
Terrestrial Dividends

(stub)

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"It is a position not to be controverted that the earth, in its natural uncultivated state was, and ever would have continued to be, the common property of the human race. In that state every man would have been born to property. He would have been a joint life proprietor with the rest in the property of the soil, and in all its natural productions, vegetable and animal."

This is Thomas Paine, from his 1797 pamphlet *Agrarian Justice*. The pamphlet is short but forwards a strong chain of thinking: The Earth began as the common property of humankind, for no one labored to create it. However, its value to humanity was greatly improved through cultivation, and for this, an additional value is owed to its cultivators. Nevertheless, these cultivators still owe a “groundrent” to the human community for use of our common resource, otherwise, it would mean nothing less than humanitys dispossession. The Earth was still unfortunately parcelled into private land ownership and therefore a fund should be created, “out of which there shall be paid to every person, when arrived at the age of twentyone years, the sum of fifteen pounds sterling, as a compensation in part, for the loss of his or her natural inheritance, by the introduction of the system of landed property: And also, the sum of ten pounds per annum, during life, to every person now living, of the age of fifty years, and to all others as they shall arrive at that age.”

This last proposal amounts to a universal basic income, and Paine is usually credited as the first to propose such a thing. However, just as radical is his idea of *groundrent* or what we'll later call a *terrestrial dividend*: that humanity as steward of the earth, is also its landlord, owed rent on its commonly-held capital. In *Rights of Man*, Paine lampoons the “rightful inheritance” of the English Crown when—as all Englishmen plainly knew—this little family heirloom was gained by *conquest*, i.e., by William the *Conqueror*. Defenders of succession, like Edmund Burke, were in effect saying that the son of kings were owed their crown because their predecessors stole it fair and square. Paine takes the same tack on land ownership: it is a rightful ownership ludicrously founded upon expropriation:

"There could be no such thing as landed property originally. 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 landoffice, from whence the first titledeeds should issue. Whence then, arose the idea of landed property?"

This is a question that we all puzzle over, even as schoolchildren, and Paine answers it pragmatically: “*I answer as before, that when cultivation began the idea of landed property began with it, from the impossibility of separating the improvement made by cultivation from the earth itself, upon which that improvement was made. The value of the improvement so far exceeded the value of the natural earth, at that time, as to absorb it; till, in the end, the common right of all became confounded into the cultivated right of the individual. But there are, nevertheless, distinct species of rights, and will continue to be so long as the earth endures.*” Groundrent, then, is class-action compensation for the injustice and atavistic absurdity of landed property.

As revolutionary and far-reaching as Paine's proposal was, his groundrent was still ostensibly formulated as a “National Fund,” to be administered by the emerging nation-state apparatuses in Europe and the United States, not as a “*charity but a right, not bounty but justice*.” His own thinking, though, unmistakably points beyond the nation-state, since what else is the territorial state than landed property on a grander scale? The nation-state may make more room for public use or common good, but if it is fundamentally absurd that a person may own land, how much less absurd is it for a people to own a territory? What could possibly justify one nation “owning” a bottomless reserve of oil or minerals, when another nation is condemned to some square-mileage of scorched or war-ravaged plains? Just as Paine laments that civilization has upset the natural equality of humanity and divided us into rich and poor, the territorial nation-state system divides humanity into rich and poor nations often based on the nothing more than the ownership of land and

its “uncultivated” natural resources. It’s unjustifiable that Hassanal Bolkiah, the Sultan of Brunei, is one of the wealthiest men in the world for his “ownership” of Brunei’s oil. Is it any better that the per capita income of Brunei’s citizenry is nearly fifty times that of Haiti, merely from their collective benefits from petroleum?

Instead of a “National Fund,” perhaps groundrent needs to be paid out to global humanity in the form of a “Terrestrial Dividend,” not merely from high net-worth individuals to the public, but from luckier states to the greater globe. The authors propose that some bulk of this terrestrial dividend should be paid as groundrent for use, sale, and extraction of our commonly-held subterranean resources, primarily oil and minerals. If there is an absurdity at the foundation of land-ownership, it’s doubly absurd when it comes to owning chunks of the earth below us. On the surface of Earth, in figuring out the relationship between spaces and populations, some variant of private landed property is likely inevitable for the very fact that two bodies cannot occupy the same space at the same time. Human bodies and their general needs require space. Occupation by one means privation for others, however small or temporary, however domestic or cooperative. From this alone, we might see how some might justify—or rather rationalize—the development of the wider and wider occupation, privation, and ownership of space.

