

MARRIAGE FOR SOCIALISM: EMOTIONS AND NOTIONS

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The Letters of Sidney and Beatrice Webb, edited by Norman Mackenzie, Vol. I: *Apprenticeships 1873-1892*, pp. xx + 453; Vol. II: *Partnership 1892-1912*, pp. xv + 405; Vol. III: *Pilgrimage 1912-1947*, pp. xii + 482, London: Cambridge University Press and London School of Economics, 1978.

Neither Sidney nor Beatrice spent much time reading Marx. In a speech in Moscow (in 1932) Beatrice indeed argued — to the evident embarrassment of her audience — that it was precisely because they were not orthodox Marxists that they were so very sympathetic to Soviet Communism. The Fabians “had never read Karl Marx.” For, “if they had read him they would not have understood him and if they had understood him they would not have agreed with him.” (III, 445) Although Sidney admits to Shaw to having bought Vol. II of *Das Kapital* (in 1885), he fears it was a very bad investment. “We shall find it very dull — in fact unendurable.” (I, 91) This did not stop the Webbs from regarding themselves as Socialists nor did it inhibit Beatrice from calling herself a Communist in old age. Of course, before Beatrice had met Sidney (and for quite a while after) she was neither Fabian nor Socialist, and Sidney’s own brand of Socialism was closer to Radicalism than to Collectivism. Collectivist Socialism, he wrote in 1886, was purely “an academic ideal like Plato’s republic” and not something one can win votes on; “no such change can come for many centuries ... no ten percent of us are fit for a Socialistic state yet.” (I, 102) However, if Socialism appeared to Sidney a remote and nebulous political reality, it nonetheless seemingly qualified eminently for wooing purposes. When all other ploys proved dismally unavailing — including Keats and Rosetti — Sidney invoked the “socialist cause” as an inducement to marriage. (I, 235) The theme was reiterated: “I am prepared to serve your life, and to ask nothing whatever in return, save only your work for Socialism...” (I, 270) It is not clear if it worked. The letters provide no clue as to what in the end prevailed upon Beatrice to change her persistent and categorical “no” into a qualified “yes”; but the idea of a common cause conceivably did not leave her quite cold, particularly since she was given every assurance that it was she who

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was to determine its nature and direction.

For sheer human interest Volume I is certainly the most revealing. Beatrice describes Sidney as "a remarkable little man with a huge head on a very thin body; a breadth of forehead quite sufficient to account for the encyclopaedic character of his knowledge, a Jewish nose, prominent eyes and mouth, somewhat unkempt, spectacles, and a most bourgeois black coat shiny with wear; somewhat between a London card and a German professor." (I, 128) Although she secretly agreed to marry the "ugly little man" in May 1891, "simply because you are a Socialist and I am a Socialist", she made it perfectly clear that "it is the head only that I am marrying." (I, 201 and 281) In contrast to Sidney, who kept no diary, Beatrice was possessed of a compelling need to record her inner states from adolescence to her death. Prone to severe depressions and suicidal phantasies, she alternated between craving for complete independence and solitude and a desperate longing for love and recognition. She was not going to be easy to live with. As well, Beatrice was a beautiful woman and she knew it. She knew also that, compared to her, Sidney had "no social position and less means" and that he was the last man her millionaire father would approve of. The most that her family and circle of friends would say for Sidney is that he had "a certain pushing ability." (I, 239 and 274) While she recognized that seen in this light and in the absence of any countervailing feelings on her part a union with Sidney was anything but a "good marriage", she could not wholly discount his good points, in particular those which would be of value to her scholarly ambitions. For she had to agree with Sidney that although she was good in interviewing and digging up facts she was a laboriously slow writer, whereas Sidney had the knack of ordering his thoughts quickly and of getting them down on paper as rapidly as he could articulate them in conversation. So, in the end, the "Beauty" chose the "Beast" (Sidney's way of putting it), probably to their mutual advantage and possibly for the advancement of "socialism". To judge by the letters, however, the Beast was decidedly more human than the Beauty.

