Public Education as a Course of Social Action

BY WILL LISSNER

ONE of the surest signs of virility in the Georgeist movement is the criticism which constantly appears of the strategy and tactics with which Georgeists are engaged in working for the establishment of an ethical, democratic social order. Throughout their history, Georgeists have never taken strategic policies and tactical efforts for granted. Even when embarked upon them they have continued to scrutinize, study and weigh their efficacy. It is because of this that they may claim to merit, at least in part, Professor Broadus Mitchell's generous tribute to the intelligence of their efforts.

In the framework of this the Henry George School of Social Science has a prominent place. As the most successful effort undertaken in recent years by those who believe that the socio-ethical economics and the progressive social philosophy of Henry George deserve a more influential role in American thought, it is, of course, representative of the most progressive tendencies in the movement. Even before the permanency of the venture was as definitely established as it is today, those who were contributing valuable time or were sacrificing income or savings to support this institution constantly questioned its course.

This deserves to be set down, if only for its historical interest.

I

This tendency of Georgeists is derived, of course, from the social philosophy that animates them—from the framework of ideas to which they refer practical problems whose solution is not found in measurements. It is only natural that the tendency should have been especially marked among supporters of the Henry George School of Social Science; Oscar H. Geiger was its founder.

I can still hear Oscar Geiger's voice ringing in my ears, expounding the principle—one of his most cherished convictions derived from the Georgeist social philosophy—of an inner unity between ends and means that bars any divorcement of ends from the means with which they are sought to be achieved, that demands, nay, even furnishes the same criteria for the determination of practical methods (as, say, the choice of economic devices) as are employed in the selection and formulation of practicable aims (as social goals).

I can still see the look of justifiable pride which brightened his face as he showed me, in his apartment one day, the exposition of this principle by his son, Dr. George Raymond Geiger, in the galley proofs of "The Philosophy of Henry George" which the author's father was then engaged in checking. The whole book itself bore testimony to the principle. Oscar Geiger thought his son's work was a precise statement of his own convictions in more modern language than that in which he had arrived at them; I thought—privately—that the son had shown himself worthy of his father, that the father had made himself worthy of such a son.

The doctrine that the end justifies the means—falsely ascribed to the Jesuits who immediately proscribed the one Jesuit book in which it appeared around the turn of the sixteenth century—was one Oscar Geiger never tired of refuting with weighty, reasoned argument.

No follower of Thomas a Kempis—or Groot or whoever it was that really laid down the injunctions in "The Imitation of Christ"—ever engaged in this type of soul-searching more earnestly than the supporter of the Henry George School of Social Science, a fact which I think deserves to be entered into the record.

I can speak of these matters with some assurance. Before the School opened its doors I was a student. I think I may claim to be one of the very first students on those grounds, because, since there was yet no School then for him to refer me to, Oscar Geiger was kind enough to have me visit his home weekly throughout the winter preceding the School's establishment so that he could tutor me personally in the subjects which later became its curriculum.

On the other hand, the claim would be a sentimentalism: Oscar Geiger was a teacher all his life and hundreds must have preceded me. But at any rate, when the School opened its doors at last, I was one of the eighty-four students of the first year. Joseph Dana Miller was a frequent visitor and a welcome one Oscar Geiger yielded the rostrum to Stephen Bell when we took up international trade. Frank Chodorov used to come in from Minnesota or some other outlandish place to discuss the School's problems with its director.

Norman C. B. Fowles, who passed from among us the other day, sat next to me in the only classroom. And I can still remember the light in Oscar Geiger's eyes one day at the end of that year when, haggard with overwork and worry, he fixed an evangelical look upon Fowles and me and said: "Never mind about me. The work will go on. Your consciences will never let you rest easily if it doesn't."

(At Oscar Geiger's funeral not many days later—an outpouring of student affection that jammed the school's limited quarters—Norman Fowles recalled this to me as one summoned on a mission; and later he told me that it was this that determined him to accept the vacant directorship over the urgent objections of his physician and family.)

II

Most of the debate of the School's supporters centered about its charter from the Board of Regents of the University of the State of New York (the State Education Department). Oscar Geiger went to great lengths to get

this and it was granted, I think, only as a tribute to his own integrity and scholarship and to his extraordinary capacity as a teacher.

