doi: 10.22353/mar.202501.02

Empty Land, Empty Time? Anthropological Theory and the Challenge of Nomadic Civilization

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Abstract

This paper, based on lectures given at the National University of Mongolia, examines the effect of treating land and time as 'empty'. It argues that the force of those effects is felt particularly acutely by nomadic peoples, and therefore that the study of nomadic civilizations has a crucial part to play in developing anthropological theory that can resist this misrepresentation. In particular, sedentary presumptions have exerted a powerful influence on our understanding of both land and time, treating unenclosed land as 'waste' and erasing the rhythm and time-depth of 'unsettled' landscapes. So what happens instead if we make mobility and movement the starting point for social theory?

Keywords: empty; land; time; nomadic; Mongolia

The Problem of Emptiness

This is about the problem of emptiness. More specifically, it is about emptiness as a misrecognition, and the distorting effect this can have: what does it mean to speak of empty land, empty time?

The problem matters because this is such a powerful misrecognition. In the case of empty land, this power finds its starkest expression in the doctrine of terra nullius[1] that justified British colonial seizure of Australia on the grounds of its emptiness (Banner 2005; Fitzmaurice 2007). As we shall see, this expressed a wider logic justifying land claims on the basis that land had not been put to use – a logic that, in fact, erases life in that land in the course of designating land as empty.

The notion of empty time, meanwhile, was famously described by Walter Benjamin in his manuscript "On the Concept of History" ([1940] 2003) where he notes that ideas of human progress through history imply a linear passage through "homogenous, empty time". Time in this sense becomes a mere container, stripped of specific meaning or significance. Again, Benjamin treats this as a misrecognition of time, naturalising power structures and obscuring moments of radical transformation.

[1] A Latin term literally meaning 'nobody's land'.

My argument here[2] will be driven by two linked points. Firstly, that presumptions of empty land and empty time have effects, and the force of those effects is felt particularly acutely by nomadic peoples. Secondly, that the study of nomadic civilizations has a crucial part to play in developing anthropological theory that can resist those presumptions. To be clear, my focus here is not primarily on Mongolian regional studies (that is not my area of expertise, and other people are far better equipped for such a task). Rather, I am trying to set out a wider comparative field that makes such studies so significant. What are the social effects when land and time are treated as empty, and why is it so important for anthropology to help provide an alternative?

Empty Land and the 'Labour Theory of Property'

Our relationship with the land is the foundation of everything. We rely on that relationship for our existence. So the ways that we understand that relationship are important.

For this reason, I want to begin with the English philosopher John Locke (1632-1704). Why? Because his account of the human relationship with the land remains enormously influential. Aspects of the theory set out in his Two Treatises on Government remain a foundation for property law to this day, with important global implications, including for international development economics. To give a relevant example, it underpins the World Bank's emphasis on private property rights for global development (Bertoldi 2024; see e.g. Ngugi 2003 for analysis of the Lockean logic of World Bank policy and its impact on pastoralists in Kenya).

Locke advances a "labour theory of property". In short, he believed that property emerges when we add our labour to a resource. "That labour put a distinction between themselves and common. That added more to them than Nature, the common mother of all, had done; and so they became his private right" (Locke [1689] 1960: 288). What is especially significant for the study of nomadic civilization is that Locke's starting point is from the perspective of sedentary agriculture. It is when we cultivate the land that we add human labour to it and so enclose it as property.

Here, in one move, Locke creates a distinction between wasteland and cultivated land, and offers a justification for the enclosure of wasteland. In his view, the enclosure of unused land becomes a necessity, otherwise that which humans have been given would go to waste. "Land that is left wholly to Nature, that hath no improvement of pasturage, Tillage, or Planting is called, as indeed it is, wast" ([1689] 1960: 297). He drives this point home by looking at the 'waste' of land by the native Americans: in Locke's view, they failed to fully add their labour to the land and failed to

[2] This paper develops the lectures I gave at the National University of Mongolia on 27 March and 3 April 2025. These lectures were jointly organised by the Institute for Mongolian Studies, NUM, the Mongolian Anthropological Association, and the UNESCO International Institute for the Study of Nomadic Civilization.

cultivate and transform it. They have left the land to nature and so it is wasted. "There cannot be a clearer demonstration of anything, than several nations of the Americans who are rich in land and poor in all the Comforts of Life; whom nature having furnished as liberally as any other people, with the materials of plenty … yet for want of improving it by labour, have not one hundreth part of the conveniences we enjoy" ([1689] 1960: 296–97).[3]

So this understanding of property in turn expresses a theory of value rooted in settlement, cultivation, and extraction. We might call it a sedentary theory of value. Clearly, the task for anthropology is to give a different account of the relationship between humans and land. The study of nomadic civilization, coming from a different starting point, has an important role to play here.

