in essence separate beings having relationships. We are relationship.

I once heard Martín Prechtel, speaking of his village in Guatemala, explain, "In my village, if you went to the medicine man with a sick child, you would never say, 'I am healthy, but my child is sick.' You would say, 'My family is sick.' Or if it were a neighbor, you might say, 'My village is sick.'" No doubt, in such a society, it would be equally inconceivable to say, 'I am healthy, but the forest is sick.' To think anyone could be healthy when her family, her village, or indeed the land, the water, or the planet were not, would be as absurd as saying, "I've got a fatal liver disease, but that's just my liver—I am healthy!" Just as my sense of self includes my liver, so theirs included their social and natural community.

The modern self, in contrast, is a discrete and separate subject in a universe that is Other. This self is the Economic Man of Adam Smith; it is the embodied soul of religion; it is the selfish gene of biology. It underlies the converging crises of our time, which are all variations on the theme of separation—separation from nature, from community, from lost parts of ourselves. It underlies all the usual culprits blamed for the ongoing destruction of ecology and polity, such as human greed or capitalism. Our sense of self entails, "More for me is less for you"; hence we have an interest-based money system embodying precisely that principle. In older, gift-based societies, the opposite was true.

The urge to own grows as a natural response to an alienating ideology that severs felt connections and leaves us alone in the universe. When we exclude world from self, the tiny, lonely identity that remains has a voracious need to claim as much as possible of that lost beingness for its own. If all the world, all of life and earth, is no longer me, I can at least compensate by making it mine. Other separate selves do the same, so we live in a world of competition and omnipresent anxiety. It is built into our

self-definition. This is the deficit of being, the deficit of soul, into which we are born.

Trapped in the logic of me and mine, we seek to recover some tiny fraction of our lost wealth by expanding and protecting the separate self and its extension: money and property. Those who lack the economic means to inflate the self often inflate the physical self instead, which is one reason why obesity disproportionately afflicts the poor. Addictions to shopping, to money, and to acquisition arise from the same basic source as do addictions to food: both come from loneliness, from the pain of merely existing cut off from most of what we are.

Looking out upon the strip mines and the clear-cuts and the dead zones and the genocides and the debased consumer culture, we ask, What is the origin of this monstrous machine that chews up beauty and spits out money? The discrete and separate self, surveying a universe that is fundamentally Other, naturally treats the natural and human world as a pile of instrumental, accidental stuff. The rest of the world is fundamentally not-self! Why should we care about it, beyond our own foreseeable utility? So it was that Descartes, a pioneering articulator of the modern sense of self, articulated as well the ambition to become the "lords and possessors" of nature. As the latter word implies, the idea of property occurs quite naturally to the separate self.

Our rigid, narrow, self/other distinction is coming to an end, victim of its own premises. As the mystics have taught, the separate self

1. As above, so below. Having made nature into an adversary, or at best a pile of resources,² it is no surprise that we manifest the same relationship within our bodies. The defining diseases of our time are the autoimmune diseases, the somatization of our self-other confusion, just as the village, the forest, and the planet are inseparable parts of ourselves that we mistake as other, so our immune systems reject our own body tissues. What we do to nature, we do to ourselves, inescapably.

can be maintained only temporarily, and at great cost. And we have maintained it a long time, and built a civilization upon it that seeks the conquest of nature and human nature. The present convergence of crises has laid bare the futility of that goal. It portends the end of civilization as we know it, and the instauration of a new state of human beingness defined by a more fluid, more inclusive sense of self.

One theory of the origin of property associates it with the notion of autonomy, or self-sovereignty, that emerged slowly out of our communal tribal past. Charles Avila describes the logic this way: "If I am my own, and my labor power belongs to me, then what I make is mine."² Here then is an ideological prerequisite for any concept of property, that "I am my own," which is by no means a universal precept in human societies. In other societies, the clan, the tribe, the village, or even the community of all life may have taken priority over the individual conception of the self, in which case your labor power does not belong to you, but to something greater.³ The institution of property, therefore, is not the root of our present malady, but a symptom of our disconnection and isolation. This book, therefore, does not seek to abolish property (for to do so would address the symptom rather than the cause) but to transform it as part of a larger transformation of human beingness.

