

## **Husbanding the Earth and Hedging out the Poor**

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This paper explores the idea of improvement and how it affected attitudes towards property and ownership in the mid-seventeenth century. I want to present improvement as a contested concept, subject to debates and disputes which reveal a great deal about the development of the idea of private property. The discourse of improvement rested on a particular mode of ownership and control which regarded land as having the potential for investment, sustainable productivity and a re-establishment of people's original dominion over nature. To exploit this potential and to be improved, land required labour and careful husbandry.

It reaches conclusions about the complexity and contestability of notions of property. It explores the way in which nature was converted into property: the improvement discourse offers an insight into how this conversion came to be identified with liberty. Modern feminist literature describes a process of transition from pre-Enlightenment ideologies which treated nature as nurturer to Enlightenment ideologies which treated nature as a resource. As a sidelight, this paper seeks to complicate this picture by taking seriously contemporary challenges to improvement and enclosure and highlighting the contests and debates around treating nature as a resource.

## Improvement and Ingenuity

Improvement helps to make the 'vital connection' between the context of ideology and the historical context of society, politics and economy.<sup>1</sup> This paper draws on the works of improvers who were almost evangelical in their commitment to their projects; the pamphlets of ministers who recognised this reforming zeal and tried to harness it, and the writings of those who opposed improvement and enclosure. Husbandry literature was concerned with practical purposes, and written for a readership of landowners who were also employed in government, for example as JPs. The writers followed certain self-imposed rules - their books should be cheap, straightforwardly written, and any suggestions they made should be based on experiment.<sup>2</sup> They were engaged in a practical enterprise, but it was one which reflected a changing ideology and which provides an opportunity to explore shifting notions of property and ownership. It was not a unitary doctrine, and the different strands and emphases within it reveal conflicting visions of the market, the public good and of God's purposes for mankind. Improvement creates a recognised but contested public agenda.

For the improvers, the notion of improvement is fundamental to God's intentions for the earth and for mankind. It is part of the story of the creation. God appears throughout the literature as the great or mystical husbandman who created the pattern for all subsequent improvement of chaos. He made all creatures, plants, fruits, trees and herbs serviceable to mankind who was expressly created 'to husbandize the fruits of the earth.'<sup>3</sup> All other callings are supplementary. Husbandry has a special status because it was ordained by

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<sup>1</sup>N. Wood *John Locke and Agrarian Capitalism*, (University of California Press: Berkeley and London, 1984), p 11

<sup>2</sup>John Worlidge *Systema horti-culturae: Or, the Art of Gardening*, (London, 1677), Preface viii

<sup>3</sup>Walter Blith *The English Improver: or, A New Survey of Husbandry*, (London, 1649), p 4

God, and because it works directly and dynamically on the earth itself: 'the Earth being the very wombe that bears all, and the Mother that must nourish and maintain all.'<sup>4</sup> Those involved in husbandry and improvement felt themselves engaged in a tremendous project to convert the desolate wastes into fruitful fields, and the wilderness into comfortable habitations. Wild and vacant wastelands were regarded 'like a deformed Chaos' which brought discredit to the commonwealth.<sup>5</sup> Improvement thus connected men to the story of the original creation, and their continuing creativity turned the genesis into a continuing process of transformation. Through their language of the earth as a womb, and the importance of sowing the husbandman's seed the writers reflect the intimate connections between the imagery of productivity and of reproduction: 'And he that can trust his Seed in the bosome of the Earth, can trust his Charity in the hands of God'.<sup>6</sup>

Anne Runyan argues that it possible to identify two competing paradigms of nature/ woman as nurturer versus nature/ woman as resource. She characterises the first paradigm as 'pre-Enlightenment organicism' which relied on a conception of matter as a passive female awaiting the generative qualities of the male, a cosmology which saw '...the male heavens raining down semen on the female earth to set the workings of nature in motion'.<sup>7</sup> She stresses the passivity of the earth within this conception which created the necessary conditions for an ideology which sanctioned exploitation and domination of both women and the natural world. The idea of improvement complicates what happened to the natural and how it came to be entangled with private property. It constructs an intermediate stage where the earth is revered, but is not entirely passive: it can be entrusted with men's most treasured possessions and invested with his generative