A key feature of this treatment of uncultivated land as waste is that mobile populations are excluded. We see, for example, how the Andaman Islanders were represented by British colonial authorities and subsequently by the Indian government as "'prowlers' who merely roamed the landscape" (Kapila 2022: 85) rather than a population with claim to the land. When this logic is taken to its extreme, mobile populations are quite simply treated as though they are not there. We can see how a labour theory of property was used to justify the British seizure of Australian land; "If the Aborigines were nonfarming nomads, then by conventional European standards they had still not acquired property rights in land" (Banner 2005: 124). But the doctrine of terra nullius – 'nobody's land' – applied in Australia makes the implication even starker by simply disregarding the existing mobile population and its relationship with the land.

Kriti Kapila, in her book Nullius (2022), gives us an important anthropological account of such forms of erasure. Drawing on her work among Gaddi pastoralists in the western Himalayan region of India, she describes a different kind of relationship with the land. Wealth through pastoralism is considered a reward for ethical conduct. Herding is a sacred duty, having made a pledge to the god Shiva, who promised the Gaddi ancestors that as long as they looked after these sheep and goats, they and their descendants would have prosperity. Crucially, this is an identificatory relationship with the land. "A key part of the promissory bond with Shiva is transhumance, their obligation in the mutual pact for prosperity. Transhumance is a way of recognising and sharing Shiva's domain" (Kapila 2022: 54); indeed, this movement is understood to echo Shiva's own migration.

This participation in the landscape is clearly something different to a logic of ownership through settlement, cultivation, and extraction. To treat

[3] As several scholars have argued, Locke's labour theory of property cannot be disconnected from his own ownership of land in America. So Locke's assertion that land cultivated by Indigenous Americans was 'waste' must be read in part as a justification of the English appropriation of land which he himself benefitted from (see Arniel 1996; Murray 2022).

the land as 'terra nullius' is to erase this sacred relationship. But the Gaddi are disregarded through the logic that they do not work the land and make claim to it. They merely move through it. Gaddi transhumance sits at odds with a regime of property ownership and enclosure (see also Saberwal 1999), and so the identificatory relationship with the land is forced to shift to a proprietary relationship (Kapila 2022: 58).

Geology, Ontology, and Power

What happens when the very nature of our relationship with the land is placed under this kind of pressure? The anthropologist Elizabeth Povinelli (2016) has developed the concept of 'geontology' to explore the kinds of conflicts that emerge here. The term 'geontology' is a combination of the words 'geology' and 'ontology' – in other words, it allows us to ask: what is the nature of geology's existence? In one significant example, Povinelli analyses a court case between the Aboriginal Areas Protection Authority and OM Manganese Ltd. This case was about the destruction of an Indigenous sacred site known as 'Two Women Sitting Down', an embodiment of the presence of the ancestors in the landscape. For the Kunapa, following the movements of the ancestors in their own movements through the landscape, the outcrops of manganese can be recognised as the blood of these ancestors; and as the machinery cut away at Two Women Sitting Down, we see the blood exposed. OM Manganese were fined AU$150,000 for desecration of a sacred site. But at the heart of the courtcase, we see the clash of geontologies – two ways of thinking about the nature of the land that are radically incommensurate. Are we looking at a rock formation that can be treated as a resource for mining, or at living beings that have been harmed?

To consider another example, from North America: When the Standing Rock Sioux resisted the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline in 2016-17, they carried the slogan "Water is Life". This was a statement about the danger posed by the oil pipeline to their water supply and ecology, but also about the life of the water: "the Missouri River, is one such nonhuman relative who is alive… Nothing owns her, and therefore she cannot be sold or alienated like a piece of property. (How do you sell a relative?)" (Estes 2019: 15). But the power to determine otherwise was violently real: as sacred lands were bulldozed, protestors were brutally resisted by police and private security.

