



GREAT THINKERS IN ECONOMICS

SERIES EDITORS: JOHN KING · ALEXANDER MILLMOW



Sidney and Beatrice Webb

An Academic Biography

David Reisman

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Great Thinkers in Economics

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The famous historian, E.H. Carr once said that in order to understand history it is necessary to understand the historian writing it. The same could be said of economics. Famous economists often remark that specific episodes in their lives, or particular events that took place in their formative years attracted them to economics. *Great Thinkers in Economics* is designed to illuminate the economics of some of the great historical and contemporary economists by exploring the interaction between their lives and work, and the events surrounding them.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Everyone knows the names. Few people can say what they wrote or what they said. Adam Smith is *The Wealth of Nations*. Karl Marx is *Capital*. The Webbs are *The History of Trade Unionism* (1894), *The Decay of Capitalist Civilisation* (1923), the three volumes of the *English Poor Law History* (1924, 1927), the 850 pages of *Industrial Democracy* (1897), the 4212 pages of the ten-volume series on *English Local Government* published between 1906 and 1929. The 23 books alone add up to at least five million words. To that must be added the reports, the Tracts, the correspondence, the newspaper articles and the diaries. A working checklist of their publications prepared by the British Library of Political and Economic Science extends to 440 items. It is an amazing body of work. In spite of that, few people will be able to name a single title or summarise their contribution. Who, if anyone, now reads those lost volumes, papers and letters? What, if anything, was the lasting message?

The present book answers the questions. It says that there is an intellectual system which is nonetheless important for being scattered through a lifetime of words and insights. The Webbs were agitators, educators, investigators and public servants. This book shows that they were theorists, thinkers, ideologists and political intellectuals as well. The Webbs were more than plumbers who dealt sequentially with the current and the *ad hoc* before moving on the next broken pipe. The Webbs were also social and economic philosophers whose intellectual system, properly understood, is more than a vestigial organ that has not stood the test of time.

Chapter 2, 'Towards the Partnership', and Chap. 3, 'The Firm of Webb', describe the 60-year pilgrimage of two concerned and alert social scientists who believed that the facts would set their fellow citizens free. Chapter 4, 'The Fabian Way', situates the Webbs in the evolutionary gradualism of democratic socialism that looks to persuasion and permeation to accelerate the transition. Chapter 5, 'A Social Economy', explains that the Webbs were historical economists who rejected the abstractions and axiomatics of ungrounded deduction in favour of induction from past experience and extrapolation into the future.

Chapter 6, 'Cooperation', demonstrates that the Webbs modelled the good society of collaboration and mutual aid on consumer cooperatives that put use-value before profit-seeking exchange. Chapter 7, 'The Factor Labour', shows that they turned to strong unions, if not to the less-enlightened proletariat, to represent the working class in its struggle for better pay and conditions.

Chapter 8, 'Poverty', discusses the Webbs' rejection of the existing poor laws that perpetuated destitution through stigma and hardship without differentiating the needy to fine-tune their relief. Chapter 9, 'State and Welfare', continues the theme of prevention and cure by explaining that the Webbs looked to municipal and national government for the education, healthcare and income maintenance that would raise up the deprived to the national minimum.

Chapter 10, 'Unemployment', identifies the social causes of involuntary unemployment and the policies best suited to arrest the degeneration in skill. Chapter 11, 'Capitalism: Decline and Fall', explains why the Webbs in the 1920s were convinced that private enterprise was collapsing under the weight of its internal contradictions. Chapter 12, 'Political Economy', examines the nature of the socialist state that will inherit the vacant throne. Chapter 13, 'Soviet Communism', shows that the Webbs towards the end of their life identified a superior alternative to the instability and greed of decaying supply and demand.

Chapter 14, 'The Legacy', summarises the world-view. The Webbs were evolutionists who expected public ownership and predicted a welfare state. It concludes that their interdisciplinary contribution to historical economics in combination with social policy and moral philosophy places them in a unique category of their own.



Towards the Partnership

They were, Elizabeth Haldane recalls, the fabled two-brains-in-one: ‘There was always great discussion, as to which was the abler, but no conclusions were arrived at, for both were extraordinarily able and yet more extraordinarily diligent. They made one feel heartily ashamed of one’s idle hours when one saw how they worked from morning to night, producing volumes of carefully verified matter’ (Haldane 1937: 135–6). The Webbs worked hard and worked together. They were a team because they had a cause. Inscribed on their wedding rings were the words *pro bono publico*.