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<sup>4</sup>Bliith *English Improver*, p 6

<sup>5</sup>*The Waste Land's Improvement*, (London, 1653), p 2

<sup>6</sup>Richard Steele *The Husbandman's Calling*, (London, 1668), p 149

<sup>7</sup>A. S Runyan 'The "State" of Nature: A Garden Unfit for Women and Other Living Things', in ed. V. Spike Peterson *Gendered States: Feminist (Re)Visions of International Relations Theory* (Lynne Rienner: Boulder, Co. and London), p 125

capacities. Improvement certainly contains the possibility of treating the earth and the labour of the poor as a resource, but we need to recognise that this possibility was contested by those who opposed improvement and enclosure.

The relationship between the earth and their labour was mediated by the notion of the calling. Transformation of the fruits of the earth required the dedication and creativity of mankind through their calling. The husbandman's calling is seen as a reflection of a spirit of innovation and enterprise, rather than of passive ownership. The calling becomes a part of his property because he has to labour on the land in order to release its full potential and true value: 'A Husbandman is a man that works profit out of the Earth'.<sup>8</sup> At first, this was possible without toil. In the garden of Eden, Adam laboured willingly because it was pleasant. His obedience guaranteed and confirmed his control over his natural environment. As a result of the Fall the calling has decayed, and part of the punishment is condemnation to unremitting toil. A good husbandman, however, can reverse this decay, and so mend the effects of the Fall. The ideals of husbandry, in particular penitent labour in a calling, sustain a particular vision of property and imbue it with the almost mystical power to reverse the Fall. The Christian husbandman reproduces the original control over nature. He 'lives upon the precious fruits of the Earth, and sustains them all.'<sup>9</sup> The husbandman's calling thus brings spiritual rewards: 'the meanness and painfulness thereof, is fully compensated by the innocency, healthfulness and safety of it...'<sup>10</sup>

Their labour is regarded as innocent and healthy because of its close relationship to God and because it calls for industry and ingenuity. Husbandmen require diligence and

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<sup>8</sup>Steele *Husbandman's Calling*, p 16

<sup>9</sup>Steele *Husbandman's Calling*, p 17. This is a far cry from the passivity and repression suggested by Dunn as integral to labouring in the calling.

<sup>10</sup>Steele *Husbandman's Calling*, p 198

experience to ensure abundant fruitfulness and profit. Neglect would lead trees to bear less fruit. Application and industry are the means of salvation: 'Heaven is not gotten by sitting still, but by laboring and striving for it, in Gods way'.<sup>11</sup> Improvement of the fruits of the earth by human ingenuity 'is little lesse then an addition of a new world'<sup>12</sup> gained above the natural fruitfulness of the earth. Lands which appeared barren and fruitless can be transformed by husbandry. Their nature is not fixed by God. Men could act to alter them to their advantage: 'God in his provident Creation, hath appointed helps to mans industry for their improvement'.<sup>13</sup> Paradise can be regained on earth through the encouragement and dissemination of ingenuity and industry to perfect God's natural gifts. All land was capable of such perfectibility and improvement. The discovery of new arts and methods created the greatest possible advantages. Nature has the potential to be improved by industry: 'a deligent Operator may advance the vertue of our Earth.'<sup>14</sup>

The language and the ideas evoke Locke's emphasis on the industrious and the rational as the true beneficiaries of God's endowment of the world. Divine grant has ensured everyone the ability to derive subsistence from the natural abundance. Positive ownership had to involve more than mere occupation and immediate consumption. By labouring in the calling, attempting to recreate paradise and involving themselves in enriching the original creation, humans become uniquely capable of appropriation. This particular vision of appropriation relies on a conception of the earth as both nurturer and potential resource. Improvement and human labour are the mechanisms by which they 'create the specifically human environment of their lives.'<sup>15</sup> The concern for production and productivity becomes a self-sustaining process which creates and recreates value as a

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<sup>11</sup>Ralph Austen *The Spirituall Use of a Garden of Fruit Trees* (Oxford, 1657), p 253

<sup>12</sup>Bliith *English Improver*, p 6

<sup>13</sup>Adam Moore *Bread for the Poor*, (London, 1653), p 16.

