

chapter on "Economics and Art": "Several years ago a young assistant professor of economics . . . had written a number of good papers. One or two in particular showed originality, technical virtuosity and incomprehensibility, a combination that is held in the highest regard."

Yes, this book may not contain pearls but the oysters are very good.

First Aid For Tenants

WHEN SOMETHING IS WRONG at the very roots of a society's economic life, problems of different kinds are bound to arise, and as fast as one problem is partly solved another springs up in its place. A man with a cold who wakes up with a sore throat may suck pastilles and eventually get rid of the sore throat, only to find that he has a headache instead; he may then dose himself with aspirins and deaden the headache but find himself developing a cough. Curing a symptom of a disease is not curing the disease itself, which inevitably breaks out in another form.

A community that fails to collect the rent of land for public purposes allows private profit to be made from holding land idle, removes the spur to owners to put land to its most efficient use, and then seeks to extricate itself from problems of uneven development by bringing land use under public control. Today the land on which planning authorities will permit development is very restricted in amount, and what there is of it is often in the hands of speculators or of building firms "stockpiling" for the future. The ensuing shortage stimulates more hoarding, and by increasing land values encourages more speculation. These in turn aggravate the shortage, values increase still further, and so the process continues.

The most grievous consequence of this artificial scarcity of land in contemporary Britain is the housing shortage. The demand for homes is vast, but the supply is restricted by the land available and by its price. The price of land is so high that the only homes being built to rent are luxury flats: to cover the cost of erecting or buying even a modest house as a simple investment a landlord would have to charge a rent far in excess of what the poorly-paid tenant, seeking such accommodation, could afford to pay. So the tenant lives in a slum which should have been pulled down decades ago but which continues to exist because there is no alternative. (Fear of rent control that would not allow rents to keep pace with monetary inflation, as wages and prices generally tend to do, is another inhibiting factor against providing houses to rent.) Market rents have been inflated by shortage for many years now, and the need was felt long ago to control rents and protect tenants from eviction. This took away the landlord's incentive to keep his property in good repair and to modernise it (the cost of which he would naturally expect to recover in increased rent).

In 1957 an Act was passed decontrolling the rents of new houses and of all houses over a certain rateable value

and allowing a market rent to be charged whenever there was a change of tenancy. The Labour Government is pledged to repeal this Act, but until it does so the position is that if a landlord can persuade his protected tenant to leave, and takes in a new tenant, he can increase his rent substantially. The methods of persuasion are frequently ugly, varying from offers of other accommodation at no greater rent (followed by a steep increase) to downright faking of rent books and the "smoking out" activities to which the name "Rachmanism" has come to be applied.

In *Tenants In Danger*,* Audrey Harvey indicts the still-thriving wicked landlord with a mass of well-presented information about the trickery and intimidation that he gets up to. The indictment is shocking, as no doubt it was intended to be, and should help to foster a greater awareness of the acute problems suffered by poor tenants, including many immigrants and old-age pensioners.

Mrs. Harvey's emotions of sympathy and indignation are praiseworthy, and she makes no secret of her allegiance in the battle — so much so that she is not above counselling the tenant to trickery of his own. But the head and the heart must guide together. Not all the abuses are on one side, and although Mrs. Harvey concedes the existence of landlords other than wicked ones (without any estimate of the relative proportions) this does not deter her from falling into a logical trap by boldly declaring that wicked landlords and homeless families will always exist as long as private landlordism exists. What she means is that they will always exist as long as the housing shortage exists, as long as poverty exists, and as long as the legal paraphernalia of rent control exists. Where there was no shortage of available housing at prices which all could afford, and consequently no need for rent control, the private owner of rented property could not exploit his tenant.

This is the natural state of affairs, and because we cannot return to it overnight does not mean that we cannot return to it at all. It is short-sighted to argue that since total control or total decontrol is unlikely in the immediate future, therefore local authorities must take over all rented accommodation. Municipalisation would do nothing whatever to alleviate the housing shortage.

The housing problem is a poverty problem and a land problem and only by tackling these at their roots can we hope for a satisfactory solution. The most effective way of making a start would be to levy a stiff tax on land values.

A. J. C.

**Tenants in Danger*, by Audrey Harvey. Penguin Special, 3s.

IT WOULD BE A START

WHY should communities spend their scarce resources building new estates if usable houses and housing sites stand empty while their owners bargain for a better price? Why (as the Liberals have been asking for years) should the owner of an undeveloped building site, who is holding out for more money, not be made to pay rates commensurate with its value? — *The Guardian*