

## Reviews / Comptes rendus

### **Places of possibility: Property, nature and community land ownership**

by A. Fiona D. Mackenzie, Wiley Blackwell, Oxford, 2013, 270 pp., paper \$43.95 (ISBN 978-1405191715)

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The dominant narratives of neoliberalism have frequently been dissected by social scientists in the last decade. In the process the logics of appropriating natures of many kinds by the mechanisms of marketization and the political technologies of dispossession and enclosure have been shown to be a key part of the neoliberal project. Fiona Mackenzie simply doesn't "buy" the argument that this is the way things have to be. In this book she looks to Scotland, the Outer Hebrides in particular, to show how neoliberal political technologies can be resisted and contested and how natures, both human and otherwise, are reworked in ways that refuse the dichotomies between the two that neoliberalism usually relies upon. Geography is being remade in the Hebrides. It's an intriguing political story told eloquently in this commendable volume.

Part of this story is about the possibilities that revenue from wind turbines provide. If that is, local people rather than distant shareholders and corporations control the land. High technology renewable electricity generation now links island coastlines to the British electrical grid, and in the case of at least some of the wind turbines, the renewable source of energy for the grid is also a source of energy for rebuilding local economies, reclaiming land and nature from absentee landlords, and reinventing impoverished crofts.

This isn't just a story of local opposition to distant threats, but rather many stories about remaking communities and landscapes, and doing so by resisting privatization and the separations that private property and freehold tenure inscribes on the land. How the new possibilities of community are articulated—given among other factors the exit of many young people, the growth of holiday houses, and the complicated lease arrangements over development rights that are part of some of the

buy-out negotiations—are meticulously documented in the empirical chapters of this volume. Not all of the struggles documented here have entirely happy endings. This is, after all, political ecology up close and personal, but the possibilities of resistance are explored here in a way that emphasizes how the particularity of place is always part of the contested enmeshments of social life. Documenting resistance and learning some of the lessons from particular struggles is a necessary task for social scientists and geographers in particular. As the accelerating processes of global environmental change play out in coming decades such studies of contested places are going to become ever more necessary.

While telling the stories of resistance and the pitfalls of local politics are important they will be done all the more effectively if they emulate Fiona Mackenzie's elegant use of contemporary social theory. The discussion of theory in this book is especially noteworthy for its parsimonious prose that facilitates an unusually clear exposition of key theoretical points. Drawing on Foucault and the insights about political technology gives her another part of the conceptual toolkit needed for this analysis. But particularly insightful is the use of Judith Butler's gender analyses to challenge how normalizations work, and how the conventional categories can be subverted, challenged, and reformulated.

Turning these insights loose on property, community, nature, place, and land allows for a nuanced analytics that both refuses the pernicious essentialisms that vehiculate neoliberalism and simultaneously provides a vocabulary for thinking about alternative re-workings of land and property by various strategies of commoning. Understanding this as a verb, as processes of producing new geographies and new articulations of identity in the remaking of landscapes, emphasizes nature as living, changing, and open to new possibilities. Property is key to this, but it's not a given stable uncontested set of relations, contrary to many very popular contemporary formulations.

This key insight is richly illustrated by detailed engagements with local communities, made possible

by over a decade's worth of fieldwork in the Hebrides and elsewhere in Scotland. In addition to its exemplary use of social theory to explicate the argument this volume is also a testament to the value of fieldwork. "Being there" makes this kind of scholarship possible. Patience in doing fieldwork is a virtue and its value, in contrast to the constant pressures for instant results in the neoliberal university, is also worth noting in recommending this volume to geographers in particular, as well as to scholars across the social sciences.

This volume is a model of theoretically rich, carefully reasoned, empirically detailed, and politically engaged contemporary scholarship. At the end of this eloquent volume the reader comes away with a nuanced understanding of what political ecology is all about, how best to investigate its themes, and why it now matters so greatly in this rapidly changing world.

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