The ability to enforce a particular understanding of the land's existence is described by Povinelli (2016) as 'geontopower'. Who has the power to draw the boundaries between 'life' and 'non-life' and in so doing to determine whether geology is 'alive' or 'not alive'? Who has the political, economic, and legal authority the power to insist that land is inanimate? Again, this is an act of emptying – emptying the land of the possibility of life.

Clearly, nomadic peoples have felt the particular impact of this geontopower as land has been deemed 'empty' and turned into a resource

for enclosure and extraction by mining corporations. From this perspective, we might examine Povinelli's ideas in the context of contemporary Mongolia. Humphrey (1995: 137) has famously explored the "latent conflict" between 'chiefly' and 'shamanist' landscapes in Mongolia – two different 'geontologies', to borrow Povinelli's term. But both involve a "common substratum" (1995: 141) of a land that "seethes with entities" that are "credited with their own ongoing form of being". To speak, in the 'chiefly' mode of these entities as gazryn ezed, masters of the land, is to acknowledge a very different sense of the ownership of the land to that implied by Locke's labour theory of property, where ownership derives from labour that transforms the waste into something productive. So the 'geontopower' (Povinelli 2016) here is firstly the power to overrule ways of seeing the landscape borne out of a view that "humans are nomadic beings" (Humphrey 1995: 142) with a sedentary logic of enclosure. Secondly it is the power to impose a mode of ownership in which labour encloses otherwise 'empty land', and the power to give this precedence over an ontology that recognises that the land teems with life – and in which it is those beings within the land that are recognised as 'owners'.

From Sedentary to Mobile Understandings of the Land

In order to challenge the dominant logic that empties the land out, we need to bring the ethical values of pastoralism to the fore, as Byambabaatar Ichinkhorloo (2024) has made clear in his recent paper on Modern Nomadic Civilization. As he argues, the assertion of these values has been an act of resistance to "cultural colonial policies" (2024: 236). There is clearly a productive dialogue to be had with anthropology here: on the one hand, these are insights that can contribute massively to the development of anthropological theory; and on the other hand, there is a great deal that can be learned from anthropological comparison.

We might start with the classic observation by the anthropologist Keith Basso, working among the Western Apache, that Wisdom Sits in Places (1996). Relationships are built up over time through the stories we tell of the land, emerging from the names given to the land by the ancestors. In this place-making, Basso tells us, the Western Apache move in paths not across empty land, but a land where the movements of the ancestors come to life here and now.

As Tim Ingold (2000: 208) argues, it is important to remember that telling a story in this way is not just clothing a landscape with meaning. "Stories help to open up the world, not to cloak it." When we say 'people tell stories about the land', there is a risk that we disconnect "people" from "land" and treat them as two separate things. In fact, people and land are intertwined and stories reveal this intertwining. Ingold's major book The Perception of the Environment (2000) is especially relevant for the study of nomadic civilization, as its insights emerge from Ingold's work with Sámi reindeer herders in Arctic Finland.

Ingold sees an important contrast between the sedentary ideology that treats the land as a resistance to be overcome – something to be tamed – and the mobile understanding of the land as a pathway to be followed (2000: 58). This is an important inversion of the Lockean logic that treats mobile populations as 'prowlers' with no claim to the land. Instead, it recognises that mobility involves a deep understanding of the possibilities inherent within the landscape, rather than insisting that landscape must be transformed before it can be inhabited. Through this, Ingold (2000: 153) advances a "dwelling perspective", exploring how humans grow through their immersion in a lifeworld. We do not just give meaning to the land, or transform it in line with our will. Rather, we understand ourselves through the land. It gives us meaning and substance.

In an essay on the 'conical lodges' erected by reindeer herders in their movements through the arctic landscape (such as the Sami lávvu), Ingold (2013) describes how this dwelling perspective takes form. The lodge, he argues, is "a place where earth and sky are brought together in the growth and experience of its inhabitants" (2013: 22), with the hearth at the centre. This resonates with the description Humphrey (1995: 143) gives of Mongolian nomadic circuits in time and space, with the ger as the 'axis mundi' as the centre of the cosmos. And crucially, in contrast to architecture which is set against the world – housing designed to enclose and resist a hostile external environment – these mobile dwellings represent the "weaving together of life-paths in the world" (Ingold 2013: 18).

