



Left: An LSE dinner held in the mid 1930s in honour of George Bernard Shaw (back table, seated on left). From *The Webbs and LSE* photographic exhibition, October 2000
Below: Portrait of the founders by William Nicholson, 1928-29

less marriage, Beatrice says: 'Our means would not have allowed a family and continued expenditure upon investigation and public life. But perhaps the finally conclusive reason was that I had laboriously transformed my intellect into an instrument for research. Child bearing would destroy it...'

Their accomplishments as social theorists would have been enough in themselves to ensure the Webbs' enduring fame and importance. They were, however, also practical reformers who helped change the face of society. The Webbs can justly be said to be two of the founders of the modern welfare state, in particular with Beatrice's 1909 Minority Report to the Royal Commission on the Poor Law, and their subsequent prevention of destitution campaign, which together laid down a blueprint for the development of future welfare programmes.

In addition, the Webbs played a crucial role in unravelling partisan socialism – Sidney was the chief architect both of the new Labour Party Constitution and the 1918 Election Manifesto, Labour and the New Social Order, which was a clear statement of Webbian objectives – a national minimum wage, common ownership and increased municipalisation. It provided the Labour Party with a definite programme for changing society for the first time, thus the Webbs had captured the labour movement for their ideas and helped prepare the Labour Party for power. In reviewing these achievements Royden Harrison's suggestion that 'the Webbs were not merely practitioners within the English

reformist tradition; they must be numbered among the makers of it', must surely receive universal acceptance.

Sadly, however, these achievements have had to take second place to the historical emphasis that is placed on the Webbs' migration to Soviet Communism in the latter part of their lives and their elitist tendencies, which governed much of their political thought. They were paternalistic in nature – perceiving democracy as centralised and homogeneous in character – therefore they rebelled against excessive pluralism, worker's control and most passionately against syndicalism. It was experts and elites who were expected to offer guidance to the masses, and who were to feed the 'Social Parliament', rather than an active citizenry. Therefore, set against today's prevailing trend of increasing political participation, many try to cast this kind of political thought in a negative light – suggesting that, even at their most pluralist, the Webbs remained opposed to initiatives such as devolution.

To my mind, though, such criticism contributes to an undeservedly bad press for the Webbs by denying them their political relevance today – their admiration of the all-encompassing centralised state was a product of their commitment to a belief in the steady evolution towards public ownership, which in turn was the product of the thinking of their time. It is still possible to draw from this the enduring and relevant principle that the community, as a collective entity, is a more desirable mechanism for organising society than a purely individualistic one. As for their

The Webbs and LSE

Following the publication in October of an abridged volume of *The Diaries of Beatrice Webb*, **Guy Lodge** reflects upon the contribution of Sidney and Beatrice Webb to British politics and society.

The foundations and subsequent development of British socialism can be largely attributed to the presence of the early Fabians, and in particular the political thought and practical reforms initiated by the Webbs. They provided the emerging socialist movement with a reservoir of talent. Moreover, British politics benefited – and was greatly magnified – by the fusion of two such powerful minds. Their marriage brought them personal fulfilment, and their partnership was pivotal, indeed vital, to the development of their work.

How did the partnership work? It seems Beatrice provided the imagina-

tion and intuitive grasp, Sidney the unrivalled analytical powers and clarity of prose. Beatrice clearly acknowledges this in her diaries when she suggests that 'we are second rate minds – neither of us are outstandingly gifted – it is the 'combinat' that is remarkable.'

Indeed it was a marriage Beatrice, perhaps to Sidney's personal dismay, conceptualised in business terms alone – on their engagement she told him: 'No, dear, I do not even look at your photograph. It is too hideous, for anything. Do be done in a grey suit by Elliot and Fry and let me have your head only – it is the head only that I am marrying.' If this small difference of opinion created any animosity between the two it

was heavily disguised, and, as Royden Harrison rightly points out in his biography *The Life and Times of Sidney and Beatrice Webb, 1858-1905*: the formative years, such differences 'did not diminish the most fruitful partnership in the history of the British intellect'. Beatrice wrote: 'He does the work and I do the inspiration. That I think will be the ultimate position – women to inspire everything and men to do it.' She was, in Harrison's memorable phrase, the 'mistress of the spoken word while he was the master of the written one'.

