Reimagining the Land:
Enclosure and the Politics of Exclusion

by Conger Wang

This essay argues that enclosure was not a natural or inevitable stage of economic development, but a revolutionary reimagination of landscape that transformed land from a shared ecological resource into exclusive property. In pre-enclosure England, common rights structured collective relationships to land through practices of shared use, which were later delegitimized as inefficient or uncivilized. Through both ideological justifications and material technologies, enclosure redefined what counted as 'natural,' recasting communal practices as disorderly while elevating privatized, controlled landscapes as markers of progress. Extending this analysis to the American West, the essay demonstrates how barbed wire and Lockean property theory facilitated the violent exclusion of Indigenous peoples and the imposition of colonial spatial orders. Engaging with Marxist, revisionist, and environmental historiography, it challenges narratives that portray enclosure as agricultural improvement, instead emphasizing how discourses such as the 'tragedy of the commons' stigmatized communal land use and legitimized dispossession. Ultimately, enclosure is understood as a process that combined coercion and ideology to naturalize inequality, erase alternative ecological knowledge, and enforce new regimes of access, producing long-term social and environmental consequences.

Edited by Poppy Williams, Copyedited by Lauren Hood,
Reviewed by Sîan Davies, Art by Rosy Fitch

John Clare's poem 'The Mores' lamented the devastating effects of enclosure: "Each little tyrant with his little sign / shows where man claims earth glows no more divine / all sighed when lawless laws enclosure came."[1] Clare's verse registers enclosure, namely the imposition of property rights on the landscape to the exclusion of others' use, as nothing glorious or progressive, but as a profound disruption in the relationship between people, land and what was understood to be natural. In folk memory, enclosure was experienced less as rational reform than as a traumatic process marked by violence, dispossession, and the erosion of customary ecological relations.[2] These memories challenged later narratives that naturalized enclosure as an inevitable or necessary stage in social and economic development. In this essay, 'nature' is understood not as a fixed condition outside human society, but as a historically constructed category shaped by power relations. Rather than arguing that common rights were inherently 'natural' while enclosure was 'unnatural', this essay examines how enclosure became naturalized through legal, technological, and ideological processes. Practices associated with common use were increasingly represented as disorderly, wasteful, or primitive, while privatized and controlled landscapes were framed as rational, productive, and self-evidently legitimate. The question, therefore, is not whether enclosure was truly natural, but how particular understandings of 'nature' were historically produced in ways that legitimized exclusion and dispossession.

Built on such critics, this essay argues that enclosure constituted a revolutionary reimagination of landscape, one that recast land not as a shared living environment but as an abstract, controllable, and improvable resource, mainly regarding its yields per hectare. Central to this transformation was the redefinition of the 'natural' itself: practices of communing, subsistence, and coexistence with non-human life were framed as wasteful or uncivilized, while barbed landscape was crowned as civilization. Through the combined force of material technologies and legitimating ideologies, enclosure expelled disadvantaged groups from the land, stigmatized their modes of inhabiting nature, and rendered their ecological knowledge illegible. In doing so, it enacted what Edward Said described as "imaginative geography"—the process of constructing and representing places as distinct, often inferior spaces, based more on cultural imagination and power than on their actual geography or realities.[3]

Enclosure is a revolutionary reimagination of landscapes, accompanied by the violent enforcement of such imagination, because the concept of 'property rights over land' enshrined in John Locke's Second Treatise of Government is anything but natural.[4] The concept of property as part of the ideology associated with enclosure, refers to an artificial set of rules governing the access to and control of certain material resources.[5] Therefore, the imposition of property rights upon lands is a drastic redefinition of the inclusion and exclusion over spatial accesses, in other words, an intensified form of human control over spaces.[6] Partly as an effort to counter the Marxist argument of enclosure being a step of 'primitive accumulation', from the mid-twentieth century, revisionist historians such as J.D. Chambers and G.E. Mingay reconsider the significance of enclosure, and reframe it as a rational agricultural improvement.[7] While E.P. Thompson grounds the legitimacy of common rights in the operation of a 'moral economy', this essay instead illustrates that such rights are intrinsically sacred not only because it functions well, but also because it is the common rights, rather than the property rights, that should be regarded as the 'natural'.[8]