This is one ethnographic instance that challenges the sedentary worldview of enclosure against a hostile wilderness. A crucial question that can be asked here, then, is what happens if we shift away from models of social theory that are based on sedentary enclosure? What happens if we make mobility and movement the starting point for social theory? Here is the exciting challenge that the study of nomadic civilization brings to world anthropology. L.Munkh-Erdene's provocative work The Nomadic Leviathan (2023) leads in this direction by inverting the idea of pastoralism as something marginal to settled society and instead placing it at the centre. Instead of the dominant paradigm that characterises civilization as a sedentary enclosure against the barbarian outer darkness (2023: 4), Munkh-Erdene argues that "It was extrahuman transportation… and not immobility and agriculture, that made the state and civilization possible... The revolutionary factor that facilitated the rise of the state – the Nomadic Leviathan – was actually the rise of pastoralism" (2023: 405). In this crucial shift of perspective, we are a long way from the dominant logic that renders mobile populations as merely 'prowlers' across a terra nullius.

Ecological Time and Time Conflicts

The human relationship with the land, argues Ingold (2000: 194-200), involves movement not only within a landscape but also a taskscape – the rhythm of activities that enable us to dwell in the world. Here again the study of nomadic civilization can bring an important perspective. To see how, let us first consider the pastoralist experience of time. In his classic anthropological study, Evans-Pritchard (1939; 1940) described the 'ecological time' that shaped the lives of the Nuer, a cattle herding people in the Upper Nile region of Southern Sudan. This sense of time emerges through the interaction of different aspects of the environment. Firstly, there is the physical environment: the flatness of the land, the clay soils, the flooding in the rainy season and the dryness when the rain ends. Secondly, there is the biological environment: the growth of grasses, the swarming of insects, the movement of fish in the rivers. Thirdly, there is the social environment: the movement of the herders and the shifts in their attention in response to the changes around them.

Crucially, here time is not an abstract measurement, but "a relation between activities" (Evans-Pritchard 1940: 100). Time is experienced on an annual cycle through the seasonal rhythms: the wet and dry seasons and the movement between the village and the cattle camps. On a daily cycle it is experienced through what Evans-Pritchard (1940: 101) calls the "cattle clock". This is the daily sequence of herding activities: milking, the movement of animals to and from pasture, and the enclosure of the animals in the evening. This is a 'task-oriented' sense of time.

Especially today, it's important not to romanticise this by imagining that such a sense of time can exist isolated from other dimensions of time. What about the impact of the state, for example? What role might digital technology have on the sense of time? Here, a key theme in recent anthropological theory has been conflict in time (Bear 2014). What happens when temporal rhythms are disjointed, when different understandings of time clash? There is, of course, a political and economic dimension to all this. The pastoralist sense of 'ecological time' can sometimes be overridden by institutions with a competing understanding of time. The impact of large-scale mining on the herder 'taskscape' is a clear example of such conflict – environmental rhythms are impacted, herder livelihood patterns shift (Mijiddorj et al. 2019; Sternberg et al. 2022).

But this pastoralist recognition of time as a relationship with the environment remains a vital perspective that the study of nomadic civilisation can bring. And importantly, this sense of time is open to life beyond the human. It connects us to the rhythms of other species, and to the rhythms of the soil and the land.

The need to expand our sense of time is a central feature of my own book An Anthropology of Deep Time (Irvine 2020). What is deep time? The term "deep time" was coined by the journalist John McPhee (1980) in his book Basin and Range as a way of trying to convey the vastness of the time involved in the geological processes that shape our planet. In European and

American contexts this awareness of the time-depth of geology is typically attributed to the Scottish philosopher James Hutton (1788), although such an understanding had already been anticipated elsewhere in the world – for example by the 11th century Persian philosopher Ibn Sina (see Toulmin and Goodfield 1965) and the 11th century Song dynasty Chinese statesman Shen Kuo (see Zhang and Faul 1988).

