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Fabianism

An essay by
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[Fabian Tracts](#)[Fabian Research Series](#)[Young Fabian Pamphlets](#)

FABIANISM is the doctrine of the Fabian Society, a small but influential group of British socialists. This society grew out of the Fellowship of the New Life, founded in 1883 under the influence of Professor Thomas Davidson, which looked to ethical reform and utopian community making, rather than to political action, for the regeneration of society. A group which included Frank Podmore and Edward R. Pease broke away from the Fellowship to found the Fabian Society in 1883. George Bernard Shaw joined in 1884, Sidney Webb in 1885.

With the advent of these two Fabianism began to assume its distinctive character and the society became definitely socialist in 1887 with the adoption of its "basis," or statement of policy. The society first became famous with the publication of the Fabian Essays in 1889 by Shaw, Webb, Annie Besant, Graham Wallas and others. This volume was followed up by a series of over two hundred Fabian Tracts designed for popular consumption and the application of Fabian doctrines in a practical way to particular questions of immediate policy. The Fabian Society at first set out largely to present an alternative to the then dominant Marxist Social-Democratic Federation. Fabian socialism was and has remained essentially evolutionary and gradualist (hence its name, from the tactics of Fabius Cunctator),



expecting socialism to come as the sequel to the full realization of universal suffrage and representative government.

The essence of Fabian doctrine lay in Sidney Webb's theory of the continuity of development from capitalism to socialism. Whereas Marxism looked to the creation of socialism by revolution based on the increasing misery of the working class and the breakdown of capitalism

through its inability to solve the problem of distribution, Webb argued that the economic position of the workers had improved in the nineteenth century, was still improving and might be expected to continue to improve. He regarded the social reforms of the nineteenth century (e.g. factory acts, mines acts, housing acts, education acts) as the beginnings of socialism within the framework of capitalist society. He saw legislation about wages, hours and conditions of labor, and progressive taxation of capitalist incomes as means for the more equitable distribution of wealth; and he envisaged the next steps toward socialism in terms of such social reforms as public ownership and administration of industries and services.

There was no room in Webb's ideas either for a theory of increasing misery or for revolution; he saw no reason why, if men would but behave sensibly, the world --- or at least Great Britain, for the Fabians at this state had thought little about other countries---should not move gently into socialism by a series of steps no one of which need involve any sharp or dramatic break with the past. Webb supported his view with illustrations drawn from the history of the nineteenth century, showing that side by side with the growth of laissez faire there had been a parallel growth of state intervention in the interests of the worker or at least for the improvement of the quality and conditions of life.

George Bernard Shaw decisively repudiated Marxism in the economic field, and the corner stone of Fabian economic theory became the Ricardian law of rent. Ricardo had demonstrated that the wealth of landlords arose from their monopoly of the soil and from the differences in the productive value of different pieces of land, which enabled the landlord to skim off as rent the difference between the yield of his piece of land and that of the least productive piece in cultivation or use. The Fabians, following up hints in earlier writers, developed this theory of rent to apply not to land only but also to capital and to personal ability. They considered large incomes to be chiefly rents arising from the possession of differential monopolies and maintained that these rents belonged properly not to the monopolists but to the community as a whole. The economic problem was thus presented as a question of the socialization of monopoly incomes through social ownership of the monopolies.

This view fitted in admirably with Webb's doctrine of continuity and gradualism. It made the theory of industrial socialization a natural and logical development of the already familiar thesis that the land ought to belong to the people or at least that the rents arising from its differential qualities ought to be socially appropriated. This doctrine, which as a demand for the "single tax" had received tremendous impetus from Henry George's work, had been preached from the eighteenth century. It had been broadly endorsed by the great authority of John Stuart Mill and had been the subject of constant agitation by land and labor leagues, land reform associations and similar bodies for decades before the revival of British socialism in the 1880's Shaw and the Fabians were thus in effect appealing to the radicals, who were already land reformers, to recognize socialism as the logical outcome of their ideas. Hence the stress which the Fabians always laid on their contention that there was no fundamental difference between land and capital or in the incomes derived from them. Both were mainly the results of differential monopoly.