Was the mind of the Webbs also the mind of early British socialism? This might account for the rise of Fabianism,

which had become the most distinctive and influential mode of English socialism. The early Fabians believed in 'permeation' of institutions by social reformist ideas, setting out the case for change and improvement through rational persuasion, which the thinking citizen would over time embrace. The 'inevitability of gradualness' was the philosophy of these educators, wedded to reform rather than revolution, through collectivist solutions, which they believed they could urge upon reforming governments. As Tony Wright (MP for Cannock Chase) points out, by harnessing facts and arguments the early Fabians took on Marxism, disposed of individualism, and made a powerful case for democratic collectivism as the solution to society's ills.

Undoubtedly the Webbs established an academic precedence by investing so much energy into this cause. As the authors of more than 20 major works, including the *History of Trade Unionism*, *Industrial Democracy* and *A Constitution for the Socialist Commonwealth of Great Britain*, one would struggle to undermine or tarnish their scholarly reputations. Their commitment to promoting socialism was fervent. Writing about their child-

'The Webbs can justly be said to be two of the founders of the modern welfare state'





From *The Webbs and LSE* photographic exhibition: LSE student common room, June 1922



LSE lunch hour dance, 1920. Sydney Caine (centre) returned to LSE as director from 1957 to 1967

'LSE as the guardian of the social sciences is a living memory of their achievements'

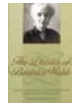
fascination with Soviet Communism they should be defended not, as some do, on the grounds that they were too old to shed this last illusion. This does their intellectual credibility a disservice. Rather, as LSE's Dr Rodney Barker has argued, they were 'conned', like so many tourists of the revolution, and predisposed to look for utopia.

Moreover, it is in the realm of the social sciences that we witness the

most significant and lasting influence of the Webbs' political thought and methodology. Through their research they developed and created a new school of economic and political science, integrating the social to the natural sciences, they became the exponents of a positive ethical science by which they sought to remedy society's ills on the basis of the social facts they had identified. This is why LSE is so synonymous with the Webbs – it is here where social problems are analysed in the context of the 'social laboratory', whilst the School's motto, *rerum cognoscere causas* – to understand the causes of things – acts as a monument to the Webbian tradition. The Webbs stand out in the English empiricist tradition and LSE, as the 'guardian of the social sciences', is a living memory of their achievements.

Throughout the political world we can see the prominence of much of

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The Diaries of Beatrice Webb

edited by Norman and Jeanne MacKenzie, abridged in one volume by Lynn Knight, with a new preface by Hermione Lee (Virago, 2000)
£25 hardback, 656 pages,
www.virago.co.uk



The Life and Times of Sidney and Beatrice Webb, 1858-1905

by Royden J Harrison (Macmillan Press, 2000)
£50 hardback, 416 pages,
www.macmillan.co.uk



LSE: a history of the London School of Economics and Political Science 1895-1995

by Ralf Dahrendorf (Oxford University Press, 1995)
£25 hardback, 564 pages,
www.oup.co.uk

what the Webbs stood for. Sidney Webb's refusal to refer to general principles, which can provide such rigid constraints, and instead to investigate the facts is being widely implemented by national governments in a world which is less dependent than it was on ideology and dogma. Whilst the end of ideology thesis is still massively contested, it is certainly the case that governments are indulging in practical politics, employing the maxim 'what matters is what works.' In Britain, New Labour can be seen to be conducting Webbian social engineering, with its concentration on collecting the information needed to establish the social facts through bodies such as the Social Exclusion Unit and the Women's Unit, and implementing policies such as the New Deal and Sure Start. This is increasingly the era of 'evidence-based policy', and although the Webbs may not have agreed with the content of much of this policy, they would have supported the methods, with its reliance on a managerial style of governance. This assumption that modern day governments are directing skills for all aspects of social life may mean that, in the amended words of former Liberal Party leader Sir William Harcourt, 'We are all managers now.'

At the end of the 19th century, the Webbs were responding to the inefficiencies of industrialism and advanced capitalism. This was a period of immense change similar to the dramatic changes that are taking place today with the advent of globalisation and the rise of the knowledge economy. It is in periods of such diverse change that the need for effective social sciences is most acute. It is likely that the legacy of the Webbs will continue to grow in coming years. ■

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