Other thinkers, notably Wilhelm Reich and Genevieve Vaughan, link the origin of property to the emergence of male dominance

2. Avila, *Ownership*, 5.

3. Even today, we have a spiritual sense that our labor is indeed not our own. It comes through in our desire to work for something greater than ourselves—that is, to dedicate our labor to a cause beyond our rational self-interest. Religious people might describe it as "giving one's life to God." Another way of putting it is that we have a need to make a gift of our labor and its products, and of all the skills and talents that inform it. We then feel fulfilled, serene in the knowledge that we are fulfilling our purpose here on earth. Eventually, we know that our gifts must be given in turn, and not hoarded for the brief and illusory enjoyment of the separate self.

and patriarchal society.⁴ While I believe these arguments have merit, I have chosen not to explore herein the sexual dimensions of money and property, a subject deserving of its own treatise. Each institution of our Age of Separation is tied to all the others; alienation from nature, the body, and the sacred feminine echoes the alienation from the world that property implies when it makes things detachable objects of commerce.

The urge to own diminishes as our sense of connectedness and gratitude grows, and we realize that our labor power is not our own, and what I make is not properly mine. Is not my ability to labor, and my life itself, a gift too? In that realization, we desire to give our creations to all that have contributed to our being and granted us the gift of life.

Certain socialist philosophers have turned this desire, motivated by gratitude, into an obligation instead, and into a justification for state expropriation of individual labor. We owe a "debt to society," and the state becomes the debt collector. In less extreme form, it justifies the income tax—also an expropriation of individual labor. In both cases, we are compelled through force to give. Can we instead create an economic system that liberates, celebrates, and rewards the innate urge to give? That is what this book describes: a system that rewards flow and not accumulation, creating and not owning, giving and not having.

THE ORIGINAL ROBBERY

The sovereignty of the individual was but a first step toward the modern concept of property, for most things on this earth do not

⁴ See, for example, Reich's *Sex-Pol* and Vaughan's "Gift-Giving as the Female Principle vs. Patriarchal Capitalism."

exist through anyone's labor. By the logic of "what I make is mine," anything that existed independent of human effort could belong to no one. To claim ownership of such a thing—the land, the rivers, the animals, the trees—would be tantamount to theft, just as I am a thief if I seize ownership of something you make.

A distinguished line of economic thought has arisen from this realization, whose most notable exponents were P. J. Proudhon, Karl Marx, Henry George, and Silvio Gesell. "Property is robbery," proclaimed Proudhon: tracing back the origin of any piece of property through a succession of "legitimate" transfers, we eventually get to the first owner—the one who simply took it, the one who separated it off from the realm of "ours" or "God's" into the realm of "mine." Usually this happened by force, as in the seizure of the vast lands of all North America in the last three centuries. This story has played itself out in various forms for millennia all over the world. After all, before Roman times there was no such thing as a deed. Land was like the air and water; it could not be owned. The first owners therefore could not have acquired it legitimately. They must have taken it.

It is often argued that land ownership is a natural consequence of agriculture. While the hunter-gatherer has made little investment in her land, the farmer has put labor into making it more productive (of food for humans, that is). It would be patently unjust for the farmer to labor all year only to have "gatherers" come in at harvest time and live off the harvest. Private property is supposed to give people an incentive to make improvements upon the land. But wouldn't it be more just if there were some way to own the improvements, and not the land itself?

Originally land rights were almost always held in common, according to the village or tribe, and not the individual. In the great agrarian

civilizations such as Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Zhou Dynasty China, there was little concept of private land ownership. All land was the property of the king; and because the king was the representative of the divine on earth, all land was the property of God.