The Fabians were no less emphatic in repudiating the Marxian theory of

value, as they understood it, and in preferring to base their economic theory on Jevons and the orthodox English economic tradition. They saw the source and measure of value not, with Marx, in labor but, with Jevons and his follower Alfred Marshall, in utility. This fitted in with their general tone of mind, for the Fabians were above all utilitarians, seeking to adapt the doctrines of Jeremy Bentham and his successors to the changed economic conditions of the later nineteenth century. Bentham had used his principle of "the greatest happiness of the greatest number chiefly to justify the abolition of had forms of state intervention. The Fabians now applied it to justify good forms, looking back on the early Benthamite work of destruction as admirable, but desiring to complement it by construction. John Stuart Mill they recognized as standing at the point of transition between the two interpretations of utilitarianism. Although he sympathized with the socialism of his day, he was too deeply rooted in old traditions for a complete conversion. The Fabians regarded themselves as completing the work which he had begun and thus found further cause to emphasize their continuity with older liberal thought.

Fabian socialism differed from the current Marxian socialism not only in doctrine but still more in spirit and in its conception of the influences making for socialism. At bottom what matters in Marx is not his theory of value but his emphasis on the class struggle as the sole effective instrument of progress. Marx believes that socialism will come not only because it is a better system than capitalism but because there is behind it a rising class led by economic conditions to achieve it. Fabian literature, on the other hand, seems often to be unconscious of the relevance of class distinctions and shows no belief at all in a class struggle as the instrument of change. The Fabians are essentially rationalists, seeking to convince men by logical argument that socialism is desirable and offering their arguments to all men without regard to the classes to which they belong. They seem to believe that if only they can demonstrate that socialism will make for greater efficiency and a greater sum of human happiness the demonstration is bound to prevail.

With this rationalism there went in early Fabianism a singular blindness to the importance or relevance of working class organization. The early Fabians, as they themselves recognized later on, often seemed never to have heard of trade unions or cooperative societies, or at all events to take no interest in them. But their awakening came with the big movement of labor unrest that culminated in the famous strike of the London dockers in 1889. Trade revival now brought a host of new workers into the trade union movement and caused a big movement of organization among the less skilled workers. New leaders came to, the front armed with socialist ideas and demands for protective industrial legislation. Battle was joined between the liberal leaders of the older trade unionism and the socialist leaders of the new. Fabians were influenced like the rest of the public to reckon with the unions, the more so because a few of them, headed by Annie Besant, had taken an active part in the struggle.

Moreover, the Fabian Society now obtained a most important new recruit in Beatrice Potter, later Mrs. Sidney Webb, who had worked with Charles Booth on his great survey of Life and Labour of the People in London (17 vols., London 1903). Under the influence of her more realistic attitude toward the social problem Webb collaborated with her in a detailed study of the actual organization of the working class; and the fruits were seen in her book on The Cooperative Movement (London

1899) and in their joint works on *The History of Trade Unionism* (London 1894, rev. ed. 1920) and *Industrial Democracy* (2 vols., London 1897; rev. ed., 1 Vol., 1920), which fully recognized the vital part which working class organization was bound to play in the making of socialism. Although these writings made a profound impression, it is doubtful if the Fabian Society as a whole fully absorbed their lessons. It began, indeed, to woo the working class movement on behalf of socialism, but its endeavors, like those of the Independent Labour party, were directed rather toward drawing the trade unions into socialist politics than toward working out an industrial socialist policy. Fabianism remained predominantly rationalist and collectivist, merely adding an appeal to trade unions to its appeal to the general public. In no sense or degree did it adopt at any stage a class point of view.

The reform of English local government in 1888 and 1894 called the attention of Fabian leaders to the possibilities of the local authorities as agents both of social reform and of constructive socialization. They began to work for the return of socialists as members of local authorities and for the development of municipal trading as the complement to nationalization, thus winning great prestige and influence in the municipal field and making their policy widely known among local working class leaders. Again the Webbs were the leaders; and their history of *English Local Government* (9 vols., London 1906-1929) marked their sense of the importance of a realistic and scientific approach to every practical problem.

When the Fabian Society began its work, the only important socialist body was the Marxian Social-Democratic Federation, led by Henry Mayers Hyndman, which held aloof from the new trade union movement. In 1893 the Independent Labour party was created as a predominantly working class socialist body to build up an independent party on a class basis and to detach the older trade unions from Liberalism. The new body had at the outset no very clear policy, and the Fabians set out to provide it with one. Their doctrines fitted in well with the immediate demands of the new movement, and their ably written Tracts enabled them to exert great influence.

