

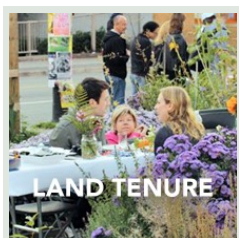
# Stewarding land and resources for the common good

Transition to Cooperative Commonwealth: Stewarding land...



**Michael Lewis.** Introduction to Module 2: Stewarding land and resources for the common good.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vRfvjolphDM> (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vRfvjolphDM>)



## Module 2 synopsis

Biological diversity, soil and foods, eco-system health, the quality of our water, property for homes and workspaces, and even the earth's capacity to drawdown greenhouse gases from the atmosphere, all are inextricably related to land.

Indigenous peoples across the globe say it best when they reason that land is life, a sacred gift, a bounty that sustains human existence.

The question of land—its existence, its purpose, its relation to human well-being and human shelter—may seem simple, yet trying to answer it is fraught with complexity. It becomes even more challenging when one considers the concept of owning the land and the legal rights that ownership confers on the “owner.”

Is private legal ownership of land for personal benefit only? Alternatively, can land held collectively be for community benefit? By the state, for the public interest? Through royal lineage, for the benefit of the monarch's family? By local resource users, for the benefit of commoners? All these types of ownership have been more or less dominant at various times in history. However, as you will see, private property rights in land—that is, freedom to buy, sell, and rent land as property—are a recent phenomenon, and fundamental to the emergence of capitalism.

Exclusive rights to a piece of land by a private owner emerged in England about 600 years ago by means of expropriation or enclosure, a process of systematic dispossession of commoners from the lands and resources their livelihoods depended on: the forest, wood and peat for fuel, grazing lands, game for food, ponds and streams for water. The new owner had the exclusive right to its use (even if others needed the

resource). They would enclose common lands with hedges and stone fences and controlled other resources on the enclosed lands against incursions by commoners. It started slowly. As the profitable woolen trade with Europe expanded, however, so too did the pressure from increasingly wealthy yeoman farmers to expand their control of common lands for pasture and water for their flocks.

Those with a right to sit in the early Parliament of England, namely existing land holders, added to a growing body of law and legal protection of private property rights. By the mid 19th century all of the “commons” except “unproductive” mountains and fens were mostly under private ownership. In 1944, the author and social critic George Orwell (1944, 207) described this central dynamic of history:

Stop to consider how the so-called owners of the land got hold of it. They simply seized it by force, afterwards hiring lawyers to provide them with title-deeds. In the case of the enclosure of the common lands, which was going on from about 1600 to 1850, the landgrabbers did not even have the excuse of being foreign conquerors; they were quite frankly taking the heritage of their own countrymen, upon no sort of pretext except that they had the power to do so. (“On the Origins of Property in Land,” in *As I Please*, Tribune, August 18, 1944)

Land continues to be a cornerstone in our understanding of contemporary political economy. Landowners’ legal rights and obligations shape how regional and local governments and planners structure and govern urban and rural lands. In turn, land ownership, and the rules and ideologies that define and shape property systems, determine the distribution of benefits in a community; indeed, an entire society.

## The contemporary context and dispossession

Today, the forceful dispossession of small farmers, forest dwellers, fishers, and others continues. In *Silent Theft*, commons researcher and activist David Bollier argues that the scope of privatization, however, has expanded beyond land to include new kinds of commons. Corporate privatization and commodification of heritage seed banks, traditional indigenous knowledge, human genetic material, microwave transmission bands, ocean reefs, and even the right to use and pollute the atmosphere, all transformed into goods bought and sold for profit in the neoliberal marketplace.

This module introduces and focuses our attention on the idea of land tenure: the rules of access, control, use, and transfer of land. Some of the most contentious issues of our time—land grabs, indigenous land rights, urban gentrification and homelessness, the urbanization of good farmland for suburban housing, and more—flow from land tenure politics.

We explore how contemporary enclosure of land and resources by private capital continues to disrupt and destroy many lives. However, the processes of dispossession are also spawning counter movements. Many, as Silvia Federici and Vandana Shiva have shown us in Module 1, have women at the forefront of struggles to protect the commons. In this module, we will explore many other vigorous efforts by communities to defend human rights and the health of the planet against global elites and neo-liberal ideology.

However, resistance, while crucial, is insufficient. Articulating a compelling vision joined up with practical alternatives is vital. We introduce a number of examples in this module, including land tenure, tax and land trust models (some prototypes, some well-established and working at scale) that seek to reshape property rights to advance the common good. While not rejecting the notion of private interests, these community alternatives illuminate and challenge dominant assumptions, rules, norms, and legal practices embedded in the private property system, what those using the MLP framework from Module 1 call *the*

*regime*. They also seek to transform dominant systems, and share access to land in ways that blend individual, community, and ecological rights.

## Objectives for this module

1. To recognize the dynamics of accumulation by dispossession in the 21st century. (15 minutes)
2. To explore alternative property rights models and measures; community, societal, and ecological benefits; and the challenges associated with the models. (143 minutes)
3. To apply the MLP lens to one of the alternatives highlighted in this module.

## Suggested time allocation: 5 hours total

Review of commentary, required video and reading materials, note-taking	173 minutes
Weekly exercises	72 minutes
<a href="https://learn.canvas.net/courses/2527/discussion_topics/43833">Weekly whole group discussions (https://learn.canvas.net/courses/2527/discussion_topics/43833)</a>	70 minutes
<b>Total</b>	<b>300 minutes</b>

## Module 2 discussion forum

As you work your way through this module, be sure to post your ideas and reflections in the [Module 2 discussion forum \(https://learn.canvas.net/courses/2527/discussion\\_topics/43833\)](https://learn.canvas.net/courses/2527/discussion_topics/43833) and read and reply to the posts of others.