There is a vast conceptual gulf between having a right to the fruits of one's labor as applied to land and owning the land itself. In the West, the absolute concept of land ownership seems to have originated in Rome, fertilized, perhaps, by the Greek conception of the individual. It was in Rome that land first came under what they called *dominium*, "the ultimate right, the right which had no right behind it, the right which legitimated all others, while itself having no need of legitimation . . . the right of using, enjoying, and abusing"—*ius utendi, fruendi, abutendi*.⁵

In the East, explicit land ownership began somewhat earlier, at least in concept. In China it dates back at least to the reign of Shuang Yang in the fourth century BCE and perhaps before, though even then a time prior to land ownership was still a matter of historical memory, as evidenced by Confucian statements that it was improper to sell land in "ancient times."⁶ India as well probably knew private ownership of land by the sixth century BCE, though the evidence is somewhat contradictory.⁷ In any event, the vast majority of land in India was communally owned up until the time of British rule.⁸

⁵ Auda, *Ownership*, 20.

⁶ Xu, *Ancient China in Transition*, 112. This book seeks to interpret the Confucian position as a criticism of concentration of ownership. Deng, "A Comparative Study on Land Ownership," 12. Deng maintains that prior to then, alienation of land was forbidden, since it was all the property of the king. Deng also argues that in practice, land was generally not alienable or fungible at least through the medieval Ming Dynasty.

⁷ Alcock, *State and Government in Ancient India*, 273-4.

⁸ Kishore, *Man and Land*, Sec. 2.1.1 and 2.1.2.

In Medieval Europe, the bulk of the land was owned either in common or by feudal lords who did not "own" the land in the full modern sense, as an alienable commodity to freely buy and sell. They had certain rights to the land, which could be transferred to vassals in exchange for various services, shares of crops, and eventually for money. In England, free alienation of land was generally not possible until the fifteenth century.⁹ Thereafter, the vast communal lands of England rapidly came under private ownership thanks to the Enclosure Acts, a process paralleled across the continent, for example through the "emancipation" of the serfs. Lewis Hyde writes,

Whereas before a man could fish in any stream and hunt in any forest, now he found there were individuals who claimed to be the owners of these commons. The basis of land tenure had shifted. The medieval serf had been almost the opposite of a property owner: the land had owned *him*. He could not move freely from place to place, and yet he had inalienable rights to the piece of land to which he was attached. Now men claimed to own the land and offered to rent it out at a fee. While a serf could not be removed from his land, a tenant could be evicted not only through failure to pay the rent but merely at the whim of the landlord.¹⁰

As with so many social reforms, the freeing of the serfs was another step in the consolidation of economic and political power in the hands of the already powerful. By one means or another, people who had for generations freely grazed their herds, collected fire-

wood, and hunted on the lands around them could no longer do so.¹¹ These lands had been a *commons*, the property of all and of none. Forever after, they became property.

If property is robbery, then a legal system dedicated to the protection of private property rights is a system that perpetuates a crime. By making property sacrosanct we validate the original theft. This should not be too surprising if the laws were made by the thieves themselves to legitimize their ill-gotten gains. Such was indeed the case: in Rome and elsewhere, it was the rich and powerful who both seized the land and made the laws.

Let the reader think I am launching a Marxist diatribe, let me hasten to add that I am not advocating the abolition of private property. For one thing, the whole mentality of *abolition* involves a fervid, abrupt, jarring change imposed forcefully on the unwilling. Secondly, private property is but a symptom of a deeper malady (Separation), and if we address that symptom from the mind-set of Separation, of conquest, of overcoming evil, we will end up with the same iniquities in different forms. Finally, even on the economic level, the problem is not private property per se, but the unfair advantages of owning it. Even though it is wrong for someone to benefit from mere ownership of what was once common, everyone benefits when resources go toward those who will use them the best. These include the land, soil, minerals, aquifers, and capacity of the atmosphere to absorb waste. We need an economic system that disallows profit-by-owning yet rewards the entrepreneur's spirit

⁹ Deng, "A Comparative Study on Land Ownership," 10.
¹⁰ Hyde, *The Gift*, 121.
¹¹ Of course, the peasants resisted their dispossession from the commons, fomenting the bloody struggle known in Germany as the Peasants' War. It is a struggle reenacted time and again around the globe whenever people resist the incursion of property rights into yet another sphere of human relationship. As Hyde puts it, "the Peasants' War was the same war that the American Indians had to fight with the Europeans, a war against the marketing of formerly inalienable properties."

that says, "I know a way to use it better," and allows that spirit free rein. Marxist systems not only eliminate profit from exclusive *control* of scarce capital resources; they also eliminate profit from their efficacious *use*. The result is inefficiency and stagnation. Can we reward those who put resources to best use without rewarding the mere fact of ownership? This book describes a money system that preserves the freedom of private property without allowing its owners to accrue unfair advantages.

