

EDUCATING FOR A FREE SOCIETY

by
FRANK CHODOROV

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HENRY GEORGE SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE
30 East 29th Street
New York

7918

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The socio-economic philosophy of Henry George is taught in schools whose teachers not only work for nothing, but also contribute towards school support

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HENRY GEORGE ENTERED the 1886 campaign for the mayoralty of New York, not through any desire to gain office, but for the sole purpose of attracting wide attention to the socio-economic philosophy he had been advocating in his writings and his lectures. Ironically, as a result of that fatuous endeavor to popularize his ideas, he is perhaps the most misunderstood of American thinkers, particularly in his own country.

The stock in trade of every party platform and every political candidate must of necessity consist largely of catchpenny phrases, promiscuous promises and flattering generalities. Henry George could not condescend to such intellectual mediocrity; but he had to hit on something the electorate might grasp. He chose the "single tax," a minor detail in his economic and social system. As a result, his name has ever since been associated with this reform proposal, to the almost complete neglect of his philosophy of freedom and

of his far-reaching economic theories.

Henry George was especially importuned to enter the campaign by organized labor. For that reason many people believed for a long time, and some still do, that his solution of economic problems is in some way connected with unionism. Yet he made no secret of his opposition to the theory of special privilege on which trade unions rest their case, and to their destructive strike methods. But bickerings within the unions made it necessary for them to seek a candidate from outside their ranks. George was a public figure as a result of the popularity of his writings, particularly his classic "Progress and Poverty." They drafted him in spite of his un concealed rejection of organized labor's economic theories. As a consequence, it is only within recent years that the idea of his being some sort of laborite has died down.

George is the apostle of individualism; he teaches the ethical basis of private property; he stresses the function of

capital in an advancing civilization; he emphasizes the greater productivity of voluntary cooperation in a free market economy, the moral degeneration of a people subjected to State direction and socialistic conformity. His is the philosophy of free enterprise, free trade, free men.

But the socialists—George never once failed to point out his opposition to their doctrines—adopted him for reasons similar to those of the labor unionists. His name was valuable. In those days (long before it invaded Park Avenue), socialism's roster consisted almost entirely of Teutonic and Slavic names. The people dismissed them as "furriners." To overcome this barrier to a consideration of their doctrine the socialists, always expedient, sought a leader with an Anglo-Saxon name, regardless of its owner's sociopolitical views; this compromise between doctrine and respectability has not altogether ceased. George has not yet lived down the charge of being a "socialist" mainly because of his socialistic hangers-on in 1886—to the constant chagrin and annoyance of the students of his philosophy.

In every reform campaign malcontents of every description become articulate, and the popular "liberal" candidate, no matter how definite his program, must sustain the weight of their incongruous attachment. George was no exception. To this day there are those who vehemently claim him for their economic and philosophic guide,

and yet propose ideas which are antipathetical to everything he taught.

Up to the time of the campaign of 1886 scholarly consideration was being given, though grudgingly, to George's economic theories and his social philosophy. But the moment he entered the political arena with his "single tax" he was conveniently dismissed with professorial disdain as a mountebank, a nostrum-peddler. As a result the ignorance of George's theories displayed by recognized economists and sociologists is astounding. Text books to which students are exposed make statements about these theories which are just not true; the writers palpably are not familiar with their subject.

COMES THE YEAR 1932—and an inconspicuous soul who for forty years had been teaching, like many of the followers of George, among his business associates, at public forums, in his home. Oscar H. Geiger decided that it was time to rid this philosophy of its political stigma, to rub off its erroneous label, to present it in its fullness.

He worked out a catechetical manual—a series of questions and answers in the Socratic method. He rented a room. He gathered about him some students and proceeded to found the Henry George School of Social Science. Eighty-four students came the first year.

The economic philosophy of Henry George is built upon two absolutes: first, that man seeks to satisfy his desires with the least effort, and secondly,

that his desires are unlimited. It does not endow these absolutes with ethical content; it does not moralize about the observation of fact. But, resting its case on how man reacts to his economic environment, it unavoidably reaches conclusions which emphasize the dignity of the individual. Perhaps that is the reason its advocates assume individual proprietary and missionary rights in the philosophy. So that, when Mr. Geiger, his heart succumbing to the strain of long hours of punishing work, died in the summer of 1934, these "graduates" and some of the "old timers," took over the job of carrying-on.

IN THE SIX YEARS since then, some unique practices and policies have shaped themselves into a distinct pattern; yet this unconscious moulding of the school's unwritten constitution can be traced directly to the philosophy of its guiding genius. Its faculty, for instance, consists entirely of volunteers. Not only do they teach without pay, but each according to his means contributes to the school's budget, usually by additional services. They come from all walks of life, running the economic gamut from clerks and WPA workers to manufacturers and bond brokers; they include the Brahmins of Boston and immigrants of comparatively recent vintage; Catholics, Jews, Protestants and agnostics; former socialists, anarchists and rock-ribbed reactionaries; many with college degrees and a few more fortunate with less to unlearn. They

have only one thing in common: an appreciation of the principles of a free economy, and a firm conviction that the widespread understanding of these principles is the essential condition of that economy.

