

## Private Property and Environment (18jun13)

I don't usually write book reviews or tout new works, but I've just come across a recently-published work that I think deserves a wide readership, not least for its very clearheaded and succinct presentation of the contentious issue of the relation between private property and the environment.

The book is Daegan Miller's *This Radical Land: A Natural History of Radical Dissent* (Chicago University Press, 2018), and the passage that particularly caught my attention is Miller's discussion of the late 19thC Kaweah workers' cooperative community in the California sequoia country.

Miller relates that community to the international cooperative movement in general that was spreading in response to the explosive growth of exploitative industrial capitalism, to Laurence Gronlund's then-popular *The Cooperative Commonwealth: An Exploration in Modern Socialism* (1891), and, more specifically, to the book that has since influenced all cooperative efforts, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon and Amédée Jérôme Langlois' *What Is Property? An Inquiry into the Principle of Right and Government* (1840; first translated into English by the American anarchist Benjamin Tucker in 1876, and since then widely available in many editions).

Proudhon is best known for introducing the much-maligned often-reviled concept that "Property is theft." As Miller states, putting the bare statement back into its original context, "though Proudhon conceded that one could certainly own clothes or her own tools or books. . . . the earth and its fertility was given equally to everyone."

As he goes on to say, it is with that original understanding in mind "that property is theft. . . is the radical principle at work in Kaweahan thinking. . . . Because the land belongs to all of us, Proudhon writes that the laborer 'is responsible for the thing entrusted to him; he must use it in conformity with general utility, with a view to its preservation and development; he has no power to transform it, to diminish it, or to change its nature. . . . In a word, the usufructuary is under the supervision of society, submitted to the condition of labor and the law of equality.'" This is a sort of mutual aid, an idea of evolution guided by cooperation that predates both Darwin and Kropotkin. . . . Proudhon refers to his laborer as an usufructuary, or someone who has a moral duty to leave the landscape as productive, as healthy, as beautiful as she found it precisely because the land must always remain unowned" (*This Radical Land*, pp.199, 200).

It was more Chief Joseph than Proudhon I had in mind when, settling on my "property" in rural Cochise County, I wrote in my first book that "though in no real/ sense can land be bought/ or sold the legal act/ is binding if by owning/ we mean caretaking/ if by that we mean/ to conserve and restore" (*The Valley Floor*, 1975). But the moral is much the same, and I'm glad to see Miller reintroduce the much-needed medieval concept of *usufruct* that brings the notion of *property* together with *community*, a concept terribly perverted when not altogether lost in today's environmentally destructive, totally unsustainable, consumer-capitalist, egomaniac insanity.