Perhaps the most remarkable notion which the courting partners shared was Comte's idea of a well-regulated social system governed by an enlightened elite. Cooperatives were a most excellent instrument in keeping interest away from central government, the realm of experts. (I, 19-20) At any rate this is what Beatrice Potter maintained in 1883, reiterated in 1890 (to Sidney), and substantially upheld to the end of her life. Although Sidney essentially agreed with her elitism, he could not quite stomach her intellectual coldness, her disregard for the unfortunates at the bottom whose survival she deemed less important than the cultivation of the able and strong. (I, 137)

Beatrice's "intellectual coldness" derived from a reasoned conviction that state intervention in the form of unemployment benefits or public works projects had a demoralizing effect upon the worker. She saw proof of this in the

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fact that out of 135 Whitechapel men who applied to the Relief committee only fifteen accepted the offer to sweep the streets at two shillings a day. Hence she only grudgingly agreed to the principle that "the rich *must* keep the poor alive" on condition that "the poor, with liberty to increase, are not injurious to the community at large." (I, 53) Shortly after spending 120 pounds on a dress she could quite calmly declare — so severe was her intellectual consistency — that while the slow death of a hundred men through semi-starvation is "terribly sad", it does not follow from this that something must be done to prevent it.

Profoundly suspicious of political (let alone revolutionary) means as a vehicle of social change, she could likewise see no point in legislative measures designed to bring about a restructuring of property ownership. The workers must first learn the difficulties of management, the problems they will have to solve, before they can be expected to manage and to solve them. "Above all they must learn the absolute necessity of *strictness* of dealing, of self-control, and of patient temper — all qualities they are deficient in ... you cannot introduce corporate ownership until you get some corporate *feeling*." (I, 43) Presumably they could best learn to gain this feeling in the consumer co-ops which (in 1889) she regarded as decidedly preferable to the "catastrophic overturning of the existing order" preached by the Social Democratic Federation. (I, 68)

Not surprisingly, she put no great store by the Fabians in those days: "I do not think it is a matter of much intrinsic importance what happens to it [the Fabian Society]. It cannot be made into 'a great instrument of Progress' — its material is too poor." (I, 357) She feared that the abler members of the Fabian Society, such as Bernard Shaw and Graham Wallas, would lose interest before long and felt that the remainder were not worth preserving. Just as she thought of marriage as the "wastepaper-basket of the emotions", she saw the Fabian Society of 1891 as a future wastepaper-basket of the intellect.

The Rise and Fall of Permeation would not be an inappropriate title for the second volume of letters since the hallmark of the period it covers (1892-1912) consists in variously fated attempts to manipulate practising politicians by supplying ideas and tactics together with lunches and dinner parties. Although Beatrice found it far from easy to divest herself of her lingering "individualist antecedents", she now began to view herself as a Socialist, too, notwithstanding the fact that she (like Sidney) would have nothing to do with the diverse contemporary Socialist groups. Even when they abandoned the Liberal Party (after 1893) they refused to try their fortunes with the emerging alliance between Socialists and trade unionists that constituted the new Labour party. They chose, instead, to persist in high level wirepulling, perhaps without realizing that they were pulled more than they were pulling, that, far from promoting their own schemes they became the dupes of policies which were as

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removed from Liberalism as they were from Socialism. For, by the end of the century, their salon politics landed them practically in the camp of Tory imperialists. Not until 1914 were they to become associated with the Labour Party to any serious extent.

Actually, Beatrice was not, by virtue of family background and natural inclination, seriously at odds with Tory thinking. Her conception of collectivism was shot through with a profoundly authoritarian streak. She enjoyed the company of the Edwardian great and moved with ease among men of the stature of a Haldane, Asquith, or Balfour. Poverty was then very much the centre of controversy and the Webbs were acutely involved in it. They were determined to see things go their own way. As it happened, Beatrice's efforts as a member of the Royal Commission on the Poor Law proved a singularly unsuccessful demonstration of their idea of political permeation. The Webbs wholly failed to persuade the Liberal leaders of the merits of their own comprehensive scheme for dealing with poverty and lost out to Lloyd George and Winston Churchill. Permeation, clearly, was no substitute for solid political power; and that is precisely what the Webbs sorely lacked. Matters did not improve when they turned from background manipulation to public agitation. When, finally, the passage of Lloyd George's insurance bill put an end to the Webbs' campaign, Beatrice was both disenchanted and elated. Disenchanted, because she failed to dominate, but also because she and Sidney could not persuade those who should know best, the elite of society, that theirs was the intrinsically better scheme. Elated, because she could now point to the disaster they experienced as telling support for her set of priorities: first books, then, if Sidney still insisted, politics.