Before the late fifteenth century, people in England practiced the open-field system prior to the widespread enclosure movement.[9] The open-field system granted common rights for the communities dwelling on the lands, which was coined early in Roman law as usus et fructus ('use and enjoy of the fruits').[10] Literally, it means the rights to use and benefit from the property of someone else, as long as the property is not damaged.[11] The usufruct/ common rights in England had various forms: the commoners (inhabitants with common rights) were entitled to graze animals, feed pigs, cut bracken for animal beddings, dig peat or turf, catch fish and collect woods, though probably the land belonged to the local manor within a feudal system.[12] The common rights were so essential and widespread in Medieval England that the 1215 Magna Carta was accompanied by a forest charter accentuating the commoners' rights to use forests (Chapter 47, 48).[13]

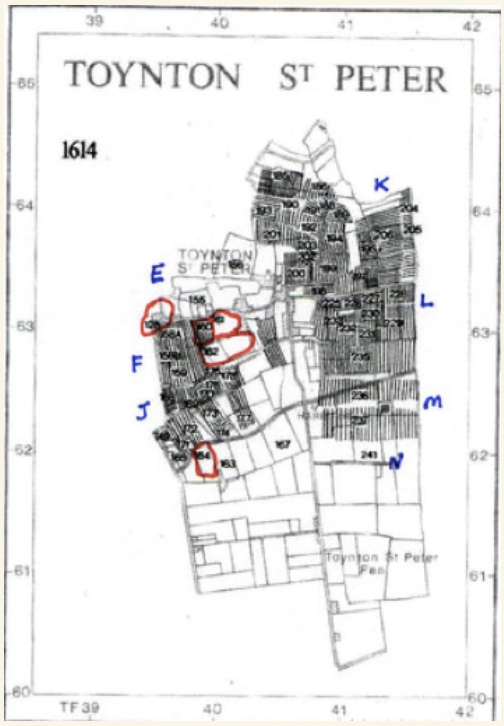

Figure 1. Toynton St. Peter (before enclosure): Medieval.

Source: "The Toynton Villages Before and After Enclosure," *Weebly*, accessed October 12, 2024, at https://theascoughsofeastfen.weebly.com/the-villages-before-and-after-enclosure.html.

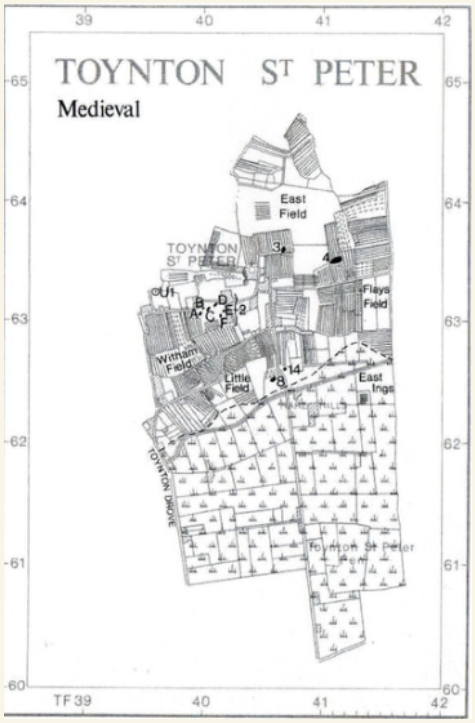

Figure 2. Toynton St. Peter: 1614 (after enclosure).

Source: "The Toynton Villages Before and After Enclosure," *Weebly*, accessed October 12, 2024, at https://theascoughsofeastfen.weebly.com/the-villages-before-and-after-enclosure.html.

Figure 1 and 2 shows the comparison between Toynton St. Peter's landscape pre-and-after enclosure. The large-scale redefinitions and reshaping of landscapes were completed in no more than a century, illustrating how revolutionary and forceful the reimagination and enforcement were. England's experiences thus evidenced that the enclosure, made practical by the shift in ideology regarding the concept of land from a collective resource to an exclusive possession, was a reimagination enforced on landscapes, rather than something customary or natural.

Even more violent was the enclosure in the American West since the eighteenth-century, where the enclosure was part of a grander state-design to exterminate or exclude the indigenous population and creatures.[14] Animals like prairie dogs who have inhabited the lands for centuries were deemed 'noxious' and exterminated by gunpowder, while their cohabited neighbors, the indigenous Americans, were banished from their homelands by the sharp barbed-wires.[15] Barbed wire, invented in 1874, is a strong, twisted wire with sharp-pointed bars, that played a significant role in reshaping landscapes, particularly in the expulsion of native populations to implement the scientific visions of State institutions like the Forest Service.[16] Prior to the invention of the barbed-wire, the indigenous Americans' retaliations had tangible effects, since their guerilla attacks against the fences severely disrupted the daily lives of the colonisers. For example, the Georgia Gazette reported more than eight raids during the October and November of 1787 by Creeks, that they have 'stolen some thirty horses, burnt several forts, fences and houses, in addition to cutting down a very considerable quantity of corn, and destroying a number of hogs.'[17] Barbed wire rendered this impossible: The correspondence between C.W. and A.H. Johnson from California in 1876 was revealing, as they agreed that 'The Indians have bothered us a great deal…since we put up the wire, they have not bothered any.'[18] The notion of the indigenous Americans as a 'disappearing race' was accentuated in the decades after the