Actually, the School he visioned had only dubious prospects and uncertain support. He himself was staking his small lifelong savings and—perhaps I ought not to speak of this lest it embarass a friend—his largest contributor was one who was sacrificing an unbelievable percentage of an executive salary. The prospects of continued support were more meagre than the prospects of students.

One of the things that helped hasten Oscar Geiger to his grave, I think, was the diffidence with which most of the movement's veterans greeted his effort. Call a roll of the trustees and incorporators, add half a dozen to a dozen more names, and you have a complete roster of the old-timers who were willing to gamble with the founder.

There has been a lot of band-wagon jumping in recent years, but all of the remarks cast about "recent adherents to our movement" (with an implied emphasis on the adjective) will not erase the speech of Oscar Geiger at Town Hall in 1934, when he told how everyone he tried to enthuse about the School had sought to dissuade and discourage him except a handful of men and women he named and pointed out. Even Charles O'Connor Hennessy, who turned out before his death to be one of the School's most valuable supporters, had no faith in Geiger's effort at the beginning. Hennessy used to admit it, with a frankness and honesty one finds was not contagious.

The Board of Regents was willing to wait five years before it counted the books in the School's library (Bolton Hall was forever in a dither lest its size be inadequate) or examined more closely the need for the School, the practicability of its methods, the adequacy of its equipment and its financial support. It must take pride in faith in intangibles now that the School is permanently established and its advanced technique the admiration of experts in adult education.

Oscar Geiger considered, and rightly so, I think, that the granting of the charter marked a turn in the history of the movement. Joseph Dana Miller, who more than any other of Henry George's close associates is qualified to speak upon this history, once wrote, it should be recalled, that the movement wasn't in the business of making history, its own or the country's, in the years just preceding the School's founding.

Oscar Geiger would point out that Georgeists had tried the method of political coalition with a third party, in George's time and in our own. (Geiger was a ringleader in the Committee of Forty-eight, the abortive venture in 1920.) He would point out that Georgeists had tried concentrating their forces on a single state, Delaware. They had tried the method of setting up their own political party. They had tried initiative petitions in several states, referenda in many, independent legislative action in municipalities, states and even in the Nation. They had made deals with the old parties. deals with the new; they had been sold out more than once. The political results justified R. G. Tugwell in writing in an encyclopedia that comparatively little had come of George's far-reaching work by way of practical achievement.

Actually, at the time when he launched the School, Geiger looked upon the movement's situation as a challenge to him and to all who cared. Many seem to overlook that in the post-war years, when a delusion of speculative prosperity gripped the country, the movement fell to such a low estate it was a miracle Joseph Dana Miller, through the movement's organ, LAND AND FREEDOM, was able to keep it alive.

Oscar Geiger understood that Mr. Miller's single-handed achievement was no neat trick but an heroic effort which taxed his every energy. He made this clear in a speech on his aims and hopes for the Henry George School, read for him by Mr. Miller at the Seventh Henry George Congress in Memphis in 1932. He said then:

"It is thirty-five years now since Henry George left this sphere of life. Those who knew his philosophy while he lived are all now on in years and few are left to carry on the work that he began. Those who did not know his teachings while he lived, likewise are on in years and burdened with cares, and comparatively few of these have more than heard of him or of his books. Those who have come upon the scene since he has gone, have had little chance and very poor advantage to learn of the great truth which he made clear and which alone can make men free."

John J. Murphy had been obliged to report to the Fourth International Conference to Promote Land Value Taxation and Free Trade in Edinburgh three years earlier: " . . . In general it may be stated that, during the World War and since its conclusion, there has been little effort to affect taxation—national, state or local—by legislation." Mentioning the brief list of Georgeist activities then, he concluded: "The men engaged in the work include several of the most devoted men in the movement, but they fail to obtain the general support of Single Taxers, nor have they been able to attract any considerable measure of public attention. . . . I wish I could present a more optimistic picture."

