

The royal wedding reminds us that hereditary principle is alive and well in the UK: property rights and control over land remain firmly with royals and the aristocracy

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With royal wedding celebrations now underway, it is perhaps a good time to reexamine the role of the royal family and the aristocracy in the UK. [Bart Cammaerts](#) finds that this Ancien Régime is still very much in control – 6000 aristocratic families own the vast majority of the UK's land, supported by the leasehold system and the House of Lords.



The celebrations surrounding the royal wedding and the orgy of patriotic media coverage that accompanies it play a pivotal role in a permanent PR campaign aimed, amongst others, at solidifying the grip of the 'cousinhood' – the owners of the land beneath our feet – on this country and at masking many idiosyncratic inequalities engrained in British history and society.

If anything else the royal wedding is first and foremost a celebration of the hereditary principle – legitimating privilege and wealth by birth and centuries of inequality. Soon the groom will be heralded as the new Prince of Wales, the future King, and will automatically inherit the Duchy of Cornwall, a vast estate comprising 54,090 Hectares of land, worth about 750 million pounds and yielding an annual profit of 16 million pounds last year. The [Duchy of Cornwall](#) was created in 1337 by Edward III to 'provide [his heir] and future Princes of Wales with an income from its assets'.

Is it wrong to think that it is somewhat quirky, and dare I say incomprehensible, that this level of hereditary privilege and blatant inequality goes completely unquestioned and is generally deemed to be a logical, normal state of affairs 674 years later in the 'age of austerity'? Other marked examples of almost never discussed dominance of the aristo-fatcats on the British real-estate market include the Duke of Westminster, who is by far the biggest landowner of the country, totalling 11.5 Billion pounds of assets comprising amongst others large parts of Belgravia and Mayfair, and the Earl of Cadogan, proud owner of Sloane Square and large parts of Chelsea as well as Knightsbridge in London.



The Queen, through the Crown Estate, also owns large parts of London (and the country), but at least since 1760 the surplus revenues emerging from the Crown Estate flow back to the Treasury in return for a fixed yearly income from the state for the royal family, as well as retaining control of the Duchy of Lancaster. As such, it could be seen almost as a zero-sum game, the royal family costs the state, if we take the calculation of [Republic](#), some 183 million pounds a year. In 2010, the state received 210 million pounds from the Crown Estate in return. The royal family furthermore tops-up its income with 16 million pounds from the Duchy of Cornwall and 13 million pounds from the Duchy of Lancaster. However, while the state and the monarchy operate more or less at break-even point, the property rights and control over the land remain 'firmly' with the royals and the aristocracy.

About 70 per cent of the land in this country is owned by a mere 0.6 per cent of the population, with aristocrats owning by far the largest chunks. In Europe, only Spain does worse in this regard. In this country [some even speak of the 'cousinhood'](#) to describe the 6000 or so aristocratic families that own the majority of the land in the UK. What is even more astonishing from a continental perspective is the fact that this land owning aristocracy has over the centuries, through the House of Lords and aided by subsequent governments, successfully resisted a fully registered and valuated land register – a so-called cadaster. As a result of this, while revenues generated from the land can be taxed, as are incomes from labour, the ownership of land as such and the intrinsic value (i.e. capital) it represents is not taxed on a yearly basis at all as is the case in many other countries. Taxing the land and property owning elites on the capital they own including the value of land would have made it possible to make fewer cuts in public services and

redress imbalances in taxation between those who work and those who own capital.

The UK is still very much a Feudal society compared to many other Western countries. Besides the dominant position of aristocrats amongst land-owners, the system of leasehold, which has for the most part been rooted out in continental Europe, is another illustration of a remainder of the *ancien régime* and so is the House of Lords to which the coalition government appointed [117 new life-time peers in less than one year](#).

Needless to say, the restoration in 1660 after the botched Cromwellian revolution accounts for much of these outdated remains of aristocratic rule and hereditary property arrangements. Despite this, it is still surprising, to say the least, that even after the subsequent French revolution, the Paris Commune, the democratic revolutions and the emergence of Marxist and socialist parties into positions of power so much injustice and privilege by birth remains untouchable in this country.

I don't know yet what I will do on Friday, I might put my loudspeakers on my balcony and put *La Marseillaise* on a loop for the duration of the day? But I'll be kind to my neighbours and feed them Serge Gainsbourg's reggae version '[Aux Armes, etc Š](#)' instead of the original.

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