adoption of barbed wires, as illustrated by Joseph Dixon's photographs of the indigenous Americans as a 'vanishing race', which was funded by the Wanamaker family.[19] The barbed wire, via the successful expulsion of those inhabited the lands for centuries, realized the blueprints drawn by the central authority. The colonisers reimagined landscape as gridded and privatized, redefined the meaning of 'appropriateness to inhabit', and enforced their calculated results on the land by the barbed-wire enclosure. Such enforcement of reimagination of landscapes, assisted by the technology of barbed wire, reshaped the ideological conception of 'nature', and hence backed the legitimacy of the colonization.

Socially and historically, the ideologies associated with enclosure largely stigmatized the victims for decades. The Agricultural Fundamentalism, one of the most influential schools regarding the enclosures' effects, contends that the traditional feudal peasant farms prior to the enclosure hindered the 'modernization of England.'[20] The reformation of rural institutions, namely the enclosure, created capitalism, extended markets, spread commercial attitudes, and ultimately led to a productive agriculture, which fed the industrial growth.[21] Agricultural Fundamentalism, which glorified the enclosure as progressive and necessary and stigmatized those small peasants/ tenants as stumbling blocks for the making of the 'empire without sunset', had enjoyed dominant position for decades. Therefore, it had imaginably produced damaging effects to the reputation of the indigenous lifestyles and redefined what seemed to be 'natural' on the lands. Partially built on this social-Darwinian notion, Garrett Hardin's theory of 'tragedy of commons' is a very influential ideology condemning the commoners' practices since 1968, though originally it was written to dissuade people from overbreeding.[22] Hardin argues that when a resource is shared and access is unrestricted, individuals acting in their own self-interests will inevitably overuse and deplete it, ultimately harming the collective benefit.[23] Despite the arguable reasonability of the theory, Elinor Ostron has exemplified that collective lands could be successfully managed under certain conditions.[24] Furthermore, to quote E.P. Thompson's words: 'Despite the theory's common sense air, it overlooks the fact that commoners too had common senses,' which reveal the Achilles' heel of the theory.[25] Hardin's theory hugely impacted the free-market campaigns of the neoliberalists (mostly purporting to reduce state-intervention), which worsened the notoriety of the commoners' because under such discourse, they were nothing more than a group of ignorant, selfish and unenlightened 'crowds'. The notorious overfishing of Atlantic cod fish is the most frequently cited evidence backing that theory. Therefore, the ideologies backing the practices of enclosure strategically achieved the legitimization of such practices by redefining what was 'the natural thing to do'.

Similar discourses flowered during the colonization of American West for the purpose of justifying the expulsion of natives, occupying and enclosing the seized lands, which produced effects of stigmatization on the disadvantaged side, namely all the native inhabitants on the land. The labor theory of property, formulated by John Locke, argues that the rights to own land belong to people using their labor to improve the land which otherwise would lie empty or wasted.[26] Putting the ideology into practice, by 1630, John Winthrop (the first governor of Massachusetts Bay Colony) had used the discourse to justify the taking of American land in New England by violence, though the land had been occupied, pastured and managed by the natives for a long time.[27] The infamous Indian Removal Act 1830 backed by the 'improvement ideology' was not only the physical expulsion of the indigenous Americans from their homelands, but also the condemnation of the memories, defining their past interactions with the landscape as emptiness and waste, waiting to be corrected or