Not that they had been idle in the book-production business, far apart from Fabian tracts and articles the Webbs published in this period *The History of Trade Unionism* (1894), *Industrial Democracy* (1897), *Problems of Modern Industry* (1898) and several volumes on *English Local Government*. Thanks to Beatrice's substantial yearly income from inherited investments, Sidney was able to leave the Colonial Office and devote himself entirely to writing. He was not sorry to leave his clerical job, nor did he now evidently regret that his wife was a "person of station and good connection and some wealth" as he seemed to do when he was courting her as one who was "both poor and proud." (I, 205) Books, however, were not their only offspring. 1895 saw the foundation of the London School of Economics, one of their most remarkable achievements.

Although Beatrice was to Sidney a loyal and devoted wife, she never lost consciousness of the fact that it was Joseph Chamberlain, and not Sidney, who had "absorbed the whole of my sexual feeling," and that neither her "physical passion" nor her "social ambition" were stimulated by Sidney. It did not take many months of marriage for her to feel "hemmed in" by matrimony. Among Sidney's old friends, Beatrice particularly admired Shaw's "sparkle and

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flavour" but could not understand his personality. "Delightful" as a companion, he struck her as too much of "a born Philanderer ... disliking to be hampered either by passion or by conventions and therefore always tying himself up into knots which have to be cut before he is free for another adventure." (II, 7) Her feelings for Wallas were quite different. She found him a "loveable man", full of "morality and scrupulousness", but missed a sense of direction in him; he seemed to her "incapable of directing his own life." (*Ibid.*) But she could not help mixing an element of contempt — or at any rate condescension — with her admiration for Sidney's closest Fabian friends. What was lacking, Beatrice felt, was "a personality of *weight*." (*Ibid.*)

As for doctrinal notions, the principal idea among the scant references to Socialism is the denial that Socialism is a ready-made system that can be "established" over-night, by a political act of will or force. "The day will never come when Socialism will be 'established' in any sense that it was not established the day before." (II, 14) There is also a twofold tension in Sidney's thinking about Socialism of which he probably was unaware. His ideas seem to run on a double track simultaneously, so to speak. Socialism is at one and the same time seen as an objective truth, the discovery of which is essentially a matter of disinterested research and teaching (the intended function of the London School of Economics), *and* a method of arriving at the truth which is perfectly known and only requires skilful application. Socialists are those who *know* how to discover the truth. On this view, the function of education is to make reasoning men capable of recognizing reason when it stares them in the eye. It did not seem possible to Sidney Webb that holding *both* notions may prove extremely problematical — for it involves a circularity that is scarcely escapable. In effect it means this: Socialism is a matter for intelligent people. Stupid people are not eligible; incapable of being educated, they can neither acquire nor benefit from "scientific" knowledge (*i.e.*, the method of intellectual discovery that is known to Socialists *and* the discovery of truth which is thereby attained) and consequently belong to those who *constitutively* are beyond the Socialist pale. The aim is not, as Beatrice put it, to "organize the *unthinking* persons into socialist societies" [but] "to make the *thinking* persons socialistic." (II, 44) The matter does not end there in view of the fact that the unteachable ones do not remain passive in their stupidity. Enlightenment does not merely elude them, it is actively resisted. "Do you really believe," Sidney writes to Professor Ely (from Johns Hopkins University) in 1894, "that the opposition [to Socialism] would come from the exceptionally gifted? It seems to be on the contrary that these are the first to place their services at the disposal of the Community 'for love', as we say ... It is the *stupid* men and women now living on rent and interest — not the able ones — who are our bitterest opponents. Socialism implies 'la carrière ouverte aux talents' in the fullest sense — the career of social esteem." (II, 14) It did not seem to occur

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to Sidney that to set such stringent perimeters to valid thought courts the danger of suffocating it altogether.