Subterranean space has no such excuse. Generally speaking, subterranean space is needed neither for occupation, nor movement, nor storage—at least not at the depths demanded for resource extraction. And its ownership is justified by an even sillier story: it is “claimed” either through conquest or “discovery,” though usually by some tragic mix of the two. Direct and explicit conquest, such as sixteenth century Spain’s claim upon South American gold, is less tenable under contemporary international law, making claims on subterranean resources more justifiable as discovery, or rationalized through the pains of extraction, or through some wider claim or access to territory, such as American nation-building in Iraq and Afghanistan. Distributing our subterranean resources by happy discovery would be no different than distributing it by scratch-off lottery tickets: buy a flat plane, and look below the surface to see if you’ve won. It may seem fair in the way a coin-toss is fair, but randomness only achieves fairness through repetition or agreement (which is why the one-time lottery of birth is anything but). And while direct conquest of both surface and subterranean resources is usually accompanied by some sort of justification, such as a *mission civilisatrice*, oil and mineral distribution by lots seems to slip by unquestioned: why do those own the surfaces get to call *dibs* on the resources below their feet? Historically, how did this arrangement or leap of logic become com-

mon sense? Will it persist? For centuries the adage ran “*cuius est solum, eius est usque ad coelum et ad inferos*”—*For whoever owns the soil, owns everything up to Heaven and down to Hell.*“ This was quickly qualified with the advent of the airplanes and the sudden collective need for free passage in the skies. So it can change. However, despite the relative ease of this shift, perhaps we shouldn’t rush to compare air rights and mineral rights: the air over us is already evenly distributed; minerals, not so much.

A nation-state, and the nation-state system, is an order relating populations, territories, a form of governance, and—we will always insist—a set of resources. As such, if we were to “globalize” subterranean resources as a commons, or equalize the global citizenry’s relation to resources through a terrestrial dividend, we would inherently and fundamentally alter the nation-state system, and the very meaning of the nation-state, which has for so long entailed a sovereign use of its resources. Changing one means changing the other. The question then becomes precisely how it would transform geopolitics. How would history have unfolded without the premise of owning subterranean resources? What would the Middle East now look like? Or South America? What would it mean today for Greenland, Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Brazil, Norway? We would expect enormous resistance—even war—against the creation of a terrestrial dividend, or any move toward of global subterranean ownership, but what would this resistance look like and who would adopt which position? How much good is done simply by delegitimizing the ownership of subterranean resources, creating new pressures and duties on their purported owners?

Typically, proposals for collective ownership of resources have adopted the cry of “nationalization.” The “transnationalization” of resources prompts other questions, especially if imagined beyond the nation-state system. Who would manage the fund and administer the dividend? What is to keep this proposal from being systematically exploited by powerful nations, polities, or bodies against resource-rich (but otherwise poor) nations, polities, and bodies, under the guise of justice or management, as they have with international loans, aid, and trade? Or, even now if subterranean resources do not benefit the nations that contain them (many times, the opposite case could be made), how do we thwart plutocratic control justified through the pains of extraction or security? And if this is the case, how do we then decide which resources to extract? On a positive note, how might alternately incentivize our sources of energy, away from fossil fuels and toward renewables, and on a more cautious note, how might we make sure renewable energy also remains understood as terrestrially owned as well?

As utopian as the terrestrial dividend may seem, we should bear in mind that plenty of nations, such as Norway and Iran, operate sovereign funds based on their subterranean resources, though with varying benefits to its private citizens. And even a politician as famously cautious as Hillary Clinton once considered proposing a national dividend from financial transactions, based on the Alaska Permanent Fund paid out to permanent residents of Alaska. Meaning that pieces of the proposal are already floating in our political discourse, but they lack a coherent template that would help nudge us towards global equity for both citizens and polities.