The School, as Oscar Geiger visioned it, was a break with all the unsuccessful methods of political maneuvering. It was a new course. To establish an ethical, democratic order, he believed, it was not enough to write economic devices for its achievement into the statute books. First, he thought, the masses of the people through their leaders must be helped to discover what they really wanted and needed in this respect and then they must be helped to discover how they can obtain this. It was because he saw no royal road to the good society, no short

cut to economic democracy, that he tackled the herculean task of founding the School.

III

Oscar Geiger recognized the job as one of education, one of adult education. (It happens that my own higher education was largely in this field, so that we had a common interest in educational techniques and used to discuss them—I had an academic interest in the field only, for my profession is in quite another field than teaching.)

This educational job, as he saw it, was the basic one; above all, the neglected one. Create an informed influential public opinion, he felt, and the political side of the task would take care of itself. This educational job, he thought, could only be done when the educators went among the people in the role of educators. Not as propagandists. Not as politicians. Not as agitators for a special interest. Not as missionaries for scripture and calico. Not as paid evangelists, but as leaders of groups of earnest, selfless men, seeking the truth wherever it might be found. The charter, be believed, established that character in the institution he founded.

We used to recall his position when we debated whether the School would prosper best with the charter or without it. We used to recall how we alumni (I among them) would say to him, with typical youthful impatience:

"We've got the vision of a free society, and we've got an understanding of its concrete economic foundations. But now that we've got it, what will we do with it?"

And we used to recall his bland reply, ever reiterated to alumni:

"Now that you've 'got' it, what will you *do* with it? I don't care what you *do* with it; because I know what you'll *do* with it."

He did know. I would have realized this even if, in the few months before his death, he had not confided in me his intimate opinions about current social tendencies and about what he thought the movement ought to do in the event that it was confronted with certain alternative situations, situations which then, as now, were likely to develop.

He did know and we've been *doing* it, just as he had planned that we should. The record of our activities and influence is there for anyone to examine who wishes to; it is neither a short nor an unimpressive one. We have consciences and we sleep at night. That record is a vindication of Oscar Geiger's belief that the charter would never hamstring the School, would never bar effectual action.

We did recognize in our discussions that the charter did keep the School within certain limitations.

For one thing, it assured that the minimum of educational standards, which distinguish New York State Schools alone from all others, would be maintained.

It assured that the director would be a man with some experience in the conduct of a responsible enterprise and some culture, as Geiger, Fowles, Dorn and Chodorov have been, rather than a glib wire-puller.

It assured that the teaching would be in the hands of competent instructors rather than the windbags who always infest movements.

It assured that the endowment would not be dissipated in overhead—in providing jobs for professional executive secretaries, the "bureaucrats of causes."

It assured that every penny of financial contributions would be used for educational purposes and not diverted to political adventuring.

It assured that those who came to seek guidance in the fulfillment of their responsibilities as members of humanity and as citizens of their country would get that guidance; and it assured that they would not be letting themselves into the clutches of unscrupulous manipulators of the popular will.

It assured that the corporation's board of directors—the trustees, a hand-picked, self-perpetuating body like the governing boards of all Georgeist organizations but in this case, as in that of the Robert Schalkenbach Foundation, no affront to the organization's democratic philosophy since its status as a hand-picked self-perpetuating body is one peculiarly suitable for endowed educational institutions and one dictated for these alone by tradition and law—would be held to their responsibilities by a higher power, a written contract entered into with the representatives of the people of the State.

And it assured, finally, that an adequate plant would be maintained, with adequate equipment.

To be sure, we recognized these things as limitations, as others have so recognized them. But the more we thought about it the more we welcomed these limitations. They were not the least among the factors responsible for the success of the School.

IV

The mention of the maintenance of educational standards recalls an amusing incident. The special techniques of the School—use of the discussion method, relation of theory to current events having living reality in the student's own world, the active participation of the student in the educational process, employment of the catechetical method not to teach but to set off the discussion among students by which they teach themselves when under competent leadership—these were, of course, laid down by Oscar Geiger. But when he passed on, his teaching materials covered only part of the present curriculum and were in the form of notes which required not only editing but adaptation for less skilled teachers than he was.