<sup>14</sup>Worlidge *Systema*, p 241

<sup>15</sup>A. Rapaczynski *Nature and Politics* (Cornell University Press: Ithaca and London, 1987), p 186

result of human activity. The essential creativity of labour, and especially of improving labour, is rooted in the initiative which it both expresses and reinforces.

The improvers' discourse is founded on the direct, non-mediated relation between the husbandman and the earth itself. They emphasise the importance of labour not for immediate returns, but for the cumulative transformation of nature, of society and of the commonwealth. For them, all men are primarily producers rather than consumers, and it is this productivity which forges a cumulative relationship with nature. The only limitations are imposed by the industriousness and ingenuity of the labourer. Locke's spoilage limitation can be applied to labour as the real gift of God to man. It should not be wasted on appropriation which does not create genuine improvement.

Walter Blith made the point as early as 1649. He exhorted the improvers to make the nation seize its opportunities for honour, wealth and glory. Men should stop trying to gain estates and plenty through non-productive exchange for immediate consumption. Instead they should 'strive to gaine it at first hand Out of the Earth, the True Mother.'<sup>16</sup>

Improvement is a way of advancing the nation's honour, of expressing public spiritedness and patriotism. It provides an answer to the question of how to preserve a free and flourishing society without undermining the accommodation and advancement of competitive individuals.

### **Common Lands**

For the improvers, the commons were wasted and desolate. They generated unemployment, idleness, vagrancy and crime, and were directly opposed to the ideal of

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<sup>16</sup>Blith *English Improver*, p 160

enclosure and increased productivity. The improvers' discourse set up the commons as a kind of state of nature to be transcended by ingenuity and industry. Defenders of the commons were defenders of the poor, and ministers who feared that enclosure would diminish their tithes. They constructed a defence which stressed the importance of accountability, and the drastic consequences of the depopulation and the decay of tillage caused by enclosure.

Blith's defence of enclosure does not recognise the possibility of competing interests. He claims that the enclosure of common fields and arable land could provide for the interests of the landlord, the minister, the freeholder and tenants, and the poor labourer or cottager. The day labourer should be allotted his proportion of the 'Interest he hath in Common',<sup>17</sup> so that, for example, he would keep the same number of cattle in pasture as he had done on the commons. He denies that enclosure usurped or oppressed other men's rights, and claims: 'I desire that Right might onely run in its proper Chanell.'<sup>18</sup> The proper channel was, of course, the 'gallant principle' of extracting the utmost worth from the land.

Writing an updated version of the *English Improver* in 1652, Blith felt he needed to distance himself from the Diggers. His emphasis on the benefits of working directly with the earth is close to Winstanley's explication of digging as spiritual restoration.

Winstanley's account stressed the righteousness of unalienated labour and expressed the Diggers' intention of treating the commons as a common treasury belonging to the poor as part of their birthright.<sup>19</sup> Blith's engagement with the arguments of the Diggers illustrates the extent to which improvement and enclosure provided a forum for debates

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<sup>17</sup>Blith *English Improver*, p 66

<sup>18</sup>Blith *English Improver*, p 88

<sup>19</sup>.. we require and we resolve to take both common land and common woods to be a livelihood for us,...knowing very well that England, the land of our nativity, is to be a common treasury of livelihood to all, without respect of persons.' From Gerrard Winstanley 'A Declaration from the Poor oppressed People of England', ed. C. Hill *Winstanley: The Law of Freedom* (Penguin 1973), p 104

around property and power. He seems to recognise their common emphasis on labour directly connected to the earth, and the spiritual rewards of husbandry, and feels the need to rebut any comparison. The danger for Blith seems to lie in the poor organising themselves to claim absolute rights and property, rather than contenting themselves with traditional common rights. His objections are worth quoting in full:

'Although I indeavour so mainley to worke my Improvements out of the Belly of the Earth, yet am I neither of the Diggers minde, nor shall I imitate their practice, for though the poore are or ought to have advantage upon the Commons, yet I question whether they as a society gathered together from all parts of the Nation could claime a right to any particular Common.'<sup>20</sup>

This distinction between having an interest and claiming a right is the core of the disagreement between enclosers and defenders of the commons.