From the first the Independent Labour Party regarded itself as only the forerunner of an inclusive working class party in which trade unions as such should directly participate. The Fabians helped in the effort to create such a party, which came to fruition in the Labour Representation Committee in 1900. They were from the outset a constituent body of the Labour Representation Committee and the Labour party. Thus while Fabianism was not a working class movement it helped to bring an independent working class party into being and gave that party its collective support. But, characteristically, the society continued to include members who sat in Parliament or on other public bodies as Liberals, and saw no inconsistency in encouraging its members to work inside the older parties even after it had helped to bring the new one into being. In London the Fabians, headed by Webb, largely supplied the brains of the Progressive party which for a period controlled the London County Council. Fabianism was inclined to regard the Labour party rather as the working class wing of the political socialist movement than as coextensive with that movement, an attitude not wholly extinct today.

In international politics the Fabians have always been on the Right wing of the socialist movement. At the time of the South African War they alienated much support by refusing to join the opposition and

contending that it was in the interest of civilization that the South African republics should be annexed to the British Empire. Bernard Shaw was the chief exponent of this view, as he has been on principle opposed to nationalist movements and in favor of the unification of the world into larger economic and political units. Similarly in 1914 the majority of the Fabians, unlike the Independent Labour Party, followed the Labour party in its support of British participation in the war. Repudiating the class war, the Fabians have usually recognized their loyalty to their own state as coming before any loyalty to the international working class movement. This, however, did not prevent them from working out detailed plans for the prevention of war and the evolution of international economic and political cooperation. L. S. Woolf's International Government (Westminster 1916), proposed in the Fabian Research Department, was one of the most important documents leading up to the creation of the League of Nations.

In every field the characteristic Fabian policy has been that of permeation. In accordance with their doctrine of continuity the Fabians set out to develop existing institutions by permeating with this or that element of their doctrine those who had power to influence policy, e.g. the civil service, the political parties, the professions, the administration of business, and local government. It was part of their creed that no sharp line could be drawn between socialists and nonsocialists and that many who would not call themselves socialists could be persuaded to help with particular reforms making for socialism. This policy was most successful in the campaign which followed the Reports of the Royal Commission on the Poor Laws of 1909 Mrs. Webb embodied in the minority report a host of semisocialistic schemes, and a great national campaign of propaganda was organized by the National Committee for the Prevention of Destitution, a special Fabian body.

During the first decade of the twentieth century the Fabian Society grew rapidly. Between 1906 and 1915 it went through four serious crises. A group of members headed by S. G. Hobson, later prominent as a guild socialist, tried to lead the Fabians into a socialist party which would be more militant than the Labour party, which was at that time inclined to work as the Liberals' subordinate ally. Later a considerable body of younger members desired to expel all members who were not supporters of the Labour party and to commit the society to working wholly in and through the Labour party. Both these movements were heavily defeated by the "Old Gang," led by Shaw and the Webbs. A similar fate befell H. G. Wells' program of enlarging the society's membership and setting up a network of branches throughout the country.

The failure in 1914-15 of a group which included G. D. H. Cole to induce the society to abandon active politics was followed by the secession of the Fabian Research Department and its reorganization as a Labour Research Department based mainly on trade union support. This department, both before and after the secession, was the leading research organization of the Labour movement. Out of it arose indirectly the research departments subsequently set up by the Labour party and the Trades Union Congress. In 1931 the New Fabian Research Department was constituted.

From 1915 onward the history of the Fabian Society was for the most part tranquil. The old leaders continued at the head, and the old activities were pursued. Relations with the Labour party became much closer after 1918, when the party adopted its new constitution and accepted an

essentially Fabian policy drafted by Webb under the title Labour and the New Social Order (London 1918). Indeed, the Fabian policy and attitude were adopted almost in their entirety by Labour after the war; and the recent comparative inactivity of the society is largely due to the fact that the Labour party is a larger reincarnation of Fabianism. The society thus no longer stands for a distinct or clearly defined policy of its own and its members no longer use it as the chief agent for the expression of their policy. It now functions as a home for intellectual discussion of socialism, a research and propaganda publication agency and a body through which membership in the Labour party can be secured by socialists, chiefly of the middle classes, who do not wish to connect themselves actively with the Independent Labour Party.

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