This was done, but with Oscar Geiger gone we always suspected the adequacy of the supplementary work. We once were worried because a minority of registrants did not complete the course. Mrs. Anna George deMille, daughter of Henry George and indefatigible president of

the School's board of trustees, and I were dispatched one time by Otto K. Dorn, the trustee who was then the director, to pay several visits to Professor John Dewey to see what could be done about this problem.

Professor Dewey, whose system of progressive education has remoulded the practises of the teaching profession in many parts of the world, studied our registration and attendance figures. He questioned us about our teaching materials and we explained that we were always uncertain about them and used to fashion them from experience in the classroom, test them under varying conditions and constantly revise them in the light of further experience. We thought we needed an expert to change our system completely.

After he had looked over the materials and talked to one or two friends, Professor Dewey entertained us again. He seemed quite amused when he explained that the student loss we were worrying about actually was one of the lowest in the whole field of adult education and really was a remarkably successful record.

He told us, in the kind, gentle way that is characteristic of this foremost scholar and educator, that he thought we really ought to carry on as we had been doing, in the assurance that an expert, no matter where we recruited him from, could not much improve the method that seemed, on the basis of the results we related, to do our job so efficiently.

Some time before, well-intentioned professors had sought to make clear to me what distinguished the progressive methods of Dr. Dewey and his collaborators from traditional ones. But it was only after I pondered these remarks of Dr. Dewey that I realized that the basic test of an educational technique was whether its procedures were drawn from life and projected back into it, not whether its theoretical basis followed fullsome expositions in forbidding textbooks; whether it worked, not whether it squared with the traditional opinions of experts.

And it was only then that I realized why Oscar Geiger would not even open his School until he had experimented with his method, until he had tested his techniques at Pythian Temple in Manhattan, until he had tempered his ideas in the fires of practise. It was only then that I came to understand that the veneration Geiger accorded Dewey was not merely homage to a courageous social theorist, but acknowledgment of intellectual debt to an educational practitioner.

V

We, of course, have become permeated with the School's theory of action in the course of applying our energies actively along the lines that it demands. We understand the theory because we have always seen it in relation to the life around us in which it has its only meaning. These things seem so simple and commonplace to us that sometimes we cannot look sympathetically upon otherwise intelligent persons who seem to misunderstand our method, to miscomprehend that our method is a precise course of action distinguished by a zone, not a line, from any other upon which the movement has embarked.

The evidence of this misunderstanding has always been small but it may be growing. So perhaps it is well that someone should turn from pursuit of that course of action and take the trouble to define it in measured terms, to explain what it implies to set down in limiting prose what has become known by conversation, debate and more direct experience to the thousands identified with the School over the country.

The misunderstanding is grave enough to require plain-speaking. That most of those who misunderstand are those who have not been active as teachers, secretaries, administrators, financial contributors or in other capacities in the School's crusade for economic literacy should not deter us; it is to be expected that those who divorce theory from the experience out of which it sprang, from the experience to which it is to be applied, should be the first victims of confusion.

These persons demand: "Do you not abjure politics?" And we say we do, not merely to the extent demanded by the charter, not merely because the charter demands it (for we could give up the charter with an infinitesimal amount of the trouble it took to get and keep it) but because we, as members together of an institution, have foresworn political maneuvering as a matter of principle.

"Then how," they declare triumphantly, "do you expect to put our principles into practise?"

There is a naivête implied in this declaration that one who—as I did—followed a state's politics for several years as a professional observer can readily appreciate. Apparently these people think that the statutes which now are the laws of the land were enacted primarily as the result of pressures generated by political clubs, the offices of legislators or the headquarters of legislative associations. Students of society ought to know, nevertheless, that he wastes his time who raises straws against the winds of legislation in these halls. The laws, regardless of where their technicalities are whipped into written form, arise from the offices—or the drawing rooms—of private individuals for the most part. And particularly of the tax laws it can be said that the last place to look for an intelligent discussion of pending legislation in this field is in a political club.

But the answer to our triumphant friends has already been given. We have abjured politics, but what we specifically have abjured is *politics as the predominant field of our collective activity*. As individuals, we have not abjured life, nor politics as a department of life. (With Father Edward McGlynn we can say that when we took the cross of service to humanity in this crusade we did not surrender our temporal citizenship.) We follow our course of action not as a method of expounding principles —as principles apart from practise we have no interest

in them—but we follow it as a method of putting the principles into practise.