saved by the colonisers.[28] Figure 3 is an advertisement of barbed wire published by Jacob Haish, which was entitled 'The Civilizing Effects of Barbed Wire'.[29] Under the giant rooster's barbed stride stands tiny half-naked indigenous American figures. The explicit sense of dominance and superiority of the 'barb rooster' and its European master over the native population conveyed the information that the 'civilized' Euro-Americans are destined to 'civilize' the landscapes and all the native 'savage' inhabitants.[30] Confiscation, control and exploitation, dramatized by the penetration of the iron-wire into skins, were disguised as education and civilization. In the 1876 San Antonio exhibition, the longhorn bulls, who were deliberately provoked to challenge the surrounding barbed wires, finally resigned the battle after various painful and fruitless attempts.[31] Exhausted and wounded, they ultimately learned the invincibility of the wire, and thus 'civilized' to obey the new order, 'educated' by the pains incurred by the wire.[32] Henceforth, the basis of the discourse about a 'triumphant and invincible barbed wire' was the stigmatization of the native organisms as 'uncivilized' barbarians. The ideologies associated with the enclosure system were numerous and systematic, craftly turning extraction to progress, control to civilization, dispossession to integration, and disasters to opportunities.[33] They stigmatized the dispossessed, condemned their interactions with the ecosystems, erased their contributions, making them socially and historically humiliated and silenced, and claimed that the repurposed landscape was its natural appearance.

Technology and ideologies brought power and profits but were not equally enjoyed by all. They created wealth for the landlords and colonisers, leaving misery and poverty for the dispossessed. The word 'pauper' first appeared in 1566, referring to an individual without home or livelihoods.[34] In the 1770s, a Welsh minister lamented the shattering dislocation before his eyes: 'the depriving of the peasantry of all landed property has beggared multitudes.'[35] In The Deserted Village, Oliver Goldsmith described the enclosure as a new kind of plague, in which 'wealth accumulates, and men decay.'[36] The cancellation of common rights was catastrophic for the English small-peasants and tenants. Figure 4 shows that there are two dramatic increases of enclosed acres, namely between 1550-1660 and between 1750-1850. The first wave was followed by some Royal legislations to protect the peasants, which indicates the severity of poverty and vagrancy.[37] The second wave resulted from Parliamentary legislations, and a thorough study of poor laws shows a positive association between the enclosure and rising level of poor relief.[38] The justifications afforded by the ideologies, and the protection offered by the technologies, means that the landlords could bet safely on the policy of enclosure, converting the peasantry from independent or quasi-independent farmers into dependent waged-labors. Those Appalachian mountaineers, who were forced by the Adam-Smithian ideologies about 'integration into markets' to become miners, extracted silver for the managers, subsisted their own households with 'captured gardens' (marginal lands).[39] Fruits grown

Figure 3. Haish's advertisement: The Civilizing Effects of Barbed Wire.

Source: L.E. Bennett and S. Abbott, "Barbed and Dangerous: Constructing the Meaning of Barbed Wire in Late-Nineteenth-Century America," *Agricultural History Society* 88, no.4 (Fall, 2014): 576, https://doi.org/10.3098/ah.2014.088.4.566

from the technologies and ideologies about enclosure were reaped by the advantaged, whereas poverty and misery were the central-theme for the dispossessed. Here the history again witnessed the normalization of enclosure—a practice initially alien—to be a naturally legitimate way of land-use, at the expense of a larger disparity of wealth distribution.

Stripped of its "progressive" and "technological" gloss, enclosure represents neither scientification nor progress, but violence, impoverishment, stigmatization and exploitation. It is a revolutionary reimagination and reshaping of landscapes because the concept was neither natural nor customary, but a late-Medieval invention by the landlords. The barbed wires, gunpowder, and all the ideologies associated with it, helped to bring out the physical expulsion, social stigmatization and economic impoverishment of the dispossessed. By foregrounding the entanglement of ideology and technology, this essay has shown how enclosure systematically narrowed social and ecological plurality, transforming commons into controlled spaces and diverse land-use into signs of disorder. Alternative ways of inhabiting land were rendered illegible, while those who failed to conform to the new "natural order" were stigmatized, expelled, or destroyed.

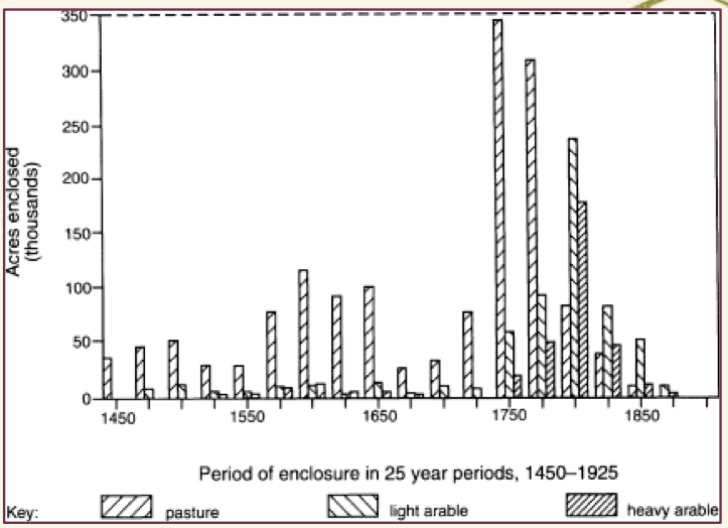

Figure 4. Period of Enclosure in 25 years, 1450-1920.

