

A Pervasive Idea: The Doctrine of Improvement and Policies of Development

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In my research on the distribution of lands during the time that Ontario was a British colony, I learned how very important two particular ideas were in shaping the development of parts of the British Empire, including Canada, New Zealand, Australia, and the United States (also called settlement colonies). One idea was the "doctrine of improvement," a belief that land should be used to produce as much as possible, and not be wasted. In the 1700s and 1800s that usually meant farming. Land should be improved in order to make it grow the most crops by clearing trees, draining swampy areas, and irrigating dry areas. The other idea came from John Locke, a seventeenth-century British philosopher, who had written that when a man worked on the land, his labour made him an owner of the land. Locke argued that every man should be able to own the land he farmed, and to be fair, that the farms should be a reasonable size, to produce what a family needed. These two ideas came together to create a powerful belief that if a man owned his own farm, then he would work that land to its fullest potential in order to make the most money, but also take care of the land so that it would continue to produce at high levels in the future. As a result of the influence of these two ideas, the lands of the settlement colonies were divided and distributed according to the principles of individual farm ownership. The success of those former colonies today is, in large part, believed to be a direct result of the promotion of the idea of the individual family farm.

It was with this knowledge that I began to consider how the history of the British Empire, and especially the United States, has affected developing countries especially since Britain and the United States have been two of the most influential powers in the United Nations. In particular, have the doctrine of improvement and the ideas of John Locke continued to be important, and if so, how? How has history influenced the way those two nations have led the development strategies of the United Nations? What are the consequences of those development strategies on the way land and property are viewed and used in developing countries? How has it affected the autonomy of individuals and of cultural groups?

In order to answer these questions, I began by examining the reports and publications of the World Bank, a major UN agency that funds development projects. I found that a strong belief in individual farm ownership and the doctrine of improvement was unmistakably present in the policies of the World Bank. Over and over again, reports emphasized the importance of family farms and ownership as a key step in ensuring agricultural productivity and success for developing nations and their populations. There is a strong belief that because such a strategy worked for nations like the United States and Canada, it will also work for less-developed countries. As a result, before providing money for development projects, the World Bank very often requires that every affected agricultural producer has secure land tenure, in other words, their own farm.

Why is individual land tenure so important, according to the World Bank? If each farmer owns a plot of land, then that farmer will work hard to make that land produce as much as it can for as long as possible. If the farmer only rents the land on an annual or other short-term basis, then there is no

incentive to take care of the land, to maintain its fertility and ability to grow crops over many years. Moreover, if a farmer is a sharecropper, and must pay a percentage of the crop to the landowner, then there is no incentive for that farmer to increase the crop yields, since more will go to the owner.

Another reason the World Bank argues that secure ownership is necessary is because it makes it possible for farmers to use their land as collateral when they want to borrow money for improvements like irrigation, better equipment, better seeds, and fertilizers. If a farmer owns the land and he or she defaults on the loan, the lender can take possession of the land and sell it to get the loan money back. If farmers cannot provide collateral like land, then they are going to have trouble getting loans for improvements.

The World Bank policy promotes autonomy through land ownership, especially economic autonomy. This economic autonomy is found either through agricultural production, the food that is produced for the family to consume or products to sell, or in the cash value of land, the money that would be received when the land is sold. Different cultural ways of thinking about land and ownership, such as communal and group tenure, do not fit comfortably with Locke's basic idea about labour and land ownership, because such tenures split the responsibility for labour. Problems of inequality may mean that some individuals (particularly women in some cultures) have to do more of the work, while others enjoy more of the benefits. Although acceptable in some cultures, others view this inequality as a problem because it gives autonomy to some people at the expense of others. As a result, organizations like the World Bank place a great deal of emphasis on the idea of individual ownership in order to make things more equitable.

To understand more clearly how the pressure to switch to individual land ownership was affecting people, I decided to look at the Maasai of Kenya. They are traditionally nomadic people, herding cattle in a region that is part of Tanzania and Kenya. In their traditional way of life, no one owned land. Land was not property. For Maasai, the most important property was cattle. A man's wealth and power was based on how many cattle he owned.

In the 1960s, however, Kenya, with funding from the World Bank, and advice from Great Britain, decided to create large group ranches to encourage the Maasai to increase their herds to feed the growing population. The ranches were owned by a group of Maasai who made decisions about managing their ranch's resources. The biggest problem with the group ranches have been that members of the group with the most wealth and power (i.e., the biggest herds), have been able to get the good grazing land on the ranch and the rest are restricted to the poorest grazing land. This means that the wealthier have been able to increase their wealth while the poor struggle.

To solve this problem, more recently it was decided to divide the group ranches, to give each individual their own piece of land. The wealthiest Maasai, taking advantage of their power, get the best and larger parcels of lands for themselves. They have expanded their herds even more, selling the beef to the growing urban markets. However, since the poor Maasai usually get inferior land and in smaller pieces, they often sell it. They use the money to buy cattle, which traditionally is the most important property, and move onto the small area of grazing land in Kenya that is still not owned by anyone: the commons. They are trying to live the traditional Maasai way of life. However, because more and more poor Maasai are moving their herds to these commons, the land is becoming overgrazed. Not only are the herds becoming weak, but the environment is suffering. Many of the Maasai live in the Mara-Serengeti ecosystem. The Serengeti National Park of Tanzania and the Maasai-Mara National Reserve in Kenya create a large protected area but it is not big enough to support all the wildlife. The Maasai are taking action to reduce the number of wild animals so their

cattle herds have less competition and predators. Those concerned about the ecosystem believe that the commons should be eliminated or incorporated into the protected area. However, this would mean that Maasai who do not own land could no longer practice traditional herding.

The effects of the combination of Locke's idea and the "doctrine of improvement" have been mixed for the Maasai, benefitting some and dramatically changing the way of life for others. The autonomy that outsiders like the World Bank see in individual land ownership may prove to reduce the autonomy of some of the Maasai and their ability to follow their traditional ways because of the importance they give to herds as property, not land. Some Maasai have adapted to the new understanding of land as property with great success, others have not.

It seems likely that other peoples, who, like the Maasai, have traditional understandings of land and property that are different from that of the developed world, will experience similar difficulties. They too, because of the need to produce more crops, may have to accept the ideas of improvement and individual land ownership, and the changes in autonomy that will bring.