Why, then, would this concept of 'deep time' matter for anthropology? Firstly, a recognition of the human relationship with geological timescales is important because our existence depends on this time. The soil, the resources we use, all develop on timescales that require us to think vastly beyond the timespan of a human life. And secondly, in the context of the Anthropocene (see Chakrabarty 2009; 2018) – a geological epoch of humanity's own making – we need to recognise that human geological impact reaches into the deep future. Consider, for example, the long life and impacts of plastic waste; or the changes to the composition of the atmosphere through the use of fossil fuels; or the rate of species extinction caused by human actions.

The Domestication of Deep Time

In Western representations, the relationship between humans and deep time is often seen as one of alienation. Deep time is so vast that we struggle to locate ourselves. Yet what I have argued is that we also live in relationship with it, and the study of nomadic civilization can help us see the nature of this relationship. In my own research (see Irvine 2018; 2022), I have drawn on literature such as the work of the Mongolian poet and novelist G. Mend-Ooyo to explore different ways of thinking about deep time. His novel Altan Ovoo takes its title from the place of pilgrimage in Dariganga. While it is grounded in autobiographical time and his own nomadic childhood, it opens out to stories that speak of the time of deep history and the shaping of the landscape. "This road is the artery of eternal time which joins me with the universe, tens of thousands of feet are moving, striking out under the pulsing moments of history" (Mend-Ooyo 2007: 21). Here again we return to the concept of nomadic circuits in time and space (Humphrey 1995: 143) but recognising within that landscape of movement an expansive sense of time.

What I have found striking in this work, in contrast to the idea of deep time as something alienating, is the domestication of deep time. Mend-Ooyo's work shows an intimate connection between human and geology, and a sense of human movement within a world of ecological and geological movements. This domestication, clearly expressed by giving a stone from Altan Ovoo the place of honour within the ger, recurs throughout his writing. For example, in treating the depth of ecological time as a cumulative process – "the intertwining nature of the four seasons is growth, spreading, fading, and withering" (Mend-Ooyo 2007: 161), as a result of which "thick stacks of corpses watch the time go round" (2007: 163) – Mend-Ooyo employs a metaphor from the architecture of the ger for this passage of time. He

describes it as "the rope which is securely tied to the roofring [toono] of the world" (2007: 161), a metaphor with deep resonance given the connection between the shape of the toono and the Buddhist wheel of dharma. And again, just after evoking a passage of time that seems to eclipse human history – "throughout a hundred aeons, the time flies by and is gone" – he returns immediately to the ger and the hearth: "the fire is blazing" (2007: 164).

Here we come back to time conflict. This kind of deep time perspective clashes with a world of presentism, immediate return, and a focus on extreme short-term priorities. And this also links back to our previous discussion of the erasure of relationships with the land: as Kapila (2022: 81) has argued, the ideology that treats unenclosed land as 'empty land' is also a temporal erasure, forcing a "permanent present tense… an 'as-if' of timelessness, by erasing any prior social order and settlements".

This focus on the immediate short-term has been described by Jane Guyer (2007: 410) as an "enforced presentism". In an important paper drawing wider theoretical implications from her research in Nigeria, she describes how economic and political uncertainty make planning for the near future impossible. There is a 'gap' in time where the near future should be. Distant prophecies exist (either economic projections or religious visions of the far future); but for now we just have to struggle from day to day. Guyer calls this the "evacuation of the near future". This resonates with recent work carried out in Mongolia, such as Plueckhahn and Bumochir (2018: 343) on a "deepening climate of pervasive precarity and uncertainty" and Pedersen (2017) on the uncertainty around infrastructural projects that leads to the "collapse of an imagined future".

A related problem is described by Joseph Masco, an anthropologist who carried out fieldwork near Los Alamos (the home of the USA development of nuclear weapons) and who thinks about the impact of catastrophic thinking. In a 24-hour rolling-news world which provides us with a surround sound of constant crisis, bombarded with different existential risks, Masco (2017: 66) argues that we find ourselves in a "crisis-paralysis circuit". Our panicked attention jumps from one catastrophe to the next and we find it hard to filter what matters and plan what we have to do. We get stuck.