1 SIDNEY BEFORE BEATRICE

Sidney James Webb was born on 13 July 1859 and died on 13 October 1947. He was the son of a London accounts clerk and a Cranbourn Street milliner-cum-hairdresser. The family was lower-middle class, generally evangelical, loosely utilitarian in the tradition of the philosophic radicals. Public spirited, his father was on the Poor Law Board of Guardians and played a role in local politics.

Sidney was educated at a good local school and, although family money was tight, between 1871 and 1875 in Germany and Switzerland. In 1875, aged 16, he became a broker’s clerk in the City. Aided by a retentive memory, an uncompromising work ethic, an ascetic personality, extensive reading and a talent for debate, he took the civil service examinations and,

aged only 19, joined the War Office in 1878. Postings followed in the Surveyor of Taxes Office in 1879 and the Colonial Office in 1881.

In 1885 he was called to the bar at Gray's Inn. Sidney had attended evening lectures at the Birkbeck Institute (then part of the City Polytechnic) and in 1886 had obtained his external LLB from the University of London. It was as near as he got to a university education. Like Beatrice, he was neither public school nor Oxbridge.

With a strong interest in current affairs, Sidney joined the Zetetical Society. It was one of many discussion groups that flourished in late-Victorian London. It was there, in 1879, that he met the playwright and critic George Bernard Shaw. Through Shaw he discovered the Fabian Society in 1885. In 1886 he joined its Executive Committee. He served on the Fabian Executive for 50 years, until 1935.

Of the first 60 Fabian Tracts Sidney wrote 25. In all he produced 45, beginning with *Facts for Socialists* in 1887 and *Facts for Londoners* in 1889. The titles—'facts', 'socialists'—leave no doubt as to where he positioned himself in the spectrum of ideas: 'I am accepted by the Socialists as one of them' (SBWL I: 124). Lucid and accessible, Sidney's Tracts were at once inference and propaganda. The purpose was not to uncover new information but rather, drawing on published data, government position-papers and casual empiricism, to shape public opinion.

The Tracts were complemented by journalism in the popular press and lectures at public meetings. In 1890 there was his first book. In *Socialism for England* Sidney Webb described the socialist future that, slowly but inevitably, had to come: 'On the economic side, Socialism implies the collective administration of rent and interest, leaving to the individual only the wages of his labour, of hand or brain. On the political side, it involves the collective control over, and ultimate administration of, all the main instruments of wealth production. On the ethical side, it expresses the real recognition of fraternity, the universal obligation of personal service, and the subordination of individual ends to the common good' (SE 10).

It was an important definition. Socialism to the young Sidney Webb meant the socialisation of the non-labour means of production. It meant the politicisation of control. It meant a new sense of brotherhood and belonging. It meant the lexical primacy of the collective All over and above the disparate parts. It meant a sense of duty which would bind the organs to the organism for reasons not captured by the classical liberals.

Some Fabians were already recommending the creation of a Socialist Party. Webb in *Socialism for England* expected that the Liberal Party could

be brought on side. While Gladstonian free traders were still preaching what they took to be Adam Smith's laissez-faire individualism, his Party was increasingly being permeated by the ideals of Oxford Hegelians such as T.H. Green that were to culminate in the New Liberalism of Asquith and Lloyd George. Not freedom *from* the state but freedom *to* unfold, Green's *Lectures on the Principles of Political Obligation* in 1879 had called for reforming governments to be actively hands-on in the promotion of liberty through public services like education. With Shaw, Sidney steered the Fabians away from Marx's iron laws of economic development and towards collective activity as a moral imperative.

2 BEATRICE BEFORE SIDNEY

(Martha) Beatrice Potter (22 January 1858–30 April 1943) was from a considerably higher level of society. Her father was a wealthy industrialist whose own father (a successful manufacturer, radical Member of Parliament, co-founder of the *Manchester Guardian*) had made his own way up. Educated at Clifton and University College London, a barrister, an Anglican, a Conservative, Chairman of the Great Western Railway in Britain and the Grand Trunk Railway in Canada, Beatrice remembered Richard Potter as a man of honour but also resilience who had risen again from the economic downturn of 1848 that had all but bankrupted him. He was not interested in 'the abstract principles of political economy' and had 'no clear vision of the public good' (MA 7, 9). Although not a scholar himself, he read what he could and was curious to learn. He encouraged his daughters to surround themselves with books.

Beatrice spent her childhood at Standish House, near Gloucester, and at the family's town house in Kensington. Her education came from a private governess, a brief spell at an academy in Bournemouth, unstructured study and business trips with her father to America, Germany and Italy. She never learned to cook and clean. There would be servants to do that.

