

Book Reviews

Property for People, Not for Profit: Alternatives to the Global Tyranny of Capital

By Ulrich Duchrow and Franz J Hinkelammert

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Reviewed by Emeritus Professor T F Carbery

Many years ago I had occasion to meet the late Captain John Morrison. Captain Morrison was a Conservative MP - indeed, as I recall it, he was Chairman of the formidable 1922 Committee. He was, too, a substantial land-owner. On one occasion he was asked how much land he owned. He winced visibly, not, I inferred, because of embarrassment but by boredom: he was continually being asked about the extent of his holdings. On this occasion he had recourse to his standard answer: "All I can do is tell you to the nearest 100,000 acres."

Property rights, particularly of land, is always a tricky issue. Thus in Zimbabwe the present administration continues to condone the taking of land from white farmers and redistribute much of it to Africans, especially veterans of the "War of Independence". Recently a BBC News item depicted an African farmer who had very little seed-corn. He had neither adequate capital nor efficient tools. The hitherto fertile productive farm was going back to bush. Was this an improvement? Clearly it did not help the GDP of Zimbabwe. But it is argued it makes the indigenous feel better.

Not dissimilar considerations arise in Ireland, Northern Scotland and elsewhere. Since Strongbow the English have gone into Ireland, taken the land or some of it from the native Irish, given it to their own captains and left them to "run the place". As Shane Leslie pointed out 50 years ago three or four generations later the descendants having married into the Irish and having been assimilated by the rain, led insurrections whereupon other Englishmen came, defeated them, hanged the leaders, re-appropriated the land and again gave it to the captains. The Elizabethan years, the Cromwellian invasion, the 'supplanting' of James VI and I and the post-Boyne redistribution all exacerbated the situation. Land is owned and ownership is resented by the usurped.

This book, which I was invited to review,

deals with property but does not confine itself to property. It goes on to examine international capitalism (the authors are against it) and looks to see what could be done about it and what could replace it. They talk about alternatives but they mean options.

The authors clearly have a great deal of sympathy for liberation theology, a stance no doubt fortified by their writing from Latin America. There is a fleeting reference to C H Douglas, the founder of the social credit movement in Britain in the 1920s. Remarkably and sadly there is only one reference to co-operatives.

In reviewing this book I find myself in something of a dilemma. Thus I understand the motivation of the authors and share their views (dare I suggest prejudices?). Yet I do not like their book.

Experience, and God knows I have a lot of it, tells me that there are two kinds of academics and quasi-academics - those who make the simple complicated and those who make the complicated simple or at least simpler. Here the two authors are very much in the first of these two camps.

True, the authors have done their research but they seem intent on giving the reader full evidence thereof.

When I taught at Trade Union schools I was frequently denounced as a neo-fascist hyena pig. I conceded that I was on the extreme right of the Labour and Co-operative Parties. It is in keeping with that stance that as I see it political realism teaches us that the best we can do in the short-to-middle term is achieve an alleviation of capitalism.

Many of us, not least members of this Society, wish it were otherwise but our more rational selves - however reluctantly - accept its validity.

If "Das Capital", Marx, Engels, Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin, the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, the Chinese, the Vietcong and Castro could not transform the world then these two well-meaning gentlemen are not going to do it.