

# How Typical Is the Typical Student?

By DOROTHY SARA

**S**TAGE fright is the ever recurring experience of the instructor, at the opening of each ten-week course in fundamental economics and social philosophy, at the Henry George School of Social Science. The feeling of apprehension is normal; it is based on the "blind date" concept, because the teacher and the students may or may not be attracted to each other at first sight. If the student group showed similarity in mentality, attitudes, age and personality, the work in the classroom would be clear, uphill learning together. But each new class is composed of an easily discernible heterogeneity; the teacher can only hope that, before the ten weeks are over, these distinct individuals will find a common bond in study. When this happens the instructor's tension is released and the role of "moderator" for a mutually interested group of students becomes a joy. This sense of comfort is, of course, merely temporary — very soon comes the next date with the next new group of students, and it starts all over again!

I am often asked, "What type of student comes to your classes?" and find much difficulty in responding. There is no type. There are only people. Each student comes to the Henry George School for individual reasons, which may be broken down loosely into these classifications: (1) an intellectual desire to explore the cause and cure of poverty, (2) an emotional desire to do the same, (3) the desire to meet new people, and (4) the desire to "sample" every free course available. Each is *seeking to satisfy a desire*, and some individuals find its fulfillment at the school, while others may not. Usually, my observation has been that those in the first three classifications are more likely to remain throughout the entire ten weeks of the course, while those in the latter group may drift away by the second or third lesson. Occasionally, however, a "sampler" remains to become a "graduate," then he often becomes most vociferous about his newly-found knowledge, and takes great satisfaction in the fact that he was at last able to curb his roaming tendencies and concentrate his enthusiasm on one subject.

The reasons for coming to the school are as diverse as the personalities of the individuals. During the opening class session, I try to find out why the students have enrolled, and their replies range from "I want to find out why, when I earn four times as much as I did ten years ago, I have less money left to enjoy," to

"Just curious, never studied economics and I thought I'd come in to find out what it's all about," or "I just figured something must be wrong, we have so many wars and we go from one depression to another." Some are quite frank in saying—"Oh, I have some spare time, and I thought I'd find out why this is a free course." The reasons they advance for coming to the school afford no rule on which we may base a premise as to whether or not they will complete the course. Some of the people who



start on a purely intellectual basis may lose interest; on the other hand some who were just "shopping around" may develop an exceptional enthusiasm, and go on to the advanced classes. About the time the teacher believes he or she can compile statistics on the percentages of those who will remain as serious students, and those who are merely "killing time," the intangible element of human nature enters to upset all the statistics. The excitement of teaching year after year is based largely on this factor of uncertainty.

Another clue to the students' attitudes is revealed when they tell us what prompted them to call. As one part of the amenities of the first evening's session, I like to find out how the

students heard of the school. Their answers may be "I got an announcement card in the mail, but I don't know who gave my name," or "I read an advertisement in the newspaper," or "One of my friends took a course, and suggested I come, too." Others read our class announcements on the bulletin boards of the public libraries. There is no one way to determine the most effective way of appealing to prospective students in adult education.

Citing a class which I had recently, we were a group of men and women, ranging in age from 20 to 70, who met one another for the first time in the classroom. Most were native Americans, and some came from various foreign countries—we had an interesting collection of accents and grammar, which sometimes occasioned good fun, and our foreign friends felt they were able to improve their "American" speech while learning about Henry George's theories and philosophy. Not wishing to rely on memory, I am copying the following list of occupations from the roll call of a "typical" class which I kept in file:

WOMEN

Radio writer	Lawyer
Clerk	Typist
Advertising writers (2)	Secretaries (4)
Housewives (2)	Bookkeepers (3)
Dietician	Y.W.C.A. worker

MEN

Draftsman	Accountant
Consultant	Advertising salesman
Army lieutenant	Y.M.C.A. secretary
Exporter	Teachers (2)
Buyer	Stock broker
Automobile dealer	Toolmaker
Actor	Engineer
Students (2)	Dentist
Lawyer	Retired

This variety of occupations, coupled with the wide range of the students' ages, home and educational backgrounds, and their distinctly individual emotional personalities, is hardly the "pat" answer which the questioner expects when he asks what type of student gravitates to this school.

We would be carrying optimism to an absurd degree if we said or thought that a class of this kind could run on a consistently even keel. Frequently an imbalance occurs where one or two students assume a persistently belligerent attitude and fight the teacher and Henry George's views on every point, in an effort to prove their superiority. No matter how earnestly the teacher strives to maintain a harmonious classroom atmosphere, other students sometimes resent this sufficiently to discontinue attendance.

However, on the credit side, we can take pleasure in the many students who do graduate from the fundamental course. We also take pride in the number of students who return for advanced courses, and especially those who reach teachers training classes and later emerge as instructors themselves. This incentive—encouraging teachers to come up from the ranks—is highly regarded and appreciated by the students. The fact that they come to the school of their own free will, do not need to take entrance or graduating examinations, and are left strictly on their own to study and participate in the open classroom discussion, is a source of wonderment to many, and they are enthusiastic in expressing their gratitude.

At the end of ten weeks in the fundamental course, the class chooses (by democratic vote) the valedictorian to represent it at the commencement exercises. In about half the cases, the elected speaker turns out to be someone who, during the first two or three weeks, was shy and inarticulate, and suddenly blossomed forth as a vocal participant for the rest of the term. The impromptu speeches of three minutes' duration, given by the class representatives, are as versatile in theme and delivery as any cross section of New York could be. These expres-

*(Continued on Page Three, Column One)*

*(Continued from Page One)*

sions are a source of satisfaction to the teacher which cannot be measured by any material scale. Although no faculty members at the Henry George School receive a cent in monetary compensation, they feel amply rewarded if their graduating students show promise.

At the end of the course, the teacher relaxes and takes inventory:

There are always students who, with zealous ardor, ask, "If this is so good, why hasn't it been put into force? What can we do about it?"

There are some who can be recommended as potential teachers, either in the classroom or the correspondence course.

A few friendships have developed among some of the people in this heterogeneous group, based on their new common language and interests.

Occasionally there is a romance (a charming by-product of the school) which leads to matrimony.

Although groups which were "hand picked" might seem desirable, we have decided in favor of students drawn independently through a variety of announcements, advertisements and personal recommendations. The students pay no fee—the textbook is offered for sale at a nominal cost—but they are not even forced to buy that.

This paramount freedom which is inherent in Henry George's philosophy affords to the student a natural right to his individuality. Thus, the multi-faceted pattern, consisting of every kind of person, is the ideal one for us. If the class showed a preponderance of one type of personality and mind, one age, one occupational group, or one nationality, the work of the teacher would of course be simplified. The result, however, might be a lack of vitality, and students would be robbed of the benefits which come from meeting the challenges of a variety of opinions and people. The class which has a minimum of similarities is most exciting and stimulating — it offers the greatest attraction (aside from the subject itself) and affords opportunity for logical, objective discussion.

We cannot typify either our students or teachers. However, if the uncompromising inquirer presses you for an unqualified reply to his query about "what type comes to our classes," bring him to any evening session and let him see for himself. Perhaps he, too, may become one of us typical non-typical Georgists.