

Expert Available for Comment:

MICHAEL ALBERTUS, PH.D.

Award-winning Professor of Political Science

Latest book from Basic Books: [Land Power: Who Has It, Who Doesn't, and How That Determines the Fate of Societies](#) (Pub date: January 14, 2025)

Michael Albertus is a Professor of Political Science at the University of Chicago, where he specializes in the study of democracy, dictatorship, inequality, property rights, and social conflict. His research tackles significant questions about how countries allocate opportunity and well-being, why some societies are stable democracies while others have fragile democracies or authoritarian governments, and how these factors influence political struggles over fair treatment and representation.



Albertus' upcoming book, *Land Power: Who Has It, Who Doesn't, and How That Determines the Fate of Societies* (Basic Books, Jan. 2025), examines how land serves as a source of power in societies around the globe, how it influences social structures, and the role it plays in shaping today's most pressing political and social challenges ranging from racial hierarchy to economic inequality, poverty, and climate and environmental disasters.

Albertus has spent 20 years researching the intersection of land ownership, power, inequality, and political systems. His extensive body of work includes four books, 50+ op-eds, and nearly 30 peer-reviewed journal articles, with publications in leading journals such as the *American Journal of Political Science*, *Journal of Politics*, and *World Politics*. His books include [Property Without Rights: Origins and Consequences of the Property Rights Gap](#), [Authoritarianism and the Elite Origins of Democracy](#), [Coercive Distribution](#), and [Autocracy and Redistribution](#). Albertus teaches a wide range of courses at the undergraduate, master's, and PhD levels, covering topics such as inequality, redistribution of wealth and opportunity, democracy, dictatorship, comparative politics, and political and economic development, with a special focus on Latin America and the Iberian Peninsula.

Albertus' invaluable insights have made him a regular resource in mainstream media outlets with published articles in [The Atlantic](#), [The Hill](#), [Foreign Affairs](#), [Foreign Policy](#), [The New York Times](#), [Seattle Times](#), [Washington Post](#), and *USA Today* as well as commentary in [Associated](#)

[Press](#), [ABC7 Chicago](#), [Axios](#), [Chicago Sun Times](#), [Foreign Policy](#), [NBC Think](#), [Newsweek](#), [The Intelligencer](#), [Univision](#), [Yahoo! News](#), and has been interviewed on radio and TV for [NPR](#), [CNN](#) and the [BBC](#).

The defining features of Albertus' work are his engagement with big social questions and his ability to integrate big data and cutting-edge research methods with original, on-the-ground fieldwork. His field research spans the Americas, southern Europe, and South Africa, taking him to diverse environments—from government offices and historical archives to farm fields and rural communities.

His books and articles have earned notable global recognition, including receiving prestigious awards such as the Gregory Luebbert Book Award by the American Political Science Association's (APSA) Comparative Politics section, and the LASA Bryce Wood Award for best book on Latin America in the social sciences and humanities. Through these contributions, Albertus has not only advanced but *shifted* conventional understandings of democracy, authoritarianism, inequality and social conflict, and the consequences of how humans occupy and relate to the land around them.

THEMES AND IDEAS THAT MICHAEL ALBERTUS CAN DISCUSS:

- Democracy resilience and democratic erosion
 - Includes the US election and challenges to election integrity
 - Includes global lessons on how democracy can thrive, when it's vulnerable, and ways in which democratic erosion occurs
- The current spread of authoritarianism around the world
 - Includes transnational trends and implications for democratic countries and an open world order
- How land ownership shapes political power, inequality, and the environment
 - Includes social problems like racism, gender inequality, zoning and housing affordability, urbanization and gentrification, environmental damage, and poverty, lack of opportunity
- How social conflict and violence emerges and its ties to property and land issues
 - Includes domestic conflict and civil war, social movements and violence, international conflict such as Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and criminal violence such as turf wars between drug cartels and criminal organizations

REGIONS OF KNOWLEDGE:

- United States
- Latin America: especially Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Peru, Venezuela; regional trends
- South Africa
- Spain

TO BE IN TOUCH WITH MICHAEL ALBERTUS:

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Learn more about Mike on [his website](#)

Follow him on [Twitter/X](#) and [LinkedIn](#)

A CONVERSATION WITH MICHAEL ALBERTUS ABOUT LAND POWER:

Q: Why is your book, LAND POWER, important in our current climate? What inspired your research and ultimately the writing of this book?

Many people underestimate how important land is to the way societies work. The biggest problems in societies around the globe today, from racism to gender inequality, environmental degradation, and economic inequality, are deeply rooted in choices about who should get land and how they could use it from just a couple generations ago. But although deep wounds from misused land power of the past haven't healed, something can still be done about it. Living generations are charged with using land power today to change our world for the better. That requires us to see land power for what it is and to learn how to use it for good. This book lays out a roadmap for that better future.

Q: You argue that land ownership is deeply tied to power. Can you explain how land became a source of power historically, and how this has shaped the modern world?

