nearly 250 policemen in riot gear to drive out the squatters. The occupation of the site, known as Gargoyle Wharf, had served to re-awaken interest in Britain in the issue of urban land and its uses.

References
5. ibid p.150.
7. ibid pp. 74 75.
8. ibid pp. 90-91.
18. ibid p.204
19. The Land is Ours, 16b Cherwell Street, Oxford OX4 1BG.

Chapter 14
The land is whose?

“Hardly noticed at first, ‘Property is Theft’ was to become one of the great phrases of the nineteenth century, bandied about between anarchists and conservatives, borrowed by socialists and communists, and suspended like a sensational placard above the popular image of its author. Ironically enough, Proudhon did not even mean literally what he said. His boldness of expression was intended for emphasis... He was denouncing the property of the man who uses it to exploit the labour of others without any effort on his own part, the property that is distinguished by interest, usury and rent, by the impositions of the non-producer upon the producer. Towards property regarded as ‘possession’, the right of a man to control his dwelling and the land and tools he needed to work and live, Proudhon had no hostility; he regarded it as a necessary keystone of liberty, and his main criticism of the Communists was that they wished to destroy it.”

George Woodcock Pierre-Joseph Proudhon: A Biography

In September 1969 we all cheered when Proudhon’s phrase Property is Theft was placarded in letters three feet high on the walls of 144 Piccadilly in London, a former royal residence. The squatters were evicted and the slogan removed. And as the Crown and the royal family owns more of Britain than anyone else, Proudhon’s slogan had an unqualified and unequivocal appropriateness, obvious to all.

But of course, there has always been a distinction between squatting as a political demonstration, from that
of Winstanley and the Diggers at St George’s Hill in
Surrey in 1649 to that of The Land is Ours at Wandsworth
in 1996, and squatting as a personal solution to a housing
problem. In the first instance the intention is, for propa-
gandist purposes, to be noticed. In the second, the hope is
A. to be inconspicuous and to blend into the landscape. Given
the public perception of the squatters’ movement, it has
always been a paradox that, just as the Herefordshire vil-

dge squatters yearned to establish their children’s rights
in their wills, so the typical modern squatter actually
hopes for the security of a rent book.

Theoretical revolutionaries may be disappointed by the
gulf between rhetoric and daily life because of a curious
inability to distinguish between the property of the land-
lord and that of the peasant. “No man,” urged Winstanley,
“shall have any more land than he can labour himself, or
have others to labour with him in love, working together
and eating bread together,” and this is precisely the dif-
ference between the appropriation of land by squatters
and that by enclosers.

Many cultures share the tradition that the land was
once the common property of the people. “The landlord
owns the peasants but the peasants own the land” was a
Russian saying from the days when land-owners measured
their wealth in ‘souls’; and the peasant seizure of the land
preceded the Bolshevik seizure of power in 1917. David
Mitrany recorded how

“The collapse of the old regime had been like a
break in a dam, through which first a small trickle
and then a rushing stream of spontaneous revolu-
tionary action poured. The peasants began at once
to take over forcibly large estates and forests, the
number rising with every month from 17 in March,
204 in April, 259 in May, 577 in June, to 1,122 in
July. It was estimated that in the first two years the
peasants in thirty-six departments had taken over
86 per cent of the large estates and 80 per cent of

their farm equipment; this increased their holding
from 80 to 96.8 per cent of all usable land.”

In retrospect, the 1920s were the golden age of the Soviet
20th century, when “it was possible to find arrangements
allowing peasant households to form a co-operative and
yet keep their land, housing and equipment separately
from each other and to make their own separate profits.”
But in his very next sentence, the historian Robert
Service, observes that “The idea of peasants taking most
of their own decisions was anathema to Stalin.” From
the end of the decade, mass collectivisation destroyed the
Russian peasantry. “The price was awful. Probably four to
five million people perished in 1932-3 from ‘de-kulakiza-
tion’ and from grain seizures.”

As citizens of the Soviet Union and its subsequent satel-
lites were not allowed to discuss this terrible lesson, alter-
native approaches to food production had to emerge in the
gaps that were subsequently allowed to emerge within the
official policies. Eventually peasants were allowed to culti-
vate “private plots” and these became the salvation of
Russia’s food supply:

“In 1963, private plots covered about 44,000 square
kilometres or some 4 per cent of all the arable land
of the collective farms. From this ‘private’ land,
however, comes about half of all the vegetables pro-
duced in the USSR, while 40 per cent of the cows
and 30 per cent of the pigs in the country are on

them.”

