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A Great Experiment

The Henry George School of Social Science is a challenging experiment in adult education. In subject matter, methods and scope it defies tradition and refutes accepted educational conventions. Yet as an institution for spreading knowledge, even conviction, it has, in the five years since its humble start, proven itself.

Beginning with the goal—since that is the guiding principle which determines every detail of its plan—the School proposes to teach fundamental economics to the general public; not to make of every man in the street an economist, but in order that a sufficiently large number of citizens may be so familiar with the economic forces that shape social trends as to exert an influence on the body politic. It is, therefore, a school with a definite educational purpose. To whatever extent the school succeeds it must be an instrument of public good.

Its curriculum embraces but one subject, "Fundamental Economics and Social Philosophy." This indicates the scope of the School. The problem of making a living, regardless of his particular vocation or avocation, is the problem of every man, and the solution of that one problem is therefore the concern of society as a whole and of its individual units.

Every man has economic opinions. He must have, merely because he is daily confronted in his personal life with such concepts as "wages," "capital," "prices," "rent," "money," and so forth. Complete ignorance of these ideas would, in a complicated social order, render one as helpless as a babe. This being so—the School reasons—everybody should be interested in obtaining a clearer understanding of these all-important economic concepts. And every thinking citizen would be deeply interested if the subject were presented in a meaningful manner.

The interest shown by college graduates (to whom economics was indeed the 'dismal" course) at the Henry George School indicates that it is not economics as a study, but the way it is taught, that makes it abhorrent. It must be remembered that in taking this course at the School they do so for no ulterior motive. For the School gives no degrees, its courses are not recognized by the degree-giving institutions, and there is no way in which the students can turn this knowledge to their pecuniary advantage. This is the miracle of the Henry George School. While the mental training of this study is of undoubted value to the student, it is of value to him only in a general way, as a cultural discipline. But, in enrolling its students the School holds forth no utilitarian purpose. It offers to its students only an opportunity to understand the fundamentals of economics. There must be something in that appeal for over 20,000 have up to this writing enrolled in the course.

Every student is a challenge to the School. Every student assumes that he will be asked to buy something, to join something, to do something besides studying a book and attending class. It takes at least four sessions to overcome these suspicions.

When they come to the classes the students are told to accept no statement of the instructor, or in the textbook, without critical examination. The instructor does not teach. He asks a series of questions, based upon the textbook, which the students are encouraged to discuss. He places himself on an intellectual par with his students. He does not tell them, he reasons with them. They educate themselves.

The instructors are not professionals, which is the one reason for the solid growth of the school. They are volunteers, coming from all walks of life, giving their services freely to advance a social idea. There are about three hundred of them now, and Teachers Training Classes are being conducted in many cities. As fast as instructors qualify classes for them are formed. Their very sincerity of purpose attracts the interest of the students, and is in itself a pedagogical instrument.

The classrooms are wherever places can be obtained. In school buildings, parish houses, Y.M.C.A.s, community centers, court houses, home, offices—all rent free. In some cities central headquarters, which also serve for classrooms, are maintained; and in New York an eight room building is occupied. But, the "campus" really includes hundreds of rent-free rooms.

There are no examinations. If through the discussion method the understanding of the subject is not evidenced no written answers to formal questions will assure it. At the conclusion of the ten-weeks course the student is flatly informed that he has just started to learn, and is encouraged to continue reading. In many cities advanced courses are given, and it is interesting to note that the majority of those who complete the fundamental course are anxious to study further.

Graduation usually brings the query "where do we go from here," and the School is then confronted with the problem of avoiding the very propagandist or political organization which the students on enrolling feared they would be asked to join. Americans are inveterate organizers. Organizations become ritualistic, destroy ideals, involve personal ambitions, and discourage individual initiative. The School feels that its educational ideals will become perverted by formal organization and therefore adheres to its policy of extending its work through the voluntary efforts of its teachers and class secretaries.

Finally, its finances. All that can be said of this vital subject is this: The School is supported by the voluntary contributions of its graduates and friends. Truly a great educational experiment.

—F. C.