It is amusing to see these very persons raise the question and in the next breath tell us frankly that we are doing an excellent job of teaching Henry George's principles. For if our course of action were not a method of putting Georgeist principles into practise it would be a negation of the fundamental principle that distinguished George as economist and social philosopher. John Dewey set this out very clearly when he wrote (in the Foreword to G. R. Geiger's "Philosophy of Henry George," Macmillan, New York, 1933, pp. ix–x):

"Henry George is typically American not only in his career but in the practical bent of his mind, in his desire to *do* something about the phenomena he studied and not to content himself with a theoretic study. . . . There is something distinctive in the ardent crusade which George carried on. His ideas were always of the nature of a challenge to action and a call to action. The 'science' of political economy was to him a body of principles to provide the basis of policies to be executed, measures to be carried out, not just ideas to be intellectually entertained, plus a faint hope that they might sometime affect action. His ideas were intrinsically 'plans of action'."

If the spirit of Dewey, father of a successful educational process, is found in the School—and I think I have indicated how large a debt the School owes to the educator, its honorary president, a debt which would have been incurred even if Dewey had never set foot within its doors, if there had not been the slightest intimate contact between the institution and the educational philosopher—even if the educator had never said a word about George's or anybody's social theory—if the spirit is found there then its course of action is truly a method of putting principles into practise.

For if Dewey's idea, Dewey's process, mean anything at all they are identified with the notion that democracy is the growth of popular enlightenment, not a form of popular rule. Understanding, in this view (I avail myself of the phrases of a recent commentator who happens to be, and not by accident, a socio-ethical economist), is more important than authority. Thus democracy can be identified with education in the broad sense as a process for achieving this popular understanding.

"What makes the devices of suffrage and representation important, and what makes them work in so far as they do work, is general literacy, the growth of the informed interest of people generally in their general as well as individual concerns," notes Professor C. E. Ayres (in "Dewey: Master of the Commonplace," *The New Republic*, New York, Jan. 18, 1939, pp. 303–6). " . . . The keynote of modern education is its continuity with life. That is what Dewey has stood for always—the continuity of learning with doing and living—and not for any particular educational fad of the 'child-centered' schools. Its most important result for the country as a whole . . . is a phase of the larger process of the realization of democracy and the emergence of the modern mind from immemorial tradition."

Dr. Dewey himself summed this up back in 1903 when he wrote (in "Studies in Logical Theory"):

"Thinking is a kind of activity which we perform at specific need just as at other need we engage in other sorts of activity. . . . The measure of its success, the standard of its validity, is precisely the degree in which thinking actually disposes of the difficulty and allows us to proceed with the more direct modes of experiencing, that are forthwith possessed of more assured and deepened value."

In this way, says Dewey's most recent expositor, "he closed the abyss between thought and things on the brink of which generation after generation of philosophers had mulled and stumbled." Dewey said this in a word when he declared that the fundamental assumption of his point of view "is *continuity* in and of experience."

It must not be overlooked that the democratic principle was explained by Dewey in the same terms as those employed by Henry George.

"Social reform," George wrote in "Social Problems," "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. . . . The great work of the present . . . is the work of education—the propagation of ideas. It is only as it aids this that anything else can avail."

Dewey understood the democratic principle to be "precisely that of solving problems not by 'decisive' authority but with understanding and the slow but eventually sure seepage of ideas through the whole community." (Parenthetically I might ask if it is not true if the advocates of temperance, who obtained enactment of the Prohibition Amendment by the most skillful political strategy, had understood what these plain sentences imply, would the old-time saloon with all its attendant evils be the curse it is today?)

The School has had two alternative courses before it. It could have developed as the training school of a sect, training recruits for the sectarian activities traditional with an isolated group. Or it could make itself a positive force spurring the growth of enlightenment in the whole community—it could undertake the task of building the ethical, democratic social order that the first school would only dream about and its few adherents would never live to see. It has chosen the second course and is in the thick of the struggle. It is true to the principles of libertarian democracy to which George, Dewey, and Geiger, devoted their careers.

(*To be Continued*)