

THE MEANING OF "FREE LAND"

(From "The Theory of the Land Question." By Professor George Raymond Geiger. Macmillan, New York, \$2).

THERE IS no significant economic monopoly that cannot in some way be traced back to land monopoly, and it is no wild fantasy to feel that the breaking of land monopoly, through some such means as the socialization of rent, would mean the shaking of all monopoly. Certainly when there is no free access to the source of production, there can be no permanent economic freedom. In the words of Professor John R. Commons (*The Distribution of Wealth*, London, Macmillan, 1905 ed., p. 253): "if the size of fortunes is taken into account, it will be found that perhaps 95 per cent of the total values represented by these millionaire fortunes is due to those investments classed as land values and natural monopolies, and to competitive industries aided by such monopolies." Thus, the theory of the land question throws a different focus on the problem of monopoly. Attention is not confined only to the spectacular and obvious; new angles are disclosed, and the hackneyed attacks and counter-attacks over capitalism become less monotonous. The land question is (unfortunately for many thinkers) novel—it is exciting.

Mention has just been made of "free access to the source of production," free access to land. But there is no "free land," says the sceptic. Where are the untrod ranges of newly discovered continents? Where is the virgin territory that once opened up new opportunities for the pioneer and colonist? Even the socialist, as has been noted before, admits that in the colonies where land is actually free, capital could have no power to oppress, but he can find no free land in modern economic society. Yet "freedom" in this literal sense is simply poetic. The great contribution that is offered by a theory such as that of land value taxation is precisely how to make land free even if it be under a skyscraper in down-town Manhattan—and owned by the Astor family. For land to be "free" the following conditions seem to be necessary: (1) that land be effectively used to produce wealth, or used for socially constructive purposes;* (2) that land be available because of low price; and (3) above all, that economic rent—wherein resides the real exploitative power of private land ownership—be used for public instead of private gains. (And, as a corollary, free land implies that the products of land be free from the strangulation that is imposed by taxation.) Free land is not a matter of "wide open spaces"; it does not have to reach into the far horizons. The term is one of economics not of literary imagination. What more freedom for land is wanted than that man can produce on it without paying tribute? Rent socialization would force land into use, would lower its price, and would divert ground value from the channel of private landlordism to that of social service. That is to say, it would unavoidably free land.

* Critics of land value taxation have gone so far as to maintain that there could be no parks, no forests, no open uncultivated spaces, if such a taxing programme were put into operation. The fear of land value taxation must indeed be very great to permit nonsense like this to be written. It assumes either that political intelligence in the matter of zoning, landscape and recreational planning, and conservation of natural resources would suddenly vanish; or that the state would have less domain over land than at present.

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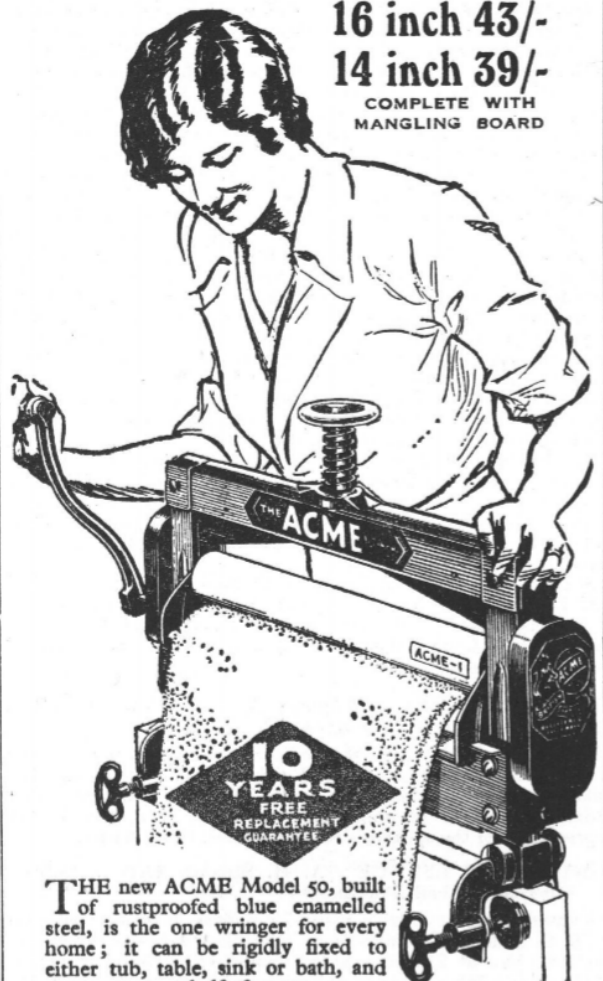
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