Enclosers were keen to stress the disadvantages of the commons. They anticipated objections to enclosure based on the harm done to the poor and pre-empt them by arguing that the commons themselves allow landlords to abuse and exploit the poor.

'Pseudomismus', for example, points to the dangers of trespass without compensation and encroachment on other men's lands. Tenants and freeholders might be reduced to beggary with no means of redress, and rich men are in a position to engross the poor men's common lands. In addition, the commons encourage unlawful cottagers - 'a new brood of upstart intruders' who are not labourers, but loiterers who attempt to 'live upon the spoyle of other men'.<sup>21</sup> As such, they could be presented as common enemies to both landowners and honest and industrious commoners. These people need to be reformed and restrained by men who truly cared for the poor. Enclosure represents the only remedy for such evils and abuses.

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<sup>20</sup>W. Blith *The English Improver Improved* (London, 1652), Epistle to the Reader, p x

<sup>21</sup>Pseudomismus *Considerations concerning Common Fields and Inclosures*, (London, 1653), p 7

Improvers felt strongly that land held in common fields was often spoiled through lack of good husbandry, and as a result could have little worth. This, to them, constituted the sin of wasting God's workmanship. Nature provides a valuable treasury, but people will not be able to reverse the Fall unless they are prepared to labour and improve. Enclosure allows farmers to rotate crops and leave land fallow without the encumbrance of obtaining the joint consent necessary in the common fields. Land in common fields is not employed to the limit of its potential worth, and labour is wasted because it does not improve or appropriate. Common fields frustrate the evangelical efforts of the improvers. The persistence of the commons prevents farmers from improving and becoming good husbandmen 'when other perverse conditioned people are not minded to permit them.'<sup>22</sup>

### **Contesting Improvement**

The improvers' discourse was not universally accepted, and the debates between the advocates of enclosure and the defenders of the commons centred around conflicting notions of property. The defence of the common lands involved in particular a reworking of the concept of stewardship and accountability. Supporters of the common lands were prepared to argue with the improvers on a common agenda, and to dispute their conclusions and assumptions. Their opposition focused on the improvers' ideal of using the land to its utmost worth. They felt that this reflected a dangerous abuse of the common treasury, and ran counter to God's purposes. For them, God is not a mystical husbandman, but as the chief owner and steward of the earth. He is in control of the land itself, rather than interested in its fruits and productivity.

Younge defines his notion of stewardship:

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<sup>22</sup>Pseudomusus *Considerations*, p 14

'God the chief Owner hath only intrusted men, as his servants and Stewards, with what they have; not giving them full authority to dispose thereof at their pleasure but hath limited them to employ the same to those uses, which he hath appointed and determined in his Word, for his honour and service...'<sup>23</sup>

This service includes the relief of the poor. Men flatter themselves that their goods belong to them absolutely. They will discover that their riches are not their unconditional property, but God's talents committed to them, to be employed to best advantage. Riches, from whatever source, are entrusted to men as stewards to be disposed of and dispensed, and not to men as hoarders of treasure. Men will be judged on their use and disposal of what God has lent them for the good of the whole. God will require them to give an account of their stewardship which addresses whether others could have done more good with their estates. Ownership is subject to the conditions of a different notion of social justice, based on the idea of inclusion and community rather than individual labour in the calling. The 'utmost worth' of the land is judged not in terms of what can be extracted from it (the resources it offered), but in terms of how the benefits the earth afforded were distributed and allocated for the good of the whole, including the earth itself. It is arrogance on behalf of the improvers to presume to judge the worth of the land on their own terms.