Wherever and whenever it happened, the privatization of land soon brought with it a concentration of ownership. In the early days of ancient Rome, land was common (not personal) property, except for a small homestead plot: "The corn land was of public right."¹² As Rome expanded through conquest, the new lands did not stay "public" very long but soon migrated into the hands of the wealthiest families—the patrician class—setting the norm for many centuries to come. Their estates also grew at the expense of the original plebeian freeholds, whose owners were frequently called away to serve in the legions, and which in any case could not compete economically with the cheap slave labor of the patrician estates. They accumulated insurmountable debts and, because land had become an alienable commodity, were forced off their homesteads and into beggary, banditry, or, if they were fortunate, the urban craft professions.

When the fortunes of the Empire turned and the supply of slaves dried up, many large landholders turned to tenant farmers, the *coloni*, to farm their fields. Bound by debt, these tenants eventually became the Medieval serfs. Think of it this way: if you owe

me an insurmountable debt, then you are obliged to pay at least as much of it as you can. The proceeds of your labor, forever after, belong to me. How similar this is to the United States bankruptcy laws as promulgated in the Bankruptcy "Reform" Act of 2005, which compel the person declaring bankruptcy to commit a portion of future wages to creditors.¹³ How similar as well to the plight of Third World countries, who are compelled to restructure their economies and devote their entire economic surplus toward the perpetual servicing of debt. These are the modern counterparts of the serfs, bound to work for the owners of money just as the serfs worked for the owners of land. Their condition is known as "debt peonage."

The parallel between ancient Rome and the present day is striking. Now as then, wealth is increasingly concentrated in the hands of the few. Now as then, people must go into lifelong debt that they can never pay off just to have access to the necessities of life. Then it was through access to land; today it is through access to money. The slaves, serfs, and tenants gave a lifetime of labor to the enrichment of the landowners; today the proceeds of our labor go to the owners of money.

In the history of radical thought, the realization that property is itself usually accompanies a rage and desire for vengeance against the thieves. Matters are not so simple, though. The owners of wealth, whether inherited or not, are born into a role that is created and necessitated by the great invisible stories of our civilization that compel us to turn the world into property and money whether we are aware of doing so or not.

12. Avila, *Ownership*, 16, quoting an ancient source from H. E. Jolowicz and Barry Nicholas, *Historical Introduction to the Study of Roman Law*, 190.

13. Moreover, many types of debt, such as tax debt, alimony debt, and student loans, are not affected by bankruptcy. At the present writing, student loan debt in the United States exceeds credit card debt, posing a huge burden on graduating students.

Let us not waste our psychic energy hating the rich, or even the original plunderers. Cast in their station, we would have enacted the same role. Indeed, most of us participate, in one way or another, in the ongoing theft of the commons. Let us not hate, lest we prolong the Age of Separation even further and lest we, like the Bolsheviks, perpetrate a revolution that is insufficiently deep, and so re-create the old order in a different, distorted form. Still, let us not lose sight of the nature and effects of the unconscious crime of property, so that we may return our world to its original and still-latent abundance.

The transformation from a right to benefit into outright ownership of land was a gradual one, whose terminus is the practice of selling land for money. Let's keep in mind that this was a conceptual transformation (the land doesn't admit to being owned), a human projection onto reality. Land ownership (and indeed all forms of ownership) says more about our perception of the world than about the nature of the thing owned. The transition from the early days, when ownership of land was as unthinkable as ownership of the sky, sun, and moon, to the present day, when nearly every square foot of the earth is subject to ownership of one sort or another, is really just the story of our changing view of ourselves in relation to the universe.

THE GEORGIST TRADITION

The distinction between the right to use and outright ownership echoes the primitive distinction between that which is produced through human effort and that which is there already; it persists today in the distinction between "real" and "personal" property, and it is a basis for thousands of years of reformist thought.

