

# What Is a Free Society?

By Mildred Jensen Loomis

A SOCIETY is free when every individual in it is free. A "society" manifestly is not an organism with a will to choose, a mind to think and a body to perform. Individuals plan and choose, decide and perform. It is only when individuals are free to follow their own judgment and choice that a society is free. Freedom to think and speak as one wishes is good, but much more important is freedom to act in line with one's convictions. The primary freedom of action is the freedom to choose one's own economic destiny. To sustain his own life and that of his family is the first right and duty of every man, and if conditions force him to work in a place or under conditions or for an employer that are not of his choosing, then that individual is not free.

## *Essentials of Economic Freedom*

For economic freedom, two basic essentials must obtain: a man must be free to offer or withdraw (1) his services and (2) his goods to another according to his own evaluation of the bargain.

Consider that first requirement. A free man chooses whether he will work for himself or for an employer. If the latter, then he chooses which employer he will have. A man is free when there are more jobs than workers—when employers compete for the services of workers. We

approximate this condition in wartime when so large a percentage of workers are drawn into the armed services, and when extraordinary destruction of goods puts heavy demand on production. But the government is given full power in this emergency, and so the economic freedom of individuals is transgressed by the state ordering men where, when and for how much they shall work.

Since mankind has almost unlimited needs and desires, there should always be more work than workers. The task of the modern reformer is to indicate the factors and help create the conditions which would bring such an overdemand for workers in peacetime. Then men would have economic freedom.

Conditions should, and can, be such that a worker might withdraw from his work if his wages or environment do not match what he could secure elsewhere. Since all production comes from land, the only time men have such freedom is when land is plentiful and freely available. Whenever a considerable portion of workers can leave their "jobs" and readily set up business for themselves or produce for themselves on land, with wages and conditions more suitable to them than present employment, then employers will be pressed to raise wages and improve working conditions.

Men were freest in those periods of the world's history

when a frontier of land existed to which they escaped from the tyranny of employment. When masses were expropriated from the land, economic freedom was lost. Today there are more workers than jobs because land is not available, though it could be. Today workers unite in unions to fight or negotiate with employers to improve their conditions—but they are not free. So long as they are denied the alternative of free land on and with which to create their own livelihood, there is no economic freedom for anyone. So long as the demand for labor in peacetime generally falls short of the number of men seeking employment, some men will be unable to find employment anywhere. So long as there is a residue of unemployed, the freedom of all workers is gone, for there will always be someone who would gladly “take the place” of any worker who does not hang on to his job. Such a threat also keeps the general wage level down.

### *Modern Tyrants*

This is due not to “competition,” which modern liberals berate so loudly, but to the restriction in the source of production and employment, land. Most of us are victims of this condition and in our ignorance we cry to the government to regulate business and direct competition, instead of demanding the abolition of the causes—monopoly in land, trade and money—which create the scarcity of employment. So government grows more and more burdensome. We move from one tyrant, monopoly, to another tyrant, government. Man becomes the tool of the state instead of the state’s being the tool of man. Our plight is due to our own ignorance. Our freedom is ours if we work to free the land.

Similarly, individual freedom is at stake in the exchange of goods. Two men, A and B, offer for sale goods which each has produced in surplus. In justice, each should receive what he regards as full payment for the labor involved. Freedom demands that each be able to withdraw from the bargain if such is not forthcoming. If A asks for his product more than B values it, then B should be able to say No. This he can do if the source of production is free and he can produce the article himself—or find someone who, having free access to source, will sell it cheaper than A. But too often B cannot do this. Monopoly interferes. B needs A’s commodity in order to live, yet since A controls the source, B cannot get to it and perforce must pay what A asks. His economic freedom is nil.

### *Free Land and Free Man*

It seems to me that the corollary between free land and free men is obvious. Yet where, in economic discussion or postwar planning, is there discussion of land as related to individuals? To be sure there is some vague talk of “nations having equal access to raw materials,” but it is not *nations* which use land. *Individuals* do. We must work to provide free and equal access of individuals to land.

Today land is certainly not free. Each generation pays more and more dearly for the right to use land. And land is certainly not equally accessible to all. By its nature, land produces at differing rates. Some land is more fer-

tile than others; land nearer roads and markets and in cities is more productive; some land contains valuable deposits of ore and oil. Those whom we now call owners of such land did not produce this extra value. Therefore, they have a privilege over the holders of land that is less good.

Justice (and freedom) demands that such owners should share this “overage” or benefit with everyone else. Then land would be equalized, and equally accessible to all. Instead, our present statutes allow them to charge others to use this better land. This constitutes monopoly, the right to levy tribute on labor for the privilege of using advantages which are not created by the owner of the land but are either the “gift of God” or are being created by the community.

“The essential character of all monopolies,” said Max Hirsch in his thoughtful book, *Democracy versus Socialism*, “is that, without causing their possessors to be treated as criminals, they enable them to exact wealth from others without rendering any service in return, or to exact more wealth for such service as they do render than the recipients could be compelled to yield if free competition prevailed. A monopoly, therefore, must be established by law, or the law must have failed to provide efficiently against it. The principal legalized monopolies existing in civilized countries today are: the private ownership of land and of such treasures as the land contains; the privileged or exclusive use of land for certain purposes; legal limitations of competition in certain industries and professions. The most fundamental of these monopolies is that of the land.”

### *Land Kept from Production*

Today there is plenty of land—if it were free and available—to provide more jobs than there are workers. Thousands of farm acres and millions of city lots are being held idle or only partially used in the hope of sale at a high figure. The toll to these sources of production—plus the heavy taxation on equipment when it is secured—prevents investment and employment. The cost of land inhibits men’s freedom to leave their present employment to set up individual or cooperative enterprises.

In *Who Owns the Earth?* Margaret Bateman reports that in Europe, outside of Scandinavia, no more than 2 per cent of the people own land. In our own country land is concentrating in fewer and fewer hands. Not more than 25 per cent of our people are landowners. The 1940 report of the department of agriculture showed that 39 per cent of our farmers are tenants. The toll charged the people for the use of God’s free gift is on the increase.

As we look for ways to regain our economic freedom, and thus remove the maze of governmental control, we must consider and deal with the ethical use of land. When once we grasp the relationship between free men and free land we are fortified with a strong moral drive. For nothing is more repugnant to the moral sense than that land should be treated as subject to individual ownership, for purchase and sale, like things produced by labor. The Old Testament concept is right: “The land shall not be sold forever, for the land is mine, saith the Lord.”