To go back to the overall theme of this paper, what I am arguing is that alongside the logic of erasure that enables land to be treated as 'empty' in order for it to become a resource, there is also an emptying of time, leaving what Walter Benjamin ([1940] 2003) described as "homogenous, empty time". This implies an abstract, uniform sense of time – time is a quantity to be measured out, and all moments in time are interchangeable. An hour of time has no special meaning or significance, it is just a chronological unit, the same as any other hour of time. A day is always the same entity, day in, day out.

But if this sense of "homogenous, empty time" has become naturalised, it is a consequence of the emptying out of time in two senses. Firstly, the stripping out of ecological time. Our sense of time is disconnected from its environmental rhythms and the taskscapes that enable human life to dwell within those rhythms. Secondly, this is a narrowing of our time-depth to an 'enforced' present.

Here, the study of nomadic civilization helps us to thicken this sense of time, bringing the rhythms of ecological time and the deep temporality of the landscape to the fore. Of course, this is also to recognise conflicts around these senses of time – political, economic, and environmental pressures that challenge or even displace such temporal relationships. Thee pressures might well generate a "crisis-paralysis circuit" (Masco 2017: 66) – but then again, to what extent does the history of nomadic civilization offer different ways of thinking about crisis and living with crisis? What can be learned, for example, from the concept of tsovuun tsag (see Empson 2005; Borjigin 2006), and how might this offer a different way of understanding catastrophe than Christian-shaped ideas of apocalypse or secular ideas of existential risk in the wake of nuclear and planetary anxiety? Here again is an important area of contribution to anthropological theory.

Emptiness and Erasure

I have tried to leave this paper open because my goal is to highlight the contribution that the study of nomadic civilization can make (and is making) to contemporary anthropology and to social theory. So the purpose of this review has been to develop a comparative frame that shows the significance of such studies. But to conclude, I will try and map out some of the arguments that I have presented here and how they relate to one another.

What happens if we make mobility and movement the starting point for social theory (see Munkh-Erdene 2023)? I am arguing that this matters because sedentary presumptions have exerted a powerful influence on our understanding of both land and time. In particular, the long-reaching influence of Locke's 'labour theory of property' grounded property rights in cultivation, and justified the enclosure of the land on the grounds that otherwise land would go to waste. The effect of this is to understand land as empty unless it has been made into a resource by a sedentary population. Mobile populations are treated as 'prowlers' on the land. The most extreme demonstration of this ideology was the logic of terra nullius (nobody's land) which simply erased any prior claim to the land.

Contemporary studies (Povinelli 2016; Estes 2019; Kapila 2022) show that this logic continues to exert an exclusionary effect on populations with historic claims to the land, erasing these relationships. As Ingold (2000) has argued, this sedentary perspective is one in which land is something tamed through human effort and won over as a resource, in contrast to a mobile perspective that understands the human lifecourse as a series of pathways within the land. A nomadic perspective therefore

provides an important challenge to the understanding of land grounded in the labour theory of property and its sedentary logic.

This emptying out of the land is also an act of "geontopower" (Povinelli 2016) which forces a particular understanding of the relationship between life and land. In acts like the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline, or the destruction of ancestral sites by mining companies in Australia, land is denied its own vital power and agency. To what extent can the ethical values of pastoralism (Ichinkhorloo 2024) resist such an erasure?

Finally, accompanying this emptying out of the land is an emptying out of time. A focus on mobility helps us to recognise the sense of ecological time (Evans-Pritchard 1939; 1940) – time as a relationship with the rhythms of the land. Here, time is experienced in response to the environment and to the lives of other species. The "homogenous, empty time" (Benjamin [1940] 2003) of global development strips time of this ecological character and turns it into something abstract and quantifiable. Yet such a sense of time is an illusion – we cannot disconnect ourselves entirely from the rhythms of our environment; the conditions of our existence depend on ecological time.

Indeed, these material conditions, I have argued (Irvine 2020), are shaped by long-term geological processes that can only be understood in the context of deep time. Yet this kind of deep time perspective clashes with the world of electoral cycles and rapid economic returns, which bring a focus on extreme short-term priorities. Again, pastoralist timescapes are squeezed hard by such time conflicts. To see time emptied out is to live in a precarious enforced present (Guyer 2007: 410).

Empty land; empty time – the comparative frame I have set out here has been an attempt to show the effects of such emptying. What has become clear is that the study of nomadic civilizations has a crucial role to play in developing social theory that can resist those erasures.

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