Another source of tension is Sidney's (and Beatrice's) ambivalence over the political base of Socialism in its emergence and of the political content of Socialism in its operation. Here I shall confine my remarks to the question of "base"; to the problem of politics *within* Socialism I shall return later. Keir Hardie, the leader of the Independent Labour Party, put his finger on the pulse when he attacked Webb and Shaw as "superior persons" who tried to be generals without an army. On the one hand the Webbs professed a belief in "democracy" and on the other they had no faith in the "masses". It was for the "Priests of Humanity" to point the way — Comte's version of the Platonic guardians. A natural aristocracy of merit was to pave the road for a Socialist order — although Beatrice was reluctant to include the Fabians among them for fear that they were not temperamentally suited to practical politics, not being members of the traditional ruling class nor men who had served their time in labour organizations. (II,7) This natural aristocracy would consist of men of recognized merit, "trained administrators, experts in organising men — equipped with an Economics or a Sociology which will be scientific [for] "men need organising as much as machines, or rather, much more." (II,144) Unlike the elites of capitalist societies, the natural aristocracy of the future would be imbued with "social feeling", not simply "off to make money" and to seek individual advantage. (II,14) Presumably, the notion of a natural aristocracy of merit was to forge a synthesis between democracy and elitism, for the Webbs believed that, while the new leaders would certainly not originate from the "masses", they would, at any rate in England, comprise many that came from the "wage-earning class". Indeed, in a letter to H.G. Wells (in 1901) Sidney emphasises the growing importance of this class: "I cannot help thinking that you altogether underrate the capacity of the wage-earning class to differentiate itself, and the extent to which it will segregate." The "people", he goes on, "need not be any large mass.... The English wage-earning class, for instance, is rapidly putting on 'bourgeois' characteristics, developing any number of markedly different classes and strata.... These segregations are quickly coming to play a great and intelligent part in the world — they contribute what is, in its way, a real governing class. This will play no small part in that administration, that organization of men to which I have referred." (II,144-145)

At the same time, in contrast to young Beatrice, Sidney attached little importance to the co-operatives, and, at any rate during the period covered by the second volume, showed minimal confidence in organized labour as the basis for a political party, despite the trade union ties which the Webbs had formed during their research. Similarly, the idea of industrial democracy, in terms of workers' control, found no favour in his eyes. "It is as a citizen, not as

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a bricklayer or a carpenter, that he [the workman] should claim his right to share in the administration of industry and its results," Sidney wrote at the turn of the century. "The workmen employed on the job do not, and should not," he added, "choose the foreman and the manager, the architect and the board of directors." (II,121-122) Authority, the Webbs maintained, is essential, as is subordination. "I have no objection to the principle of subordination — *per se* —", Beatrice informs H.G. Wells (in 1904); "it is a matter for delicate investigation the exact conditions under which it degenerates into tyranny." (II,203) Clearly, it is a moot point how successful the Webbs were in reconciling democracy and "aristocracy", or socialism and hierarchy, but there is little indication that they were overly troubled by the tension which these ineluctably entail.

During the period covered by volume III (1912-47), the Webbs did in fact set out to explore the distinction between "authority" and "tyranny" when they decided to visit the Soviet Union and study Soviet Communism. Here it is strange that anyone who puts as much store by accurate information and scientific method as the Webbs did should prove so gullible and/or insensitive to the difference between fact and wishful thinking. To be fair, the Webbs were not unaware of their bias. They admitted, more or less openly, that they went to Russia in the hope of having their "hypotheses" confirmed. What is so odd is that they refused to believe that their bias could seriously distort their judgment. When others raised doubts they serenely smiled, secure in their superior knowledge of the true facts. Even the purges were confidently explained away and only Beatrice's diary later revealed the cracks in their confidence. If the Webbs were gullible, their gullibility was well matched by that of their readers, including leading academics and writers, for the Webbs were not alone in regarding their study of *Soviet Communism* as the most thorough piece of investigation ever undertaken of this "new civilization" — the subtitle of the work. Shaw and H.G. Wells were full of praise, and although it was for the most part out of date at its publication (in 1935), *Soviet Communism* was required reading in Oxford Politics and Economics courses for years after.