The self-proclaimed agenda of improvement and enclosure is directly disputed. John Moore claims that enclosures are made purely for gain. Although they are referred to as improvement, they are motivated by the opportunity for increased profits and rents: 'Doth not silver, filthy lucre lye at the bottome?'<sup>24</sup> The profit motive cannot be disguised by the improvers' emphasis on husbandry, innocent callings and employment for the poor. In the process of carrying out their designs they make blasphemous claims to own their land,

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<sup>23</sup>R. Younge *The Poore's Advocate*, (London, 1654), p 13

<sup>24</sup>John Moore *A Scripture-Word Against Inclosure*, (London, 1656), p 6

and to be in a position to do as they wish with it rather than carrying out God's purposes. God is the sovereign Lord, and: 'Thou art but his Steward, and he hath committed to thee all these Talents of thy Estate, and one day thou must give an account of thy Stewardship.'<sup>25</sup> He insists on the need to give an account of stewardship based on whether the landowner has improved the talents of his estate to God's advantage and the good of all. Moore is questioning the virtue of improvement and improvers. It is not enough to improve for the sake of it: landownership involves a degree of social responsibility which requires men to question whether they are improving their own land to the hurt and damage of others.

These 'others' includes a broad notion of the public. Moore claims that enclosure takes away the tillage of the commons which has provided all members of the commonwealth with wheat, corn, malt, pork, peas and beans. Enclosure converts such tillage into grazing, removing vital subsistence crops. It threatens the livelihoods of thousands without providing for their preservation from starvation and vagrancy. According to Moore, 'innocent' enclosure is impossible and experience proves that all enclosure causes depopulation and the decay of tillage. It turns farmers into cottagers, and cottagers into beggars. This inverts the improvers' arguments about commoners benefiting from enclosure and improved husbandry as potential freeholders. Rather than converting their interest in the common into a plot of land, the poor are forced into market towns, and towns retaining open fields to seek employment. These towns then become overloaded with the poor and unable to relieve them. Enclosers may claim to provide for the poor, and 'have the poore much in their mouthes', but in practice they do little to meet their physical needs and instead construct 'such hedges and ditches as hedge out Publique and Poor'.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup>J. Moore *Scripture-Word*, p 6

<sup>26</sup> J. Moore *Scripture-Word*, p 15

Opponents of enclosure emphasise this exclusion. They recognise that the privatisation advocated by the enclosers could not possibly be universal, and would result in the deterioration of living standards for those who are not included in the process. For defenders of the commons, enclosure is defined by this idea of 'hedging' out and excluding the poor, and those who are not immediate beneficiaries of enclosure. Winstanley uses the graphic image of the hedge to emphasise the class divisions imposed by 'inclosures of Land which hedges in some to be heires of Life, and hedges out others'.<sup>27</sup> The earth was made to preserve all her children, and should not be confined to a particular interest. The rich should work alone in their enclosures, and the poor should have the same opportunity to labour on the commons.

Winstanley rejected the improvers' vision of enclosure as a public enterprise. He stressed that the success of improvement relied on the use of wage labour, and the denial to labourers of their capacity to appropriate. Landlords had initially gained land from their fellow creatures by oppression, murder and theft, but it is unrighteous, alienated wage labour which allows them to maintain their tyranny. They could not pursue their gallant principle without the labour of others. Labourers have a choice. They should not allow themselves to be implicated in the processes of improvement and enclosure, but instead should strive to subvert them. They should not dare to work for wages and recognise that 'by denying to labor for Hire, they shall pull them down again.'<sup>28</sup> Defenders of the commons are not convinced by the rhetoric of the enclosers, and refuse to accept their language of improvement or their assurances of universal benefit.

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<sup>27</sup>Winstanley 'Fire in the Bush', in Hill *Law of Freedom*, p 445

<sup>28</sup>Winstanley 'The True Levellers Standard Advanced', (London, 1649) in Hill *Law of Freedom*, p 262

Their insistence on accountability stems from this scepticism. They seek to emphasise the dangers of depopulation, including rent racking and usury, which constrain the poor to work for the gentry. Labourers then become dependent upon the market and separated from the land. Far from converting their interest in the commons into freehold, they leave the land altogether: 'And it hardens mens hearts one against another: for, they make their little land into a stock, and so they get to some Market-Town, and either turn Usurers, Ale-house-keepers, or Maultsters, to no small hurt of the Common-wealth.'<sup>29</sup> Opponents of enclosure recognised that the improvers' confidence that private wealth creation would automatically produce public benefits was misplaced and failed to take into account the creation of a class of landless labourers dependent on wages. It was the defenders of the commons who insisted on a class analysis of economic and social change. Their concept of stewardship involves a recognition of the exclusion of the poor, and the need to redress the imbalance of interests generated by improvement and enclosure.

