

ON UNSTEADY GROUND

A look at history reveals deep-rooted changes in our views about the earth beneath our feet – and helps us understand who we are.

Soil, land, agriculture – the words we use to describe the material basis of food production are deeply embedded in our culture. They have ancient Indo-European roots, yet different, sometimes contrasting meanings. The word “soil” comes from the Latin *solum*, meaning “soil” or “ground”, perhaps with the Old French words *soeul* (threshold, area, place) and *soille* (a miry place) mixed in. “Land”, on the other hand, has a more expansive origins; it connotes “expansion, new areas”.

Wherever the landscape and climate permitted people to settle, the first step was to start working the land. Control and ownership followed. This rewarded the laborious clearing of forests and improvement of the soil, perhaps for private use or for the community, but mostly as bonded labour for a landowner. “Agriculture” – the cultivation of the *ager*, or fields – began to dominate. Its etymology also betrays a transition. The related Old English word *æcer* had the meaning “open land”, where cattle were driven. After people started using it to grow crops, the name stayed. It morphed into “acre”, the amount of land a yoke of oxen could plough in a day.

In many parts of the world, climatic conditions did not permit permanent cultivation. In the drylands, mobile livestock herding was the chief type of land use, and individual ownership rights did not emerge. People relied on oral rather than written records. Wherever animals had to survive on scant vegetation, the joint management of land required careful agreements, customs and trust. Such arrangements were valid across large areas and over long periods, often spanning linguistic and cultural boundaries.

Land ownership led to specific forms of worldly power. In ancient times, the possession of land led to the concept of property, or immobile goods. The Greeks used it as security for loans: the origin of mortgages. Discharged Roman soldiers received a pension in the form of land, and their presence buttressed the empire’s hold on the coasts of the Mediterranean. The barbarian invasions reorganized the settlement and land use patterns in Europe. The Islamic expansion transformed a desolate Spain into a thriving culture. In the Middle Ages, “land” acquired new meanings: land as opposed to water, and the countryside as opposed to the city. In the description of a certain demarcated area, it came to mean a state or territory, as in “England” or “Scotland”.

Land stimulates both curiosity and greed. Early long-distance travellers often brought home little more than reports of distant regions. In the 14th-century, the Venetian Marco Polo told of the wonders of China, while the Moroccan explorer Ibn Battuta travelled to such far-flung places as Central and East Asia, Zanzibar and Timbuktu. The marvels of Asia – pepper, silk and porcelain – tempted, but Islamic and Venetian rulers and traders pushed up prices so high that they became luxuries in Europe.

In the 15th century, the Chinese admiral Zheng He led huge trading fleets in the Pacific and Indian Oceans, reaching as far as Mogadishu in today’s Somalia. His travels and Columbus’s discovery of the Americas, were just the beginning. Seafaring began to supplant overland travel; after Vasco da Gama circumnavigated Africa in 1498 and opened the way to India, the Spice Islands and China, the old caravan routes lost their significance. Spain and Portugal quickly divided the world between themselves. Magellan’s circumnavigation of the globe in 1519–22 finally proved that the Earth is round – and that land is limited.

From a European point of view, the competition to conquer the world’s land masses had begun. This took several centuries, and was marked by monstrous brutality – something we still tend to forget, preferring to think instead of the fascination of the foreign, the acquisition of wealth and the “superior” culture of the conquerors.

“Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it” became a popular Bible quotation. In the 1600s, the Dutch philosopher Hugo Grotius proposed the concept of the “freedom of the seas”, in contrast to the Roman/Venetian tradition of a *mare nostrum*. This idea of open access still applies to most of the oceans and to Antarctica; they have so far avoided being carved up into national territories.

Myths gave rise to lands that did not exist, such as the legendary continent of Atlantis. And they predicted land that actually did exist. In the 17th century, European sailors dis-

White spaces attracted white men: adventurers, miners and colonialists carved the world up among themselves



