

# BY

the Way...

by Lindy Davies

## Popular Education

We occasionally get inquiries, here at the Henry George Institute, about how to secure academic credit for our courses. The answer we give may seem odd: "No, we do not offer academic credit; we offer the conceptual tools that can enable any thinking person to understand today's baffling economic problems!"

Amazingly, people continue to take our courses. Over the years, various colleges have seen fit to grant credit for our courses, but we have never sought accreditation. Our curriculum will not confer any credential or professional skill. We offer learning for its own sake, in the proud (but all-but-forgotten) tradition of popular education.

Whatever else we do here at HGI, we are certainly going against the tide of educational policy and practice. The idea of education being inherently desirable, of learning being its own reward, is just not fashionable. The liberal arts degree, that last holdout of idealistic navelgazing, is increasingly seen as a career move, a proving ground in the struggle for scarce spots in elite schools of law, business or medicine. I have seen parents of high school seniors demand that their child only show up for that one required English course and nothing else. Art, music and theatre programs are always the first to be axed when budgets run short. Education today is considered an investment, not an enrichment.

It wasn't always that way. It is hard for many people to imagine, for example, how *Progress and Poverty* could ever have been a runaway best seller — but it was! Most people had dramatically longer attention spans a hundred years ago. Large crowds would gather to hear the lengthy discourse of good speakers. The Lincoln-Douglas debates went on for hours and hours.

Indeed, most schoolkids who read Lincoln's Gettysburg Address never learn the thing about that speech that truly astounded its audience: its breathtaking shortness! The warm-up speaker for the President on that day spoke, as was customary, for over an hour. It was simply incredible — and terribly disconcerting, I'll warrant — for the President to speak so briefly.

No, there was a time when popular education was all the rage. Of course, the process probably wasn't pure. Most of those popular educators had some ax to grind, faith to evangelize or bottle of snake oil to sell. But my point here is that at one time, it was actually possible to **sell** snake oil by explaining ideas, principles and theories, simply for the listener's enrichment! (*continued on page 39*)

In the field of political economy, that sort of thing obviously had to be stopped. Here was this Henry George, going around telling people that they needed no special training — that the problems of poverty, depressions, money, banking and trade could be understood by anyone willing to ponder them. No, that wouldn't do at all. Society's rent-collectors made sure to hire the top intellectual guns to create a study of economics was abstruse, enigmatic, mathematical — and the domain of credentialed experts.

This way of thinking grew, kudzu-like, until by somewhere around the 1950s people hardly trusted themselves to do **anything** without expert advice. Women could no longer trust even their own breast milk; trained scientists would use advanced research to concoct nutrition for their babies. Nobody could so much as rewire a lamp without calling in a trained specialist. To understand the meaning of all this reliance on specialists, one had to consult a specially trained sociologist; there was just far, far too much to understand and one could never hope to catch up.

To me, the process reached its apotheosis when Ronald Reagan, making a televised speech early in his first term, displayed a graph, comparing two projections of economic health over the next few years: one robust, soaring curve representing his administration's program, and the other anemic, faltering line showing the best the Democrats had to offer. The interesting thing about this chart — which was presented as the work of teams of credentialed experts — was that the co-ordinates were not labeled; and the President himself did not trouble to name them. And what did it matter anyway? Even if they were named, **we** certainly couldn't understand what they meant. We just had to trust the President's choice of specialists.

There is indeed something very satisfying about learning for its own sake. And we at the Henry George Institute aren't pure either. We too have an axe to grind; in our case it is a comprehensive program of economic reform that has never been successfully refuted, and has never been more desperately needed. Although the reform must ultimately be implemented via the process of democratic politics, the most urgent imperative is to get the word out — to get people to understand basic principles and to think for themselves.

And in the process, we have discovered how very rewarding it is to show people — often for the first time in their lives — that they are able to do that! GJ