As the population grew over the course of the past several thousand years of human history, land became an increasingly valuable resource. Land battles then spread across the globe like wildfire with the advent of modern states. Land came to be the world's most valuable resource and an immense accelerator of personal wealth for those who held it. Land ownership came to shape social hierarchy, freedom, and bondage. And it came to mark citizenship and political clout. The choices that societies have made about who owns the land and who doesn't cut deep ruts across populations and set the stage for trajectories of development, the likelihood that democracy would take root, and patterns of social inclusion or exclusion along lines of race, gender, and class. The links between land – as well as water – and power continue to evolve today in consequential ways. For instance, in the United States, as populations have increasingly crowded into coastal areas, that has given these areas increasing political clout at the same time that they have come into the crosshairs of climate change and rising sea levels.

Q: You've conducted fieldwork in various countries and regions. How has your experience influenced your perspective on land ownership and its broader societal implications?

I have spent time learning about every aspect of the land in dusty archives, vast libraries, countless government land agencies, and through on-the-ground research in fields and furrows from Italy to South Africa, from Ireland to China, and from California to Patagonia. At every opportunity, I have hopped on buses and into cars to go out to the countryside, strap on a backpack, and get out on the land. I have spoken with legions of peasants, government officials, land caretakers, and businesspeople who have dedicated their lives to the land and whose trajectories have been shaped

by decisions above them to reshuffle, or not to reshuffle, the land. All of them spoke passionately about the promise of land and its centrality to their plans and dreams. Many bitterly recalled its misuse by governments and politicians. Those experiences, many of them emotional and visceral, made me recognize that land has determined what is politically, economically, and socially possible for those who live on it and for those who have left it, but whose family heritage is rooted in the land. How cultures and individuals buy, sell, seize, and exploit the ground under us can mean the difference between a nation's success or failure.

My experiences have also brought home the point that we are all from the land. Many of us have roots in it that are very deep, even if at times they seem distant. All roads in society lead back to the land.

Q: How does the concentration of land ownership affect the political and social landscape of a country? What are the long-term consequences for democracies versus authoritarian regimes?

Because land is scarce and immensely valuable, who owns the land – and what is on it, such as housing or natural resources – has long determined who holds power. Land is economic power, social power, and political power. Land concentration generates broader social patterns of economic inequality, can entrench racial disparities and racial hierarchy, and can concentrate political power in an authoritarian fashion among landholders. This pattern has repeated itself across societies ranging from the plantation slavery and Jim Crow era of the American South to fascist interwar Germany and mid-century Spain to contemporary Brazil.

Q: Are there specific examples where land reallocation has successfully shifted political power dynamics? Alternatively, are there examples where land reallocation has failed or even reinforced authoritarianism?

There are dozens of examples! In South Korea, Taiwan, and Japan after World War II, reforms that reallocated land from landlords to renters transformed these countries, enabling small farmers to send their children to schools rather than into the fields. Within a generation, these countries urbanized, industrialized, and became wealthy while inequality radically declined. In Colombia in the last twenty years, the government began granting and titling land to women and jointly to men and women couples, which has empowered women within the household and made them upwardly mobile within society. In South Africa, land restitution to dispossessed Blacks since the end of apartheid has led to a far more inclusive and just society, even as it continues to struggle with legacies from its past.

Other countries have generated problems through how they have allocated and managed their land. Mexico reallocated half its privately owned land to peasants in the 20th century but withheld property rights from them for political reasons. That underpinned authoritarian rule and hobbled the country's development. Other countries, like Peru and China, have made similar mistakes. And many Western countries such as the US, Canada, and Australia dispossessed indigenous groups as they consolidated their territorial power, in the meantime marginalizing these groups and constructing rigid racial hierarchies where indigenous peoples were systematically mistreated, abused, and exploited.

Q: In what ways do contemporary land ownership struggles mirror those of past societies? Are there parallels between current land disputes and historical patterns of conflict or inequality?

Societies around the globe are grappling with the consequences of past land power. Countries like India and Colombia are trying to increase land access for women in order to rectify their exclusion from land in the past. Countries like Australia, Canada, and South Africa are experimenting with land returns as a way to redress the dispossession of indigenous groups from the past. Countries like Chile and Spain are trying to restore environmentally damaged lands from prior exploitative land settlement patterns. All of these are controversial and contested policies that reflect longstanding struggles in these societies. Elsewhere, current land struggles reflect a transformation of prior struggles. For instance, in the United States, battles over zoning, gentrification, and housing access reflect in some regards the historic exclusion of Blacks from land access, seeded by the failures of post-Civil War land reallocation during Reconstruction and the subsequent Great Migration northward.

Q: What impact would you like LAND POWER to have on policymaking? What impact would you like it to have on readers?

Using land power today to remedy the problems of land power in the past depends on an alignment of timing, leverage, and ideas. It requires reformers to recognize and seize upon the unique moments when power shifts and an opportunity arises to address the past. One core reason I wrote this book is because too many societies miss these moments. By illustrating ways in which a range of countries are using land reallocation to create more just societies, I hope to provide a playbook of sorts for policymakers who might otherwise view land as too distant or unchangeable to be relevant for the present. While land has shaped modern societies' deepest problems in profound ways, making good choices about how to use the land now can help address those problems.

I also want people to reflect on their own personal and family histories with the land. That can help to raise awareness and get a public debate going about how land has figured into our personal lives and our societies writ large, and how it could be most usefully employed in the future.