THE CONSTANTLY-GROWING number of instructors soon enabled the school to start classes in such rent-free quarters as Y. M. C. A. buildings, club rooms, churches, even homes. Outside of New York the educational fever spread to old-timers who, finding the propagandist and political methods a forlorn hope, had quit completely. It was hard to learn the new way. For many years the followers of George were recognized by their boring sincerity; one could almost recognize the "Ancient Mariner" look in their eyes as they proceeded to expound to innocent bystanders. Now they were expected calmly and objectively to lead their quizzical students step by step from definitions of terms to irrefutable economic laws to consequent conclusions. It was hard work. But many took to it, and trained new teachers; so that today there are forty classes continuously operating in Chicago, twenty-five in New Jersey, over a dozen in the Boston area, and anywhere from one to a dozen in St. Louis, Pittsburgh, San Francisco, Detroit, Philadelphia, Montreal, Toronto—and others springing up sporadically in large or small towns, wherever one feels competent and gets the urge. There are nearly five hun-

dred teachers throughout the country. Classes range from five to fifty students.

The conviction that political economy can and should be taught by non-professionals to the general public also finds its warrant in the writings of Henry George. Pointing out time and again the confusion among the experts—a confusion painfully dramatized during the past ten years of economic experimentation in this and other countries—George says: "We cannot safely leave . . . political economy to college professors. The people themselves must think." Again: "Political Economy is the simplest of sciences. It is but the intellectual recognition, as related to social life, of laws which in their moral aspect men instinctively recognize." And again: "The power to reason correctly on general subjects is not to be learned in schools, nor does it come from special knowledge. It results from care in separating, from caution in combining, from the habit of asking ourselves the meaning of the words we use and making sure of one step before building another on it—and above all, from loyalty to truth."

It follows that the Socratic method is standard pedagogical practice in the school. Students are required to read the text, but are not required to accept its conclusions, or the interpretations offered by the instructor. So long as the discussion is confined to the subject matter of the lesson it is unrestricted. In fact, the practise is to provoke discussion where acceptance seems too

willing, on the theory that such acceptance does not betoken the kind of understanding that will resist counter-argument.

BY 1936 the funds of the school, which up to that time had come largely from students, were augmented by considerable contributions from old-timers. A substantial bequest from one who had pooh-poohed the idea a few years previously provided the purchase price of the five-story building which the New York school acquired in 1938.

While the depression period undoubtedly helped to attract the forty-thousand people who enrolled in the classes during the past seven years—about half complete the basic course—this period saw also the growing acceptance by a depression-ridden people of collectivist principles and practises. A man working for the government, one living in a governmentally subsidized house, or one whose brother recently closed a lucrative deal with the government, would tend to build up an emotional resistance to doctrines which deny the divinity of the State.

The school found that its basic course—called "Fundamental Economics and Social Philosophy"—merely jarred the student from his befetished moorings. Ten two-hour sessions, even though supplemented with diligent home study, were not enough. Counteracting this study is not only current political acceptance of Statist ideas, but also the influence of college and school courses

in economics which tend toward collectivistic solutions of social problems. Current literature, reflecting the influence of Marx, is another conditioning influence that makes the road for individualistic teaching extremely difficult. So, the curriculum grew gradually to nine courses, including a final one which concerns itself with a critical analysis of Marxist economics.

Attendance at all the courses, once a week, covers two years. More courses are in the making. A nominal fee is charged for the advanced courses, partly to exclude the merely curious, partly to help the school's finances.

What is the ultimate purpose of the school? That is a question propounded not only by outsiders, but also by students who, like the enthusiasts of 1886, are anxious "to do something about it." Invariably the proposition to form some sort of organization suggests itself. The idea of political action is taboo; the history of such efforts has made it so. But among people who have found a common platform, the urge to

stand upon it *en masse* for the sense of importance it gives them is strong and in the American tradition. Yet the danger of attempting to substitute mass action for popular understanding is manifest.

Therefore, the school has no organization—not even an alumni association. It has no political ideology. It attracts people from all camps, and sends them forth as untrammelled with ritual as when they came, with the hope that they will freely and without direction spread the teachings of Henry George; that the principles of a free economy may become the common knowledge and the common purpose of an intelligent people. As Henry George says:

"Social reform is not to be secured by noise and shouting; by complaints and denunciation; by the formation of parties, or the making of revolutions; but by the awakening of thought and the progress of ideas. Until there be correct thought, there cannot be right action; and when there is correct thought, right action will follow."

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A Monthly Critical Journal of Social and Economic Affairs

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