

7.4. Is What's Mine Really Mine? Reimagining Resource Ownership and Control in Post-Apocalyptic Fiction

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Abstract

Post-apocalyptic fiction allows survivors the opportunity to rebuild communities on a *tabula rasa*. Worlds after the apocalypse often result in extreme resource scarcity, which means that protagonists are forced to make difficult decisions about the “rightful” distribution of resources, cognizant of the fact that these decisions can literally be a matter of life and death. Works like Frank Tayell’s *Surviving the Evacuation* series (2011–2021) and Adrian J. Walker’s *The End of the World Running Club* (2014) point to some of the tensions scholars have identified in notions of ownership and control over resources in our contemporary world. Economist Thomas Piketty (2020) has challenged conceptions of unrestricted ownership contributing to wealth inequality by advocating for increased temporary ownership. Reece Jones (2016) has argued that continued maintenance of territorial control through heavily defended national borders is also a cause of global inequality. Despite their argued negative effects, it is difficult to point to objective foundations for private land claims or national borders (Rose, 1998). The *tabula rasa* in post-apocalyptic texts allows us to explore the limits and potentials for how we imagine property rights. In so doing, questions can be raised, or even models provided, that are relevant to current global crises.

Key words: legal philosophy, science fiction, post-apocalyptic literature, property law, ownership

Post-apocalyptic fiction presents worlds experiencing intense crisis and significant change. Often central governments, judicial systems, and police no longer exist, which means that individuals cannot rely on the assistance of others to establish or maintain ownership over belongings and spaces. In these worlds,

it is hard to know what it means to say that someone has the right to “own” or “control” land or resources, and how to establish those rights. Rather than relying on previous legal regimes, this body of fiction often explores new ways to govern the relationship between humans and resources. The thought experiments and crisis scenarios posed by novels like Adrian J. Walker’s *The End of the World Running Club* (2014) and Frank Tayell’s *Surviving the Evacuation* series (2013–2021) pose a number of thought experiments and crisis scenarios. These provide opportunities to explore alternative bases for the distribution and redistribution of resources. Walker’s and Tayell’s works prioritize ownership by citizens or residents of the area in which the resources are located, and characters whose thoughts and actions readers sympathize with. In turn, questions are raised that are relevant to current crises such as global inequality and climate change, which may rest on contemporary conceptions of property rights.

Adrian J. Walker’s *The End of the World Running Club* is a 2014 novel set in Edinburgh. It follows the aftermath of a widespread meteor impact that has wiped out communication and the central British government. The majority of available farmland has been destroyed by the meteor strikes, which have also destroyed most of the food in supermarkets and homes. The story follows Ed Hill and his friends as they travel south from Edinburgh in search of safety, and encounter other survivors on their way.

One such encounter is with Gloria, a young girl whom the group meets just outside of Edinburgh. She has lit a fire to lure them to her makeshift home, intending to kill them and take their supplies. The group are quickly able to overpower her, and she pleads for her life, mentioning a sick baby. The group immediately lets her go and becomes sympathetic towards her, even when they learn that she routinely uses the fire as a lure and has killed many in this way. The next day, they return Gloria’s gun to her and travel to the neighbouring farm to barter for a car. Upon meeting the inhabitants, the Hamilton family, they learn that they have a deal with Gloria whereby Gloria hands over her dead so that they can be fed to the Hamiltons’ pigs to keep the farm running. The group are horrified and consider attacking, but are subdued by the Hamiltons first. Gloria returns and attacks the Hamiltons, ultimately overpowering and killing them with the group’s help. They leave for a second time with Gloria taking up residence in the farm.

In participating in the Hamiltons’ death and allowing Gloria to survive, the group enables Gloria’s control over the farm and thus appears to recognize that she has a greater right than the Hamiltons to its resources. However, the Hamiltons were the legal owners of the property while Gloria only arrives in the area after the meteor strike. Nor is Gloria an innocent party. Her behaviour is arguably worse; she is an active killer while the Hamiltons were passive beneficiaries of her killing. It is hard to determine what grants Gloria her property

right. The group also knows that Gloria is likely to continue killing; after all, how else will she maintain the farm? In fact it appears that the sole factor in Gloria's favour is her baby. It is the baby that renders her sympathetic and consequently deserving of the farm. Thus, in Walker's post-apocalyptic world, the protagonists have used the vacuum left by the disappearance of the central state to come up with a wholly novel property rights regime, one where the most sympathetic individuals get first pick of the resources.