Source: R.C. Allen, *Enclosure and the Yeoman: The Agricultural Development of the South Midlands 1450-1850* (Oxford: Claredon, 1992), 30.

To acknowledge enclosure as a violent reimagination of landscape and nature is therefore to challenge the assumption that such transformations are natural at all. It is in itself an effort to recover the silenced voices previously suppressed by the powerful narrative of colonialism disguised as 'civilization.' The history of enclosure is in fact a history of a violent enforcement of reimagination over the concept of 'nature', which invites scholars to reflect on to what extent 'nature' can be defined by human-beings, who was a newcomer to the earth compared to its five billion years of existence.

Footnotes

1. J. Clare, "The Mores," in *The Penguin Book of English Pastoral Verse*, ed. J. Barrell and J. Bull (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), 415.
2. R. Netz, *Barbed Wire: An Ecology of Modernity* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), XI.
3. E. Said, "Invention, Memory, and Place," *Critical Inquiry* 26, no.2 (2000): 181. http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0093-1896%28200024%2926%3A2%3C175%3AIMAP%3E2.0.CO%3B2-0
4. John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government* (Illinois: Harlan Davidson, Incorporated, 1982), 24-5.
5. Ibid, 18.
6. G. Fields, *Enclosure: Palestinian Landscapes in a Historical Mirror* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2017), XIII.
7. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, chap. 31, 'Genesis of the Industrial Capitalist,' *Marxists Internet Archive*, https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch31.htm (accessed February 25, 2026); also see See J.D. Chambers, *Laxton: The Last English Open Field Village* (London: H.M.S.O, 1964); G.E. Mingay, *English Landed Society in the Eighteenth Century* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2007).
8. See E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Penguin Books, 2013).
9. J.M. Neeson, *Commoners: Common Rights, Enclosure and Social Change in England*, 1700-1820 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 6.
10. D. Wall & M. Egan, *The Commons in History: Culture, Conflict and Ecology* (London: MIT Press, 2014), 7.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid, 8.
13. *Magna Carta* (1215), chaps. 47-48, in Ibid, 87
14. N.F. Sayre, *The Politics of Scale: A History of Rangeland Science* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 18.
15. Ibid, 18-20.
16. Ibid, 25.
17. Joshua Haynes, *Patrolling the Border: Theft and Violence on the Creek-Georgia Frontier, 1770-1796* (Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2018), 145.
18. L.E. Bennett and S. Abbott, "Barbed and Dangerous: Constructing the Meaning of Barbed Wire in Late-Nineteenth-Century America," *Agricultural History Society* 88, no.4 (Fall, 2014): 570. https://doi.org/10.3098/ah.2014.088.4.566
19. Ibid, 578.
20. Allen, *Enclosure*, 2.
21. Ibid.
22. Wall and Egan, *Commons*, 16.
23. G. Hardin, "The Tragedy of Commons," *Journal of Natural Resources Policy Research* 1, no.3 (July 2009): 244-5. https://doi.org/10.1126/science.162.3859.1243
24. See E. Ostrom, *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).
25. E.P. Thompson, *Customs in Common* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), 107.
26. Locke, *Second*, 24-5.
27. Fields, *Enclosure*, XII.
28. Ibid, 15.
29. Bennett and Abbott, "barbed wire", 576-8.
30. Ibid, 578.
31. Netz, *Barbed Wire*, 34.
32. Ibid.
33. S. Stoll, *Ramp Hollow: The Ordeal of Appalachia* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2017), 42.
34. Stoll, *Ramp Hollow*, 59.
35. Ibid.

36. Ibid.
37. R.C. Allen, Enclosure and the Yeoman: The Agricultural Development of the South Midlands 1450-1850 (Oxford: Claredon, 1992), 15.
38. K. Snell, Annals of the Laboring Poor: Social Change and Agrarian England, 1660-1900 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985): 138-227.
39. Stoll, Ramp, 216-223.

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