There are parallels between Winstanley’s insistence that
the woes of the English people stemmed from the Norman
conquest and the claim that all land belonged to the King,
and the insistence by millions of Soviet citizens that they
had a right to colonise some minute patch of the land that
they were told had been won back by the people. In
England, as Oliver Rackham put it,
"William the Conquerer introduced the un-English doctrine that all land ultimately belongs to the Crown. It was part of the King's new, supreme, status that he had the right to keep deer on other people's land which lies at the heart of the Forest system."  

The same often-forgotten point was stressed by Simon Schama, noting that,  

"Such 'forests' could be, and were, imposed on large areas of the English countryside, including the entire county of Essex, that were not wooded at all and which included tracts of pasture, meadow, cultivated farmland, and even towns."  

And just as the landless poor of mediaeval England sought out marginal patches of wasteland that they could colonise, so the economist Hugh Stretton reported from the Soviet Union in the 1970s that "Pathetically, Russian town dwellers go out and comb the countryside for patches of neglected land they can plant, visit, enjoy, 'make their own', however tenuously. Their masters, who own everything just as the masters did in Marx's day, discourage this petit-bourgeois practice."  

But with the gradual collapse of the Soviet regime it was reported in 1985 that  

"For the average Russian city dweller, it looks as if the first symbol of the Gorbachev era will be an allotment. The Politburo has authorised a series of measures designed to increase the number of private gardens — and these have already proved too few for the soaring demand... Once the plot has been dug, planted and harvested, the owner is allowed to put up a garden shed and, with a little creative interpretation of the rules, a shed can become a small dacha..."

All the countries of Eastern Europe provided variations on the Soviet experience. Western visitors to the cities of Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria and Yugoslavia would notice the landscape of gardens and dweller-built chalets along the routes from the airport to the city centre. Ian Hamilton reported that  

"The existence of peasant-owned land on the fringes of cities offers opportunities for piecemeal evolution — indeed 'overnight mushrooming' of 'wild settlements' as in Nowy Dwor and elsewhere outside Warsaw or in Kozarski Bok and Trnje on the margins of Zagreb..."

Closer to home, the British planning system, built around the Town and Country Planning Acts passed by democratically elected parliaments and administered by democratically elected local authorities, has been far more effective in excluding the urban poor from the rural hinterland. The application of the legislation on planning, building and public health has ensured a bloodless elimination of any surviving peasantry from rural England. In Chapter 11 I quoted the industrial historian L.C.T. Rolt, who described in the 1970s the changes he had witnessed in the west of England, where cottagers became council house dwellers.  

The local gentry despised those raw new council houses, and made jokes about the inhabitants keeping coal in the bath. The tenants were thrilled to be offered not only a bathroom but a water-closet, and adequate damp-free rooms, offered by no previous village landlord. But under the Thatcher regime, not only were councils obliged to sell their houses, but they were prevented from spending the income on building more. This fact, together with the shift in attitudes which makes all new buildings (apart, thanks to the political influence of the agricultural lobby, from farm buildings) a blot on the landscape, has to be coupled with the fact that permission to build multiplies the value
of a rural site tenfold. The result is that the adult children of local families have little chance of housing themselves, and rent rooms in the nearest town, while the new occupants of those picturesque cottages are in the forefront of the village preservation society, since as Professor Gerald Wibberley used to explain, they want their particular village to remain exactly as it was on the day before they decided to move there.

In one of several reports, Mark Shucksmith has described the way in which rural Britain has been transformed into an exclusive countryside where only well-off people can afford to live. He observes that,

"The studies suggest that progressive ‘gentrification’ of rural England will continue, as wealthier households outbid poorer groups for scarce housing, and ‘social exclusion’ thus becomes ‘geographical exclusion’. Planning for and resourcing affordable housing provision is fundamental to sustaining rural communities and to the life-chances of many people."

The effective challenge to the situation where only the affluent with their double garages and four-wheel-drive vehicles, can inhabit rural Britain has come, not from political movements, but from people with aspirations to feed themselves on a small patch of ground and warmly supporting the British government’s commitment to sustainable development agreed at the Earth Summit at Rio in 1972. Simon Fairlie was one of a group of friends in the west of England who rented a house with a large garden on a country estate, but was evicted to make room for a golf course. After living in a van for two years, he joined another group and bought a smallholding with no house attached. They pitched seven tents and started cultivation. The result, he reported, was that “In the two years since we moved onto our land, we have been through almost the entire gamut of planning procedure: committee decision, enforcement order, stop notice, Article 4 applica-

tion, Section 106 agreement, appeal, call in by the Secretary of State and statutory review in the High Court. “All this for seven tents!”