Since the Roman Empire developed the legal basis of property rights as we know them today, it is unsurprising that it also produced some of the earliest critics of property. In the third and fourth centuries, the early leaders of the Christian church were especially clear that the things of the earth were for all to share. Ambrose wrote, "Rich and poor alike enjoy the splendid ornaments of the universe . . . The house of God is common to rich and poor," and "The Lord our God has willed this earth to be the common possession of all and its fruit to support all."¹⁴ Elsewhere he writes that private property

is not according to nature, for nature has brought forth all things for all in common. Thus God has created everything in such a way that all things be possessed in common. Nature therefore is the mother of common right, usurpation of private right.¹⁵

Others of the Christian Fathers, notably John Chrysostom, Augustine, Basil the Great, and Clement, weighed in with similar views, encouraging followers to follow Jesus's teachings quite literally and give all their possessions to the poor. Theirs was not a detached philosophy: many of these leaders did exactly that. Ambrose, Basil, and Augustine had been men of considerable wealth before entering the clergy, and they gave it all away.

The teachings of its founders notwithstanding, eventually the Church itself acquired considerable property and allied itself with imperial power. The teachings of Jesus became otherworldly ideals that were not seriously recommended to anyone, and the Kingdom of God was transported from earth to Heaven. This was a

¹⁴ In Paulinus CXXXIII Expositio, 8, 22, Pl. 15:1303, cited by Avila, *Ownership*, 72. In Avila, *Ownership*, 74.

major step in the conceptual separation of spirit and matter that has contributed to making materiality, and especially money, profane today. Even more ironically, most people today who profess to follow Christian teachings have turned everything inside out and associate socialism with atheism and private wealth with God's favor.

The early Church fathers made frequent reference to the distinction between what people produce through their own effort and what was given to humanity by God for all to use in common. Many social and economic critics of the last several centuries echoed this early indignation at the appropriation of the commons and developed creative proposals to remedy it. One such early critic, Thomas Paine, wrote,

And as it is impossible to separate the improvement made by cultivation from the earth itself, upon which that improvement is made, the idea of landed property arose from that inseparable connection; but it is nevertheless true, that it is the value of the improvement, only, and not the earth itself, that is individual property. . . . Every proprietor, therefore, of cultivated lands, owes to the community a ground-rent (for I know of no better term to express the idea) for the land which he holds.¹⁶

The first economist to develop this idea fully was Henry George, in his eloquent 1879 classic *Progress and Poverty*. He started with essentially the same premise as Paine and the early Christians:

But who made the earth that any man can claim such ownership of it, or any part of it, or the right to give, sell or bequeath it? Since the earth was not made by us, but is only a temporary

dwelling place on which one generation of men follow another; since we find ourselves here, are manifestly here with equal permission of the Creator, it is manifest that no one can have any exclusive right of ownership in land, and that the rights of all men to land must be equal and inalienable. There must be exclusive right of possession of land, for the man who uses it must have secure possession of land in order to reap the products of his labor. But his right of possession must be limited by the equal right of all, and should therefore be conditioned upon the payment to the community by the possessor of an equivalent for any special valuable privilege thus accorded him.¹⁷

Why should someone profit from the use-value of land by the mere fact of owning it, especially when the origin of that ownership is based on ancient injustice? Accordingly, Henry George proposed his famous Single Tax—essentially a 100-percent tax on the “economic rent” deriving from land. This was to be implemented through a tax on the value of land as distinct from improvements upon it; for example, land would be taxed but not buildings or crops. It was called “single” because he advocated the abolition of all other taxes, reasoning that it is just as much theft to tax legitimate private property as it is to profit from something that belongs to all. George’s writings sparked a massive political movement that almost got him elected to the New York mayor’s office, but of course the established money power fought him at every turn.¹⁸ His ideas have been sporadically adopted around the world (the

¹⁷ George, “The Single Tax.”

¹⁸ Another reason for his political defeat was that George was rigidly dogmatic, refusing political alliance with anyone who did not uncompromisingly endorse his Single Tax.

two places I've spent most of my life, Taiwan and Pennsylvania, both levy taxes on the underlying value of land) and have greatly influenced economic thought.