### **Improving the Poor**

The improvers had plans for the poor. They needed to be properly moulded so that their potential would not be misdirected. Without education or government the poor represent a danger to the nation. They would in time grow to be 'a generation of ungodly wretches', a burden to the commonwealth and a dishonour to God.<sup>30</sup> The best way forward was to channel their labour into the projects of the improvers. The most effective method of poor relief was to employ the labour of 'many thousands of idle hands' in cultivating the waste. The opponents of improvement and enclosure resisted the implication that the poor should be treated as a labour force, as a resource to be owned and deployed on

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<sup>29</sup>Henry Halhead *Enclosure Thrown Open* (London, 1650), p 10

<sup>30</sup>Samuel Hartlib *Londons Charity Inlarged* (London, 1650)

projects determined by others. They called instead for a recognition of the poor's own interests, and even for the rights of the poor to engage with the improvement discourse.

Hugh Peters insisted that in order to preserve the nation, the magistrate should establish a general rule of fair trading 'that the poor may have their commodities taken off at a markettable price; els they will rather beg, or steal then work.'<sup>31</sup> His concern was to integrate the poor into the existing economy and treat the labour of the poor not as a resource to be owned by others, but as the property of the poor themselves. The way to prevent beggary was to recognise this ownership and encourage independence. His suggestion for the establishment of a bank of lending in every town, for example, aimed to ensure that the poor could control their own finances by having access to money through pawning goods at reasonable interest rates.

Robert Coster went further in his refusal to treat people's labour as the property of others. He returned to the imagery of space and enclosure to assert that private property was 'brought into the roome of publick Community, by Murther and Theft;' and maintained accordingly. Lords of the manor hold their right and title to the commons merely from the King's will and by force. The strength of their claim came from the threat of imprisonment, and on the basis of coercion and power they had ensured that the common people had been 'shut out from having any benefit of the Earth...'<sup>32</sup> Landowners had restricted the poor's relationship to the earth through the system of private property and serfdom. It was time for the common people to lay hold of the wasteland and receive some benefit of the earth without having to act as slaves to the landowners. They may

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<sup>31</sup>Hugh Peters *Good Work for a Good Magistrate* (London, 1651), p 17

<sup>32</sup>Robert Coster *A Mite Cast into the Common Treasury* (London, 1649), p 2

seize the common land 'for to dresse it and improve it for their best advantage;' without paying fines or heriots, or swearing an oath or fealty to any tyrant.<sup>33</sup>

This was in part a rejection of an outmoded feudal system which created personal and despotic relationships between land owners and their tenants. It was a call for the poor to reclaim their birthright and assert their entitlement to a livelihood from the earth which should act as a common treasury for all. Coster was also making a bold claim for the right of the poor to involve themselves in the process of improvement. He was not suggesting mere subsistence and survival, but cultivation and profit. This was a challenge to any attempt by the rich or by Parliament to monopolise the improvement discourse for their own private or public ends. Coster was arguing for the poor's capacity to alter their own circumstances and forge new forms of participation for themselves in political and economic life.

Farmers rented lands from lords of the manor because they were assured of great profits by the complicity of the poor. The poor allowed themselves to be treated as 'idle hands', as the property of others. By begging for work, they perpetuated the system which gave gentlemen and farmers the opportunity to tyrannise over poor people. The rich insisted on keeping the land in their own hands to receive great bags of money to maintain themselves in pride and idleness. This was a misuse of resources. The aristocratic attitude to property was concerned with the accumulation of a mere heap of money for consumption and it was this diversion of surplus to which Coster objected. He argued that the poor were being excluded from the right to make a better and more profitable use of resources, and that they had implicated themselves in the exclusion: 'because poor men

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<sup>33</sup>Coster *Mite Cast*, p 2

are so foolish and slavish as to creep to [farmers] for employment, although they will not give them wages enough to maintain them and their Families comfortably'.<sup>34</sup>

Coster claimed that if the poor were in a position to improve the commons and waste on their terms, this expansion of fertile land would bring down the overall price of land and so the price of many other goods. A livelihood was 'the right and propriety of every man' which was invaded by those who impoverish their fellow creatures through buying and selling, enclosure and the appropriation of the earth for consumption.<sup>35</sup> It would prove an increase of liberty and freedom if the poor and low-waged were able to realise their right to a livelihood and resist invasion of this right by digging and manuring the commons. Coster was claiming a right to independence, for the poor to be liberated and saved by their own efforts, not by being 'set on work' by others who could then control their labour and impose their own notions of discipline.

