

Whose Land is it Anyway? A Look at What the Philosophers Said

The Second Treatise of Government by John Locke and Māori land loss by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels has provided valuable insights into the philosophical foundations of governance and societal organisation. These works have influenced historical and contemporary debates on property, labour, and justice. However, I do not align with either Marx or Locke, as their philosophies, when applied, have often resulted in systems of oppression and injustice. For example, the Khoi and San people in South Africa were forcibly removed from their ancestral lands when Dutch and British settlers first arrived. Later, non-white people were dispossessed of their land during Apartheid. Indigenous land stewardship practices were and are still undermined by the first settlers (migrants) from other lands. Similarly, in New Zealand, the Treaty of Waitangi was manipulated to alienate Māori from their lands, aligning with capitalist systems critiqued by Marx, which commodified land and prioritised accumulation over communal ownership. Similarly, in New Zealand, the Treaty of Waitangi was manipulated to alienate Māori from their lands, aligning with capitalist systems critiqued by Marx, which commodified land and prioritised accumulation over communal ownership.

While these philosophical frameworks may provide intellectual insights, their real-world applications have often perpetuated inequality and marginalisation. Alternative frameworks rooted in ethical and sustainable practices must be considered to address these issues. The moral imperatives found in the biblical book of Amos offer a compelling lens to critique these injustices and advocate for equity. By examining these texts through the perspectives of Indigenous experiences, biblical teachings, and other religious principles, we can develop a deeper understanding of and response to the enduring legacies of exploitation and inequality.

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The Right to Equal Property Title

Locke's assertion that everyone should have an equal title to property raises critical questions when viewed through the lens of indigenous land dispossession ¹. For instance, the Khoi and San peoples had sustainable and communal relationships with their ancestral lands, but European settlers dismissed these ². They applied Locke's labour theory of property to justify expropriation. This theory posited that land ownership derived from labour and improvement, failing to recognise Indigenous practices of stewardship and coexistence with nature.

Similarly, Māori communal land ownership was systematically undermined in New Zealand through the Treaty of Waitangi and subsequent legislation, such as the Native Lands Acts of 1862 and 1865 ³. The Treaty, signed in 1840, had two versions: English and Māori. The English version granted sovereignty to the British Crown while promising to protect Māori property rights. However, the Māori version used the term "Tino Rangatiratanga", which conveys absolute authority or self-determination. This linguistic disparity led to differing interpretations and significant disputes over land and governance. Subsequent legislation systematically converted communal land into individual titles, facilitating land sales to settlers. By 2000, Māori land had reduced from approximately 66 million acres in 1840 to just 3 million acres, as documented by New Zealand History. This drastic reduction contributed to widespread economic and social dislocation, profoundly affecting Māori cultural and social structures ⁴.

These examples highlight the failures of systems based on Locke's principles when applied selectively. Governments tasked with protecting property have historically prioritised settlers' interests over Indigenous populations, perpetuating cycles of poverty and injustice, particularly in contexts like apartheid South Africa and colonial New Zealand.

South Africa: Expropriation Without Compensation

The 2018 debates on land expropriation without compensation in South Africa underscore the complexity of addressing historical injustices ⁵. The Khoi and San peoples were among the first victims of colonial land grabs, as outlined by South African History Online. Colonial expansion and apartheid-era laws, such as the Group Areas Act of 1950, formalised their dispossession,

¹ (Locke & Macpherson, 1980)

² (*Land: dispossession, resistance and restitution*, 2013)

³ (Boast, 2009)

⁴ (Orange & New Zealand. Department of Internal Affairs. Historical Publications Branch, 1987)

⁵ (*EFF to introduce land 'appropriation without compensation' motion to Parliament: report*, 2018)

resulting in significant displacement and alienation from their ancestral lands ⁶. This dispossession entrenched economic inequalities and disrupted traditional practices, contributing to the cycle of poverty and marginalisation that persists today.

Marx's critique of capitalism offers valuable insights into these dynamics. He argued that capitalism inherently creates a divide between the capitalist or wealthy, who control the means of production, and the working class, who sell their labour to earn a living. This system perpetuates exploitation, alienation, and inequality, as wealth and power concentrate among the elite while workers remain marginalised ⁷. While Marx's critique resonates with the dynamics of land dispossession, his proposed abolition of private property raises practical concerns. Who determines the redistribution of land? How can new systems avoid creating another class of elites? These questions underscore the need for transparent and just processes to address land reform.

Controlling Property Ownership

Both Locke and Marx provide insights into the ethical management of property, though their approaches differ significantly. Locke's vision of government protecting private property must be reconciled with the realities of disproportionate land ownership that arose from colonial and Apartheid systems. Reinterpreting Locke's principles to include communal and sustainable land use could align more closely with the Khoi, San, and Māori practices.

Marx's emphasis on the exploitation inherent in capitalist systems is evident in South Africa's labour practices, past and present. Many labourers, disproportionately non-white, continue to work under conditions that prevent them from acquiring property. Addressing these inequities requires limiting excessive property accumulation and ensuring fair remuneration and opportunities for marginalised communities to become landowners.

Biblical Foundations: Amos and the Call for Justice

The biblical prophet Amos provides a moral compass for addressing these historical and contemporary injustices. His admonition to "*let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream*" (Amos 5:24) calls for systemic transformation that prioritises equity

⁶ (Land: dispossession, resistance and restitution, 2013)

⁷ (Marx & Engels, 1848)

and compassion ⁸. Amos' critique of the wealthy elite exploiting the poor resonates with the experiences of the Khoi, San, and Māori, marginalised by colonial and capitalist systems. For example, Amos's condemnation of those who "trample on the needy and bring ruin to the poor" (Amos 8:4) mirrors the dispossession of the Khoi and San under apartheid-era laws like the Group Areas Act, as well as the Māori's alienation through the Native Land Acts, which led to widespread economic dislocation and loss of cultural identity.

Deuteronomy 15:4-5 complements this vision, promising that there should be no poor among us if we adhere to divine principles of justice and stewardship ⁹. Similar principles can be found in other religious texts, such as the Quran's emphasis on Zakat (charitable giving) and the Hindu concept of Dharma, which advocates for social justice and equity ^{10,11}. This broader religious framework challenges us to advocate for restitution and reconciliation, ensuring that land reforms prioritise all communities' well-being rather than perpetuating inequality cycles.

Conclusion

The dispossession of the Khoi and San peoples in South Africa and the Māori in New Zealand illustrates the tragic consequences of misapplying Locke's and Marx's ideas on property and governance. However, addressing these injustices cannot replace one form of injustice with another. Even when rectifying past wrongs, systems of governance and control that perpetuate oppression fail to achieve true justice. Throughout history, greed, often disguised as expansion, has driven the occupation of the land, even in biblical times and other historical contexts.

While biblical and religious texts provide valuable guidelines, they have frequently been misused to justify exploitation, particularly against indigenous peoples. Such misuse reflects an incorrect application of sovereignty and a failure to embody the love and care for others these texts advocate. It is imperative to incorporate the ethical teachings in texts like Amos and other religious principles to guide a more just and inclusive approach to land reform. Governments, communities, and individuals must work together to honour the dignity and rights of all people, rectifying historical injustices without perpetuating further harm. Only then can we strive toward a moral and practical vision of a truly equitable society."

⁸ (*NIV Study Bible*, 2011)

⁹ (*NIV Study Bible*, 2011)

¹⁰ (Ali, 2023)

¹¹ (Ali, 2023; Easwaran, 2019)

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