One of his admirers, Silvio Gesell, proposed a near-equivalent to George's land tax: the public ownership of all land, available for private leasing at a rate that would approximate the economic rent.¹⁹ Gesell's reasoning is compelling and remarkably prescient in its understanding of ecology and the connected self. Read this extraordinary passage from 1906:

We frequently hear the phrase: Man has a natural right to the earth. But that is absurd, for it would be just as correct to say that man has a right to his limbs. If we talk of rights in this connection we must also say that a pine-tree has the right to sink its roots in the earth. Can man spend his life in a balloon? The earth belongs to, and is an organic part of man. We cannot conceive man without the earth any more than without a head or a stomach. The earth is just as much a part, an organ, of man as his head. Where do the digestive organs of man begin and end? They have no beginning and no end, but form a closed system without beginning or end. The substances which man requires to maintain life are indigestible in their raw state and must go through a preparatory digestive process. And this preparatory work is not done by the mouth, but by the plant. It is the plant which collects and transmutes the substances so that they may become nutriment in their further progress through the digestive canal. Plants and the space they occupy are just as much a part of man as his mouth, his teeth or his stomach....

How, then, can we suffer individual men to confiscate for themselves parts of the earth as their exclusive property, to erect barriers and with the help of watchdogs and trained slaves to keep us away from parts of the earth, from parts of ourselves—to tear, as it were, whole limbs from our bodies? Is not such a proceeding equivalent to self-mutilation?²⁰

Gesell goes on, with great rhetorical flourish, to say that this mutilation is even worse than the amputation of a body part, for wounds of the body heal, but

the wound left . . . by the amputation of a piece of land festers forever, and never closes. At every term for the payment of rent, on every Quarter Day, the wound opens and the golden blood gushes out. Man is bled white and goes staggering forward. The amputation of a piece of land from our body is the bloodiest of all operations; it leaves a gaping, festering wound which cannot heal unless the stolen limb is grafted on again.

I think this is a wound we all feel, not only as the rent built into the cost of everything we buy, but also as a spiritual disenfranchisement. Some time ago I was driving with a woman from France down the country roads of central Pennsylvania. The gentle mountains and broad valleys beckoned to us, so we decided to walk them. It seemed as if the ground was begging for our feet, wanting to be freed. We decided to find a place to pull over and walk. We drove for an hour, but we never did find a field or forest that wasn't fenced with "No Trespassing" signs. Every time I see one I feel a twinge, a loss. Any squirrel is freer than I am, any deer. These signs

19. *Economic rent* refers to the proceeds of ownership, such as rents, royalties, dividends, and interest.

20. Gesell, *The National Economic Order* part 2, chapter 5, "The Case for the Nationalization of Land."

apply to humans only. Herein lies a universal principle: the regime of property, the enclosure of the unowned, has made us all poorer. The promise of freedom inherent in that broad, verdant landscape was a mirage. Woody Guthrie's words ring true:

There was a big high wall there that tried to stop me.

The sign was painted, it said private property.

But on the back side it didn't say nothing

That side was made for you and me.²¹

After three hundred years of economic expansion, we are so impoverished that we lack the wealth and freedom of a squirrel. The indigenous people who lived here before the Europeans arrived had the run of the land. They had the simple freedom to say, "Let us climb that mountain. Let us swim in that lake. Let us fish that river." Not even the wealthiest among us have that freedom today. Even a billion-dollar landholding is smaller than the domain of the hunter-gatherer.²²

The situation is different in most of Europe; in Sweden, for instance, the right of *Allmannsvärd* allows individuals to walk, pick flowers, camp for a day or two, swim, or ski on private land (but not too near a dwelling). I met a horse enthusiast who described how, in Ireland, all the gates to private farm lanes and pastures are unlocked. "Trespassing" is not a concept; the land is open to all.

21. From "This Land is Your Land." This verse is usually omitted from the song books.

22. The reader might bring up the territoriality of animals, many of whom are not free to roam. Not all animals are territorial, however, and those that are often exhibit group territoriality, not individual territoriality. So it was with humans for most of our existence. At the very least, each person had the freedom of the entire tribal territory. Shall we today shrink our territory down to the level of the nuclear family? (Or shall we expand our tribe to include the whole earth?)