There were nine girls in the family. In spite of that, the loneliness was 'absolute': 'My childhood was not on the whole a happy one; ill-health and starved affection ... marred it' (BW 1982: 112). The emotional deprivation of a solitary child surrounded by eight sisters, a generous father who was frequently away on business and a frustrated but highly intelligent mother who retreated into herself must have contributed to Beatrice's later sympathy with the excluded.

The family's circle of friends included prominent figures in economic, political and intellectual life if not union leaders and working men. Galton, Huxley, Tyndall, Hooker, Cardinal Manning, John Bright, George Eliot and most of all Herbert Spencer were frequent visitors. Beatrice discussed many topics in social philosophy with Spencer. Their conversations extended to evolution, religion, poverty, altruism, moral *ought-to-bes*, positive science, functional adaptation, social biology, radical individualism, increasing heterogeneity and the tyranny of the state. She admired him as a 'light to others' and a 'single-hearted persistent seeker after truth' (MA 37). He was her way in to sociology and economics in which she never had any formal training. But for her marriage to a known socialist, she would have been his literary executor (MA 33).

In 1882 her mother died. The elder of the two daughters still unmarried, Beatrice took on the management of her father's properties and estates. Her ten-year apprenticeship schooled her in how business was done and money made. Elegant and poised, she was hostess for his dinner-parties both in the country and in London. Conceivably, she could have become his business associate and successor. She had already shown herself to be practical and decisive.

One of her duties was rent-collecting in the St. Katherine Buildings in Whitechapel. The flats had been built by philanthropists inspired by Octavia Hill. It was her first encounter with urban or rural destitution. She never succumbed to the anti-Jewish and anti-foreign feeling as the ghetto grew and joblessness was rife. She continued to read voraciously from 5 to 8 in the morning and again at night. The knowledge she was accumulating from the rent-collecting and the books convinced her that poverty was proof of a deficiency in the social order.

Christianity had taught her that all have a duty one to another. Imbued with the ideal of 'self-sacrificing service' transferred 'from God to man' (MA 130), seeing herself as a Good Samaritan obliged to improve the status of the fringe, she became a volunteer for the Charity Organisation Society (the COS) in Soho. Beatrice throughout her life had a need to be needed. She had a need for a quest.

The complacent were gradually becoming aware of hidden misery in the slums. Data from the census in 1881, 1891 and 1901, the Board of Trade, the Sanitary Inspectorate and the Jewish Board of Guardians revealed the extent of tuberculosis, malnutrition and crime. There was independent evidence from studies such as Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851), Mearns' *Bitter Cry of Outcast London* (1883),

William Booth's *In Darkest England* (1890), Rowntree's *Poverty* (1901) and Beveridge's *Unemployment* (1909). There was Dickens' *Oliver Twist* (1838) and Jack London's *The People of the Abyss* (1903). There were the American Muckrakers and Zola's *Money* (1891). There were humanitarians like Emma Cons and Arnold Toynbee. There was also Charles Booth.

Charles Booth was conducting, at his own expense, an ambitious investigation into destitution among dockworkers, seamstresses and casuals in the East End of London. His findings were published in 17 volumes between 1892 and 1902 as *The Life and Labour of the People in London*. Beatrice, already involved with the COS in Soho, joined his Board of Statistical Research. The contact was her cousin, Booth's wife.

Beatrice immersed herself in sweated labour in the tailoring industry when she went underground as a plain 'trouser hand in a low-grade Jewish shop' (MA 44). Labour ceased to be a disembodied abstraction. Her initial results on excessive hours, subsistence pay, wage-cutting immigrants, perpetual insecurity and the spectre of unemployment were published in Booth's first volume in 1892 and in four papers in the *Nineteenth Century*. In 1888 Beatrice gave evidence to the Select Committee of the House of Lords on the Sweating System.

Her work in the COS and in the Booth investigations gave her both a quantitative and a qualitative exposure to what it meant to be poor. She discovered a hidden talent for putting her interviewees at their ease which she later described in the handbook *Methods of Social Study*.

In 1883 Beatrice made the first of three visits to Bacup in Lancashire to explore the life of the millhands. To conceal her mother's local links to both capital and labour, she called herself 'Miss Jones'. At Bacup Beatrice found that the bulk of the workers had no wish to overthrow the capitalist system. Self-reliant and hard-working, socialised by their chapels into temperance and thrift, they saw no need for the able-bodied to become dependent on the state: 'Certainly the earnest successful working man is essentially conservative as regards the rights of property and the non-interference of the central government' (MA 161).

