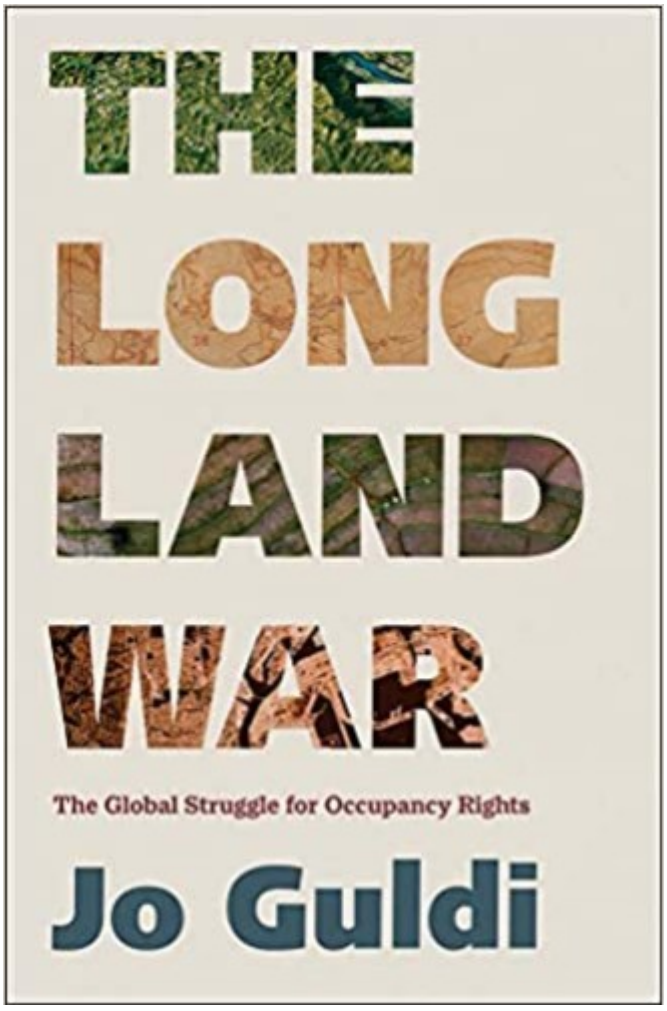
Who gets to live on the land?

Historian Jo Guldi argues that land occupancy struggles aren’t just about fairness; they’re about humanity’s survival.

by Andrew W. Stevens in the December 2022 issue

In Review



The Long Land War

The Global Struggle for Occupancy Rights

By Jo Guldi
Yale University Press
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One might expect a book called *The Long Land War* to focus on the history of violent military conflicts between powerful nation-states to divide long-disputed territory. But instead of analyzing Israeli settlements in the West Bank or the political status of Taiwan, Jo Guldi's book focuses on something much less sensational, although arguably more consequential: the recent history of land occupancy rights across the globe.

Within the United States' capitalist system of well-defined and readily enforced property rights, land occupancy rights are almost indistinguishable from land ownership rights. However, this equivalency is a comparatively new development in human history and is not universal across the globe. Guldi, who teaches history at Southern Methodist University, frames occupancy rights as the right of people not to be displaced. Armed with this tangible definition, she explores the history of land occupancy rights among former European colonies in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Guldi argues that although individual campaigns for land rights have differed in their specifics—land marches in India couldn't have looked more different than rent strikes in Ireland, for example—they can and should be viewed as part of a larger global movement among the poor people of the world. She writes:

> Only rarely are the urban squatting cultures of Europe and the slum-dwelling cultures of the developing world examined side by side as contemporary responses to the problem of land rights. Yet both are part of the same phenomenon, connected to the ongoing conversation about occupation, and enabled, proselytized, and protected by similar sets of ideas about the effectiveness of grassroots movements.

Guldi identifies various techniques by which inhabitants have sought to defend their rights to occupy land. These include marching, participating in rent strikes, squatting, seeking reparations, implementing rent controls and land reforms, and more.

In lower-income and less-developed countries, a key to defending land occupancy has been to increase the viability of small-scale agriculture through information sharing and the adoption of productive technologies. The organization that has played the largest role in seeking to support these rural poor people over the past century is the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.

The FAO is a surprise main character in Guldi's story of global occupancy rights. This Rome-based organization led by well-meaning bureaucrats was founded with a grandiose vision of broad-based land redistribution in the developing world. Over the decades, however, these aspirations increasingly conflicted with the realities of bureaucracy. Instead of catalyzing large-scale land redistribution, the FAO ultimately found itself publishing soil maps and research bibliographies that failed to deliver any meaningful benefit to poor farmers across the world.

As someone who thinks a lot about organizations, I particularly enjoyed Guldi's analysis of the FAO. Its story is one of strong personalities, differing priorities, and the conflict between realism and idealism. Some readers may conclude that the FAO's shortcomings were inevitable, that voluntary global coordination is inherently ill-equipped to counter the powerful forces of national self-interest and corporate profit. But Guldi argues that global governmental organizations like the UN could be more effective if they had more power to set and implement an agenda prioritizing the well-being of the global poor.

Guldi then applies this argument for more powerful global institutions to the issue of climate change, arguing that the disparate approaches to land occupancy rights can directly inform the fight for climate justice. This extension of the argument is natural and feels almost inevitable. If we all have a right to occupy this earth, do we not also have the right to preserve a climate that supports our lives and livelihoods? For Guldi, this is the "so what?" of the book: understanding that the struggle for land occupancy can help us to understand the broader struggle for survival in a finite and unequal world.

Readers looking for a captivating page-turner will be disappointed. Though well written and interesting throughout, *The Long Land War* is as advertised: long. This impressive piece of scholarship boasts over 100 pages of endnotes, making it a poor choice for readers without a fair bit of background knowledge. However, if you are looking for deep engagement with the history of land occupancy rights, this book deserves to occupy a spot on your bookshelf.