The regime hinted at in *The End of the World Running Club* may not seem particularly solid or workable in our contemporary world. However, it does point to the possibilities of much more temporary forms of ownership. After all, if ownership is based on a particular person's sympathetic nature, it is almost guaranteed to change over time as their personal situation changes. As Gloria's child grows up, she will necessarily be granted less priority than those who give birth after her.

The concept of temporary ownership is a significant potential solution for both the global inequality crisis and the climate emergency. For example, French economist Thomas Piketty (2020) has attributed contemporary wealth inequality to a resurgence in the rise of dynastic families accumulating significant wealth over generations. He proposes that ownership rights be fundamentally rethought and made more temporary. In the case of dynastic wealth this might take the form of large inheritance taxes that limit how much wealth can be passed on after death.

Temporary ownership can be applied to more than just individual forms of ownership. The nation-state has an additional layer of control over land and resources that sits above that of the individual and extends to everything within its national boundaries. This control manifests through taxation as well as restricting building through planning permissions. US geographer and sociologist Reece Jones has argued that strict national borders maintain global inequality by trapping individuals in less advantaged countries. He describes the system of defended (or militarized) national borders as "a collective, structural violence that deprives the poor of access to wealth and opportunities" (Jones, 2016: 14). Jones also proposes a fundamental rethink but of bounded spaces in general. Like Piketty, he has argued for a more temporary form of ownership, although he believes property rights should return to the global commons after a certain period of time, as opposed to any national repository of taxation (Jones, 2016: 99). In combination with a softening of strict national borders, Jones thus looks to reduce the monopoly on valuable space and resources by wealthy states as well as wealthy individuals.

A global view of the world underpinned by hard borders and bounded spaces also affects how we approach the climate emergency. Countries that are likely to be the least affected by climate change know that they can close their borders to

the worst affected areas when it becomes necessary. This becomes a convenient excuse for inaction. Populations that will be displaced if rising sea levels destroy their homes are also cut off from alternative spaces. While they are often termed climate-change “refugees”, they are not protected under the admittedly weak protection of the 1951 Refugee Convention. The forms of temporary ownership and softer boundaries described above would therefore be one step on the way to opening up space to rethink these issues.

Despite the compelling arguments put forward by Jones and Piketty, temporary ownership has many opponents. It holds moral weight to say that we “own” something and we feel strongly about our possessions. It therefore appears to be at odds with one of the most fundamental principles of property law. In 1753, the prominent English jurist Sir William Blackstone wrote that “[t]here is nothing which so generally strikes the imagination, and engages the affections of mankind, as the right of property”, which he further described as “that sole and despotic dominion which one man claims and exercises over the external things of the world” (Blackstone, 1753: Vol. 1, Book II, 1). Yet, we actually struggle to identify a solid basis for the notion that we have the right to own something that occurs naturally in the world. In 1998 property law scholar C. M. Rose pointed out that most do not acknowledge that Blackstone himself qualified his famous quote with “few that will give themselves the trouble to consider the original and foundation of this right”. She terms these “nervous sentences” as “the hidden skeleton in property’s closet” (1998: 605). More recently, Piketty (2020) undertakes an extensive review of private property rights throughout Western history in *Capital and Ideology*, to show that the ability to own property and pass it on to others is a product of particular socio-economic circumstances. Most significantly there has in fact never been an example of absolute, unrestricted private property ownership in history, with most political systems limiting rights through taxation. While there appears to be little take-up of these issues beyond the discussion by Rose, Piketty, and Jones, they show that there are good reasons to question the status quo. Further, the above review of *The End of the World Running Club* shows that literature is another avenue to explore this issue further.

One of the most surprising things about post-apocalyptic fiction is how often communities are depicted as surviving or even thriving. Despite the nominally dystopian backdrop, many stories end on messages of hope and may in fact be closer to utopias than dystopias. In the mixing of utopia and dystopia we find echoes of Le Guin’s concept of “utopiyin” and “utopiyang”, whereby “every eutopia contains a dystopia, every dystopia contains a eutopia” (2016: 195). At the same time, these stories are not wholly utopian either; survival remains a struggle. Frederic Jameson’s statement that utopia “is most authentic when we cannot imagine it” therefore

starts to ring true, as he describes its function as “not in helping us to imagine a better future but rather in demonstrating our utter incapacity to imagine such a future” (Jameson, 2004: 46). Therefore, even fiction which depicts its characters as clinging to familiar concepts of ownership and control may be just as informative and ripe for analysis as fiction which is more radical.