Eventually, he and his friends won the right to stay, and similar settlements, like the bender community of King’s Hill, also battled with the planning legislation, and likewise won permission to stay. Fairlie’s case is interesting, not only as a precedent, but because it led to his very significant involvement in the debate on planning. His purpose has not been to demonise the planning machinery. He believes in it because he knows that without it, speculative developers would have completed the destruction of the countryside, subsidised for years to destroy woodlands, wetlands, hedges and wildlife. At the Town and Country Planning Summer School at Lancaster in 1993, Sir Richard Body, a farmer and then a Conservative Member of Parliament, had revealed that “the intensification of agriculture in the last 25 years has gone ahead faster and more furiously in the United Kingdom than in any other member state of the EC.” He read to the assembled planners what he called “the woeful litany of statistics of the damage inflicted on the rural environment by government subsidies to farmers.” These included:

- 130,000 miles (210,000 km) of hedgerows ripped up
- 40 per cent of our ancient woodlands gone
- seven million acres (2.8 million ha) of pasture-land ploughed up
- over 95 per cent of our wetlands drained
- 875 miles (1410 km) of stone wall destroyed
- 95 per cent of the downlands of Southern England gone
- 180,000 acres (73,000 ha) of moorland ploughed up

He went on to say that it infuriated participant observers like him, that having subsidised the owners of rural land to do all this damage in the name of increased food output, we are now “Paying the farmer to manage the countryside and thus protect the rural environment.”
In the last years of the last century changes in subsidy policy, arising from the embarrassment of European ‘food mountains’ reduced the incomes of rural landowners, which had been inflated for decades, and brought the emergence of a ‘rural lobby’ claiming that the countryside was under threat from ignorant townspeople who failed to understand traditional rural ways. It was left to Peter Hall and the present writer to point to the evidence of official statistics that the quantity of land ‘set aside’ under European agricultural policy and handsomely subsidised for producing nothing, was three times the amount of land needed to accommodate all urban development predicted in Britain for the coming quarter century.16

The facts about rural Britain are a quiet testimony to the way in which the affluent, pleading the cause of countryside protection have sought to exclude the poor. The immense value of the campaigns associated with The Land is Ours has been that, virtually alone, they have re-opened discussion of the key issue of the right of all of us, just through having been born on this earth, to enjoy a right of access to our modest share of it. The Rural Planning Group of that campaign is known as ‘Chapter 7’. This is because that section of the Agenda 21 agreement on ‘Promoting sustainable human settlements’ had a series of affirmations, the first of which explains that “the objective is to provide access to land for all households... through environmentally sound planning.”

Chapter 7A of that document, stressing social justice, urged that “all countries should, as appropriate, support the shelter efforts of the urban and rural poor by adopting and/or adapting existing codes and regulations to facilitate their access to land finance and low cost building materials.”

Chapter 7G is a reminder of the aims of those of the Arts and Crafts movement of a century earlier, like William Richard Lethaby, who wanted rural housing that would ‘rise like a lark from the furrows’. For Chapter 7G declares that

“All countries should... strengthen the indigenous building materials industry, based, as much as possible, on inputs of locally available natural resources... promote the increased use of energy efficient designs and technologies and sustainable use of natural resources... promote the use of labour-intensive construction methods... develop policies and practices to reach the informal sector and self-help builders... discourage the use of construction materials and products that create pollution during their life cycle.”17

The British government is committed to these aims through its predecessor’s signature of the Rio Declaration of 1992, and this also involved commitment to the concept (in Chapter 7C) of “access to land for all households... through environmentally sound planning.” There is little sign of the acceptance of these precepts in the Planning Policy Guidance Notes that flow from government to local planning authorities. There are signs, however, not that planning authorities are abandoning the profligate policies of the past, but that, with the added incentive of the incorporation into British law of the European Convention on Human Rights, they will be obliged to accommodate the planning system to those people supported by Chapter 7 — those “who sort out their own housing, in self-built houses, mobile homes, trucks, benders or sheds at no cost to the taxpayer more or less in defiance of the planning system.”18

This recognition, when it comes, will be an ultimate gesture towards the centuries of cotters and squatters who housed themselves in the margins of history.

References


5. *ibid* p.181.


17. Rio Declaration, Agenda 21, cited in Simon Fairlie *Defining Rural Sustainability: fifteen criteria for sustainable developments in the countryside*, 1999 (From Chapter 7, The Potato Store, Flaxdrayton Farm, South Petherton, Somerset TA13)