The riders are respectful of the farmer and the land in turn, sticking to the perimeters to avoid disturbing animals and pasture. Hearing of this system, I don't think any American can look out upon the vast expanses of this country with their gates, fences, and no-trespassing signs without a feeling of confinement or loss. Can you feel Gessell's "wound"—that the very land has been severed from us? Gessell's huge contribution beyond George was to apply parallel thinking beyond land to money, inventing a new kind of money system that I will describe, after due groundwork, later in this book as a key element of a sacred economy.

Controversial among progressives of his time, Henry George's insistence on taxing only land makes even less sense today because so many other commons have been brought into the realm of private property.²³ Hyde's "marketing of formerly inalienable properties" has gone far beyond land to encompass nearly everything essential to human existence and human joy. Our connections to nature, to culture, and to community have been riven, separated off and sold back to us. I have so far focused on the land, but nearly every other commons has suffered the same fate. Intellectual property offers the most obvious example, and the royalties that derive from owning it play a role similar to land rent. (If you think intellectual property differs from land because it is created by humans, read on!) But there is one form of ownership that contains

23. There are other significant problems with George's program. In particular, it is very difficult to separate the value of land from the value of improvements upon it, especially because the intrinsic value of land is determined not only by its physical characteristics, but also by its location relative to other pieces of land bearing human improvements. By building on your land, you attract others to build nearby, thus raising the value of your own land and creating a disincentive to build in the first place. This is one reason why I prefer Silvio Gessell's leasing approach to solving the problem of economic rent.

and supersedes the rest: the ownership of money. In the realm of finance, interest plays the role of royalties and rents, ensuring that the wealth that flows from human creativity and labor flows primarily to those who own money. Money is just as criminal in its origins as are other forms of property—an ongoing robbery that both impels and embodies the expropriation of the commons.

To restore sacredness to economy, we need to redress this robbery, because it is ultimately a theft and a reduction of a divine gift. It is the conversion of what was once sacred, unique, and personal into the status of commodity. It is not immediately obvious that the right to profit from mere ownership of money is just as illegitimate as the right to profit from the mere ownership of land. After all, money, unlike land, is a human creation. We earn money from the application of our human gifts, our own energy, time, and creativity. Surely the proceeds from this labor rightfully belong to the laborer? Surely, therefore, not all money is illegitimate in its ultimate origin?

This view is naive. In fact, money is deeply and irretrievably implicated in the conversion of the land commons into private property, the final and defining stage of which is its reduction to the status of just another commodity that can be bought and sold. So too have other elements of our natural and cultural bequest been cordoned off, turned into property, and finally, as “goods and services,” into money. This is not to say that it is immoral to work for money; it is, rather, immoral for money to work for you. What rental is on land, so interest is on money. Money is the corpse of the commons, the embodiment of all that was once common and free, turned now into property of the purest form. The next several chapters will substantiate this claim, describing exactly how and why interest-bearing money by nature, usurps the commons, ruins the planet, and reduces the vast majority of humanity to peonage.

CHAPTER 5 THE CORPSE OF THE COMMONS

We cry shame on the feudal baron who forbade the peasant to turn a clod of earth unless he surrendered to his lord a fourth of his crop. We call those the barbarous times. But if the forms have changed, the relations have remained the same, and the worker is forced, under the name of free contract, to accept feudal obligations. For, turn where he will, he can find no better conditions. Everything has become private property, and he must accept, or die of hunger.

—Peter Kropotkin

All the foundation of every great fortune lies a great crime.

—Honoré de Balzac

Despite land's obvious independence of human effort for its existence, land is not so different from any other kind of property. Let us first consider material property—anything made of metal, wood, plastic, plants or animals, minerals, and so on. Are these anything other than pieces of the earth, altered through the application of human effort? The distinction between land and improvements thereupon—the distinction between that which already exists and that which human effort creates—is no more or less valid for land than for any other material good. All that we use and all that we