English author Frank Tayell’s *Surviving the Evacuation* series is a useful example of this. The series is made up of eighteen novels to date, the first of which was published in 2013. The books explore a post-apocalyptic world ravaged by a zombie plague and is primarily set in the UK. In general terms, the story follows a community of ten-thousand people as they seek a permanent base to settle. In the sixteenth book, *Unwanted Visitors, Unwelcome Guests* (2019), the group starts to flee to the Faroe Islands, but is surprised to find a small group of Faroese still living in the centre of the main island. They are begrudgingly given permission to live in one of the towns under strict conditions. They must leave the homes clean and undamaged and must leave before a certain date. While the protagonists are disappointed, they do not seriously consider attempting to take the land by force.

The protagonists thus accept that the Faroese have the right to control the use of the land in the town, although they do not appear to have any legal right to do so. None of the Faroese seem to have any individual legal ownership right over any properties in the town because the town as a whole is deserted and all the homes left unlocked, evidencing a clear intention to abandon them. Nor do the Faroese seem to be acting like a state defending its borders. The abandonment of the town also means they lack any practical ability to secure those borders, something which has generally been accepted as crucial in determining the existence borders with other states (Scott, 2009: 4). Rather, it appears that these claims to control the land are accepted as legitimate on the basis that they are Faroese. In other words, their citizenship is taken to encompass a right to own any land that exists within the borders of the previously-existing state. This conception of how rights to land work may signal the extent to which nationality and national borders dominates popular culture. Far from the soft, porous borders that Jones would wish to see, it seems that Tayell believes these borders might remain enforced and respected by ordinary citizens even past the age of government and military.

Interestingly, Tayell’s books also seem to go further than Jones to suggest that nationality of a single state can manifest as ties or even rights to a state’s region. Characters from Britain feel a sense of loss when they are faced with having to leave Europe, specifically France, permanently, even if a return to Britain could never be possible. The loss is not well defined but it appears to carry a weight that suggests it could be both emotional and practical:

For the sake of the children, all of the children, if we can come up with an alternative, now is the time. Otherwise, after Calais, when we have the ships, we will have no choice but to travel together to America ... None of us will ever return. Nor will our children. (Tayell, 2018: 49)

While Tayell's series provides no new models or solutions in relation to ownership or control of resources, it does reflect and extend understandings of nationality and national borders. In turn, this raises a number of questions which are highly relevant to the global inequality and climate crises. If we are to accept that nationality confers individual rights to resources, questions are raised about what it is about nationality that confers such rights, and how far they might extend. Is it a matter of blood, ethnicity, or generational ties; or does residency provide a stronger claim?

In the context of the climate emergency, it is the concept that citizenship of a state might encompass rights to land in a region that is most intriguing. As noted, the lack of provision for climate change "refugees" means that the status of those who may lose the land on which their nation sits is particularly unclear. However, Tayell's series prompts us to ask whether nationality grants certain rights to land and resources in neighbouring or related countries, at least, vis-à-vis citizens of more far-flung nations. Would a Scottish resident holding UK citizenship have a greater right to land in Wales than a French person? Would a French person have a greater right to land in the Ukraine than a US citizen, yet a lesser right than a Romanian? This prevailing sentiment might not be desirable, especially when we consider the calls from Piketty and Jones for a more porous and temporary ownership to combat global inequality. If it means Bangladeshi displacees would be expected to be resettled in neighbouring countries such as India, as opposed to further abroad, does this only spread the burden on far too few countries who are ill-equipped to handle it?

The post-apocalyptic scenario, in clearing away formal legal institutions such as central government, courts, and the police, provides the opportunity for a *tabula rasa* on which to rebuild society. In so doing it has the potential to reimagine our relationship to the land and the resources that are present within it. The power of radical reimaginings can be to stimulate new ways of thinking about property ownership in the real world. Novels such as *The End of the World Running Club* can illustrate and illuminate concepts like temporary forms of ownership which have real-world significance for solving contemporary crises such as global inequality and climate change. At the same time, novels such as Frank Tayell's *Surviving the Evacuation* series represent much more conservative depictions of land and resource governance, which can all the same, provide

areas of illumination for these real-world crises. By extending contemporary conceptions of national and regional rights to resources, we can raise further questions about the implications of current attitudes and ideologies. The heady mix of eutopia and dystopia that post-apocalyptic fiction tends to present thus poses an area for fruitful and significant further exploration.

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