

The Private Good?

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Eric T. Freyfogle, *Agrarianism and the Good Society: Land, Culture, Conflict, and Hope*, University Press of Kentucky, 2007.

In his latest book, *Agrarianism and the Good Society*, Eric T. Freyfogle continues his support of cultural integration of land-based community values and emphasizes the need for greater recognition of the interconnectivity of private property and public land. He grounds this argument and his accompanying critique of the dichotomies typically used to frame environmental causes in a loosely connected set of essays based primarily on the works of Wendell Berry, Aldo Leopold, and Charles Frazier.

The book is essentially, and oddly, a defense of private ownership of land as a politically strategic tool of environmentalism. To the extent that Freyfogle does this well, the book is an intriguing take on private property as the needed *basis* for land health and the reinforcement of community interdependence. This argument is, of course, not new, but Freyfogle uses it to reopen our understandings of private property. Freyfogle himself has previously argued in other work, notably in relation to water resources, that we must transform the entitlement protections granted to owners of private property into a redefined system of use rights, similar to those being negotiated to protect other shared resources. What is unusual about his argument in this collection, however, is that he uses it in defense of private ownership of critical lands and in gentle opposition to public land management. In his discussion, he first notes the unease people have when environmental legislation takes land out of economic use, then underlines the anger incurred when such legislation also impinges on the traditional rights of property owners. Drawing evidence primarily from the fictional narratives of Wendell Berry and Charles Frazier, Freyfogle suggests that only when the rights of landowners are protected will landowners assume their responsibilities to maintain the health of their land for the sake of the community at large.

At first glance this perspective hints of the age-old golden rule that environmentalist and many leftists implicitly use in arguing, from an ecological perspective, for the protection of an entire system of interconnected, shared resources. It has of course been offered before in other contexts and in other forms, although not generally backgrounded within any form of interconnectivity argument other than creation. In the early modern era, the argument that the landed owners were better stewards than those like the Diggers arguably lent support to the enclosure of previously shared common lands. Under colonial regimes, structural changes in the land economy that benefited property owners were frequently deemed beneficial to land health. In either case, the possession of fairly unfettered rights of private property owners, whether justified by religion, or nationalism (or capitalism, consider, e.g., the rubber plantations in Vietnam), has not prevented clear-cutting of forest, overuse of land, etc. That a policy protecting the rights of property owners might sponsor a widespread resurgence of land owner pride that expresses itself in ecological insight seems a costly delusion. Although perhaps not a surprising position for an environmentalist with a knowledge of the sometimes limited effects of recent U.S. environmental legislation and a lived sense of a society that views both socialism and Marxism as failed systems, Freyfogle's

support for this rather romantic owner-stewardship narrative, evidenced as well in his ideal description of the environmental leader (see Chapter 8, “Wanted: Environmental Leader”) undermines his further critique of American individualism as destructive to community and to land health.

As Freyfogle shifts from chapter to chapter, he periodically points out the pitfalls of framing U.S. public policy in dichotomies: nature versus people, liberals versus conservatives, individual freedom versus federal coercion, and private ownership versus public lands, and so on. Although he rightly argues that media and interest-group uses of dichotomies create false polarizations that impede the effectiveness of grassroots movements and federal attempts focused on land health, he is not adverse to devoting Chapter 4 to supporting the use of “better” dichotomies to frame environmental issues: market versus democracy, knowledge versus values, among others. He labels the former dyadic oppositions “simplistic,” “tired,” and “misleading,” but contrasts them with his own explicitly argued dichotomies, which “pose questions, and clarify what is at stake.” Freyfogle concludes the chapter by making a case not for the elimination of dichotomous reasoning in environmental discourse, but for the intentional use of appropriate dichotomies—those that support environmental goals rather than undermine them. This is not the more common “educate the public” appeal, but an entrepreneurial “find a better marketing campaign” approach. Arguably a weakness in Freyfogle's reasoning, such a stance is nonetheless a provocative reminder that the most effective political response to a dyadic opposition is not a lecture on complexity, but a deliberate transformation of the underlying premise.

Overall, the book is a fast surface read. The author's use of the history of ecology seems simplistic, but is fortunately brief. The disconnectedness of the book, however, is troubling: Three essays are better described as literary criticism; one is a “job description”; two are pieces based in property law; the concluding chapter is an argument for a more reasoned approach to selling environmentalism. Despite these weaknesses, the book is worth the effort, partly for the arguments many readers will have with the author, but mostly for the author's engagement with and critique of the more common arguments and assumptions of environmental activists and leaders in the context of resource use and re-conceptions of property.