The Webbs were equally susceptible to negative bias. Sidney, as Colonial Secretary, was heavily involved in the drafting of the White Paper on Palestine (1930) to which, not surprisingly, Zionists reacted rather unfavourably. Beatrice described the reaction as "a hysterical Jewish outburst," which struck her as all the more confusing since she was convinced that "the Jewish immigrants are Slavs or Mongols and not Semites, and the vast majority are not followers of Moses and the prophets, but of Karl Marx and the Soviet Republic." (III,334-5) The bias as such, though perhaps regrettable, is not surprising; nor is it incontestable evidence for anti-Semitism. A good many Jews at the time were not Zionists, some indeed were anti-Zionists, including a number of the Webbs' Jewish acquaintances such as Harold Laski. What is astonishing, if not

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frightening, about the affair, especially if taken together with the Webbs' "truths" about Soviet Russia, is that it renders yet another proof of the gullibility of intellectuals and their readiness to abandon critical judgment in favour of loaded opinion or sheer fancy, even when, as in this case, neither terror nor threat of terror could be adduced as extenuating circumstances.

Actually, judging by the letters, the Webbs' pro-Soviet and anti-Zionist biases were reversals of earlier positions — a fact made none the less perplexing by being wholly unaccounted for by the published correspondence. The editor attempts to fill the gap — at any rate on the Soviet issue — by suggesting an underlying continuity of thinking amidst the apparent discontinuity. "In a profound sense," Mackenzie says, "the new-found Soviet sympathies of the Webbs *grew out* of their earlier attitudes." (III, viii; emphasis supplied) There may indeed be a level of the emotions, if we go deep enough, at which the most incongruous ideas collude or converge. It is perfectly true that Beatrice did like to tell people in her old age that she had always searched for what at last they had found in the Soviet Union, but I wonder whether this discloses a continuity of thinking rather than a deep-felt need for redemption which, in her agnosticism, she sought in some secular creed. In a less "profound sense" it could also be taken as just another manifestation of her intensely mercurial feelings. Be that as it may, at the level of doctrinal notions, as distinct from *ur*-emotions, the editor's continuity thesis harbours two potentially serious misconceptions — in terms of empirical likelihood and in terms of ideational meaning. For the thesis would necessarily have to imply that the Webbs saw no difference between (i) the authority of disinterested experts — in which they believed — and the terror of Stalin's secret police; and between (ii) circumscribed elitism or "authoritarianism" and wholesale arbitrariness or "totalitarianism". I must admit I find it difficult to accept that their mode of thinking was quite so blurred and prefer to believe that their minds were more troubled than they saw fit to reveal.

The published letters are regrettably unavailing in yielding a rationale for the Webbs' somersault on Soviet Communism. In 1924 Beatrice still insists that "my husband and I have always been against the Soviet System, and have regarded it as a repetition of Russian autocracy based on a creed — a very Eastern conception My husband and I have never been State Socialists ... we have always advocated municipal and co-operative organisation as preferable to nationalisation of any but one or two industries." (III, 207) "The Russian revolution, and especially the propaganda of it in Great Britain, has been the greatest disaster in the history of the British Labour movement," Beatrice observes after the General Strike of 1926. (III, 286) Even in May 1930 Sidney displays an almost comical hostility toward Communism and urges Beveridge, then director of L.S.E., in a "very confidential" letter, to keep his eye on some thirty "native" students who had enrolled in the "League against Im-

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perialism'', which he calls "a mere alias for a Communism" and considers "almost a criminal offence." (III, 328) By September 1931, however, Beatrice is "inclined to back Communism." (III, 365-6) From then on she has nothing but praise for "the amazing unity of purpose", the "impressive spirit of the place", "its constitution" — the most perfect expression, according to Beatrice, of the Webbs' *Constitution of a Socialist Commonwealth*, surpassing it by its "soul" embodied for Beatrice in the "puritanical religious order" of the Russian Communist Party. (III, 374, and 380-81). Even the sight of people cramped together in boxcars fills them with pride — cattle trucks are such a wonderful way of providing cheap transport for Ukrainian peasants! (III, 377)