This was in a part related to different conceptions of the person. The improvers were able to activate what Charles Taylor terms the capacity to assume self-responsibility. They saw themselves as able to determine the greatest good and seek it. They seized the possibility of control which allowed them 'to remake [themselves] in a moral rational and advantageous fashion'.<sup>36</sup> They could see themselves as objects of far-reaching reformation, extending their rational control to re-create their habits and selves. The discourse of improvement allowed them to take charge of constructing their own representation of the world. This involved constructing an ideal of discipline and improvement and imposing it on others. In the process, the poor became objects of rational control, a part of the world as a domain of objects. The improvers located ideas

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<sup>34</sup>Coster *Mite Cast*, p 4

<sup>35</sup>Coster *Mite Cast*, p 4

<sup>36</sup>C. Taylor *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1989), p 170

and valuations entirely in the mind of subjects rather than in the world and the order of things. Their emphasis on self-discipline, personal responsibility and the inwardness of freedom meant that 'paradigm purposes are to be found within'.<sup>37</sup> The value of the poor was located in the minds of the reformers. The poor themselves were denied access to their paradigm purposes. They could not forge their own conception of the good or become autonomous choosers of ends. Without being engaged in the active enterprise, able to exercise proprietorship over their own persons and capacities, they became objects rather than subjects in the process of improvement and reformation.

Coster raised the possibility that the poor could participate in improvement as full proprietors. This was a radical proposal for the poor to opt into the gentry's very specific notion of property and out of the feudal system. Notions of property based on improvement, increase and the best use of resources required the recognition of an obligation to work productively, to undertake active proprietorship of one's persons and capacities. Land was not cultivated efficiently or productively enough to fulfil its potential for wealth generation. The leisured classes as well as the poor were failing to meet the challenge of productivity, improvement and the best use of resources. The wealth of the nation was created by the industrious and the rational, civilised into industry and reason through employment and discipline. The possibility of inclusion in the commonwealth is based on labour and employment and a notion of property based on productivity.

## **Conclusion**

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<sup>37</sup>Taylor *Sources*, p 193

This paper argues for the central importance of improvement discourse to developing an understanding of seventeenth century attitudes towards property. James Tully points out that the contrast between improvement and waste runs right through the colonial literature. Locke made property in land conditional on use and justifiable on the basis of improvement. Native Americans became aggressors in a just war because they could not or would not develop the land. They were neither industrious nor rational. The vast waste land of America 'awaits the virtuous energy of European developers'.<sup>38</sup> Tully describes how virtuous cultures were destroyed and corrupted by settlers who then needed to reassure themselves of the virtue of their corruption. To do so they developed a world view which saw native civilisations as a primitive stage in a fictitious historical scheme of development. This mythical world view was so successful that later theorists adopted the terms of the debate without registering the displacement of a civilisation. Real history was hidden from view.

The discourse of improvement effected a similar process of displacement in England. The process of moral and economic disqualification was in danger of leaving the poor hidden from view. In order to 'open up more discriminating vistas on early modern thought',<sup>39</sup> we need to recognise the consequences of improvement discourse. Shifting notions of charity, the determination to achieve full employment and the emphasis on productivity all involved objectifying the poor, denying them the opportunity to choose their own ends and purposes, treating them as a resource to be owned and exploited. The virtuous disciplined improver is defined not only in contrast to the propertyless and wasteful hunter-gatherer in America, but also as directly opposed to the ungodly, undisciplined and unemployed in England.

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<sup>38</sup>W. Glauesser 'Three Approaches to Locke and the Slave Trade', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 51, No 2 (April - June 1990), p 215

<sup>39</sup>J. Tully *An Approach to Political Philosophy: Locke in contexts* (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1993), p 134

