

The Construction of Social Reality and The Land

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John Searle's *The Construction of Social Reality* presents a straightforward characterization of realism (in Searle's terminology, "external realism") as an ontological position clearly distinct from epistemic concerns regarding representation. He thereby provides a scaffolding, relatively cleansed of arguments over differing viewpoints, for understanding the relationship between the reality we humans construct by social agreement and the physical and biological reality in which our constructed reality ultimately must bottom out (Searle 1995, 191). I therefore see it as potentially offering a bridge between two conversations that much of the time tend, to their mutual peril, to ignore one another: one a discourse that attends to human societies, social classes, and economic institutions, another that recognizes ecosystems and biological organisms, human and otherwise. Hernando de Soto, in *The Mystery of Capital*, appears to be situated primarily within the former discourse, and he seems to be looking to Searle's account of the way in which our institutional facts are generated, through the imposing of status-functions in an iterative way so as to add successive levels of symbolic meaning to the brute physical and biological facts of reality, to help those in developing nations, especially the poor, to construct systems of legally recognized property, particularly in land, that will ultimately lead to material improvement in the quality of their lives, a noble goal.

I would, however, like to "lift the bell jar" (de Soto 2000, 227) that for too long now has sealed off discussions of property, resources, and capital from discussions of biochemistry, biodiversity, human ecology, and population biology. (If discussing such latter issues is to be ruled out of court, then I suggest the conversation that continues without them at least explicitly acknowledge the incompleteness of its account of reality.) Building upon brute facts by imposing additional meanings on them is one thing—mapping the physical aspects of a terrain may not provide "all" the information there is to be had about a particular land area, for example (de Soto 2000, 202); obviously, people of a certain culture and social system live on the land and think about it in a multiplicity of ways, representations that need to be added to the bare GIS data. Obscuring or denying other brute facts about the land, however, through the imposition of social constructions that do not attend to them or, indeed, serve to conceal them, is quite another thing, one that I would maintain occurs on a widespread basis and yet one that, in this day of extensive access to biological and ecological knowledge, is undergoing the necessary process of rapidly being overturned. We may, within our socially constructed systems of representation, divide up land forms by imposing a grid of (in my part of the United States, at any rate) section, township and range, and proceed to buy and sell parcels so defined as if they were discrete, separable commodities like any other packageable good. But it remains the case that, for example, plumes of groundwater pollution, or the territories of social and migratory nonhuman animals, or the light, temperature and moisture requirements of particular green plants—the true primary producers on whose photosynthesis the "production" that goes on within a

capitalist economic system is wholly dependent—are not congruent with this grid and are not, I would argue, appropriately attended to when land is represented solely in this way.

The reduction of this very complex entity, the land, to nothing but a discrete quantity of "capital" within the multilayered abstraction that is our current global economic system is a matter of subtracting meaning from, rather than simply adding it to, the brute reality in which our social reality must be grounded, and finding more efficient ways for people in the developing world to carry out this reduction will, in the long run, prove counterproductive. Nor is it the case that human populations, coupled with their collective consumption, in either the developed or the developing world, can continue their present exponential growth indefinitely into the future, though the biologically ungrounded notion of perpetual "growth" in markets would appear to stand in denial of this very solid brute fact of biospheric finitude. Is it possible to maintain awareness of the myriad dimensions of living systems—which encompass all, but not only, human beings—while still utilizing a capitalistic arrangement for the distribution of goods and services that contribute to the well-being of human beings? Probably so, but only within the limits set by our physical and biological reality, and in order to determine what these are we will need a deeply penetrating dialogue between the two discourses I identified above. Should the elaborate social construction that is capitalism fail to come to terms with the brute facts upon which it eventually must bottom out, it will indeed "create its own demise" (de Soto 2000, 212). I will attempt further interweaving of the two conversations by bringing Aldo Leopold's understanding of "the land" into my examination of de Soto and Searle.