There is another reversal about which the published letters are conspicuously silent: the abandonment of "permeation" and Sidney's embrace of the hitherto despised Labour Party which he (and Beatrice) joined in 1912. Just over a decade later Sidney became a member of the first Labour Government. It was in the same year (1923) that Sidney coined the phrase "inevitability of gradualness" with which the Webbs, if not Fabianism as well, were to become identified in the minds of many who otherwise would know little else about either. Apparently it was not meant to imply gradualism as a method of change, but some inexorable lawlike coming to power of Socialism as a result of a steady rise in the Labour vote. Although the Tories won a handsome victory with 413 seats in the Commons, Labour took many votes from the Liberals. (The latter shrunk to a mere 40). Sidney retained his seat for the next five years in which Labour was in opposition. While he pursued his political career and attended to parliamentary business, Beatrice, still thinking that "research ... is more important than participation in politics" (III, 302), pressed on with their study of English local government and the drafting of her autobiography.

The volume is rather meagre in personal observations. Harold Laski is described (in 1930) as "a very 'viewy' person — always flirting with new charmers", and Oswald Mosley, whose capacity for leadership Sidney finds wanting, is hailed by Beatrice as a "perfect person — almost too perfect for this wicked world." (III, 330, 340, 174) The relationship between Sidney and Chaim Weizmann was stiff and strained in their official communications, but, according to Beatrice's diary entries, it was not so originally. Sidney allegedly started "with great admiration for the Jew and a contempt for the Arab." Only as a result of growing irritation with the Jewish negotiators did Sidney begin to think of Weizmann as "a clever devil" who was trying "to excite the indignation of the Jews." (III, 335) By contrast, the correspondence with G.D.H. Cole oozes with gentle tolerance and tact although there was little love lost on either side. Cole in particular is known to have disliked the Webbs and the Fabians quite intensely — "to be candid I detest them" — but the tension was more of a doctrinal than a personal nature. (III, 84)

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The letters do not enlarge on what fundamentally separated Cole's "guild" socialism (of the 1920's) from the "municipal" socialism of the Webbs. Reduced to essentials, it was a question of political legitimacy. The Webbs (above all Sidney) wished to retain the citizen as the ultimate arbiter of social and economic decisions, whereas Cole (and the early Laski) wished to replace the will of the (to them abstract) citizen by the (allegedly concrete) wills of diverse and distinct occupational groups,

Despite their doctrinal differences these two opposed brands of Socialism shared a profound ambivalence concerning the nature and role of politics within their visions of a Socialist society. On the one hand they recognized the need for the state or "political community"; on the other hand they virtually assimilated politics to administration. For it would appear that neither Cole nor the Webbs saw a basic difference between executing a blue-print and translating social purposes into political action. Finding these two sets of transactions analogous, they could see no need for distinguishing political expertise from administrative expertise and administrative expertise from scientific or technical knowledge. Given agreement over ends — the acceptance of Socialism — trained administrators (for the Webbs) or knowledgeable guildsmen (for Cole) were perfectly capable of choosing the most efficient or most desirable means. There being no conflict over ends, competing parties can have no *raison d'être* in a Socialist scheme of things. "I suggest that when a country has one dominant living philosophy", Beatrice states quite categorically in 1942, "political parties ... will be out of date as on the whole they are an unsatisfactory way of ascertaining public opinion still more of leading it." (III, 455) In short, a Socialist society would see the end of politics as a system of competitive choices or ideological conflict. It was not until the late 1960's that this widely-held view of politics under Socialism came under serious attack, not from opponents of Socialism, but from those convinced that its political application rested hitherto on wholly mistaken assumptions. It was hardly a more extensive or intensive reading of Marx, however, that brought about this discovery, and we can therefore scarcely take Cole or the Webbs to task for not having made it earlier just because, by their own admission, they had not spent much time reading Marx.

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