Bacup was not in the vanguard of cosmopolitan commerce. The locals made 'pleasant fellowship' an integral part of 'common interest' and did their best to fit in: 'Public opinion ... presses heavily on the mis-doer or the non-worker' (BW 1982: 183). Self-help, self-improvement and cooperative retailing were the first line of defence in Bacup just as they were among the East End Jews and, later, the Seaham miners. The working classes in County Durham took pride in 'sobriety and earnestness of

conduct', in 'elevation of character', in 'solidarity instead of individual selfishness' (SW 1921: 127, 128). Even poor people were looking after themselves and their community.

Relief nonetheless was urgent. It was being held back by ignorance. Reflecting her personal exposure to malnutrition and overcrowding in Soho, Whitechapel and Bacup, Beatrice knew that the first step had to be measurement. Needed was not a metaphysics but a science of society, comparable to recent advances in physics and chemistry, that would explain and predict as the precondition for reform.

There was, Beatrice said, 'a new consciousness of sin among men of intellect and property' (MA 179). The will was there, just as it had been when Wilberforce and his followers had brought about the abolition of slavery. The young Beveridge found that there had been a 'steady, if gradual growth of the sense of public responsibility' (Beveridge 1909: 2), even for the able-bodied out of work. Social science was essential if things were to be put right.

Canon Samuel Barnett, vicar of St. Jude's, Whitechapel, later to found Toynbee Hall in the impoverished East End, was in favour of education and appalled by sin. 'The sense of sin', he proclaimed, 'has been the starting-point of progress' (in MA 180). By sin, neither Canon Barnett nor Miss Potter from the COS was spotlighting the personal failing of the depraved alcoholic so much as the shared failing of a social organism that had defaulted on its duty: 'The consciousness of sin was a collective or class consciousness; a growing uneasiness, amounting to conviction, that the industrial organisation ... had failed to provide a decent livelihood and tolerable conditions for a majority of the inhabitants of Great Britain' (MA 180). The poor were on our conscience. Christians or socialists, the deprived must not be left to lie where they fall.

Beatrice Potter was brought up a Christian. It never satisfied her innermost soul: 'Christianity is in no way superior ... to the other great religions' (BW 1982: 26). Throughout her life she never resolved her relationship with God.

In 1877, aged 19, she decided that atheism was not an option—'no character is perfect without religion' (BW 1982: 24)—but that the family Bible was not necessarily the way: 'I cannot accept the belief of my Church without inward questioning' (BW 1982: 19). The Christians were losing her vote: 'I do not believe in their doctrine' (BW 1983: 245). Beatrice was discovering what she *was not*: 'I am not a Christian' (BW 1985: 229). She spent the rest of her life trying to find out what she *was*.

In 1926, by then just short of 50, she knew that she had become ‘a spiritual outcast’, an isolate without a community of worshippers to validate her ‘devotion to a wholly disinterested purpose’ (BW 1984: 137). ‘I have no home for my religious faculty I am not at peace with myself. I have failed to solve the problem of life, of man’s relation to the universe and therefore to his fellow man’ (BW 1985: 74).

God is other-regarding conduct imposed from without: ‘By religion, I mean the communion of the soul with some righteousness *felt to be outside and above itself*’ (OP 448, emphasis in original). Sometimes taking ‘the conscious form of prayer’, sometimes ‘the unconscious form of ever-present and persisting aspirations’ (OP 448–9), religion was all but synonymous with hope and service. It is the master-key that unlocks the ‘*eventual*’ meaning of human life—if not for us, then for those who come after us’ (BW 1984: 137, emphasis in original).

Beatrice steeped herself in the non-rational in order to refresh her spirit for science. She never found what she wanted in the great books. The Old Testament was ‘intellectually and ethically repulsive’ (BW 1984: 242). The New Testament was no better: ‘The character of Jesus of Nazareth has never appealed to me. The vision of Buddha, the personality of St. Francis, the thought of Plato and of Goethe, even the writings of many minor moderns, have helped me far more to realize the purpose of love’ (BW 1984: 242). None was perfect. Preachers like Jesus and Buddha should have been active in this-worldly reform. The master-key to the ‘universe’ and—‘therefore’—to our ‘fellow man’ was not a distinctive rite or a Leviticus of commandment but rather an openness to ‘all-embracing beneficence’ (BW 1984: 242) and to ‘goodness’ (BW 1985: 74) because the benchmark can only be ‘the good’.

Evensongs, confessions, revelations and holy books are not the essence of the sacred. God created man not to pray but to do. *Laborare est orare*: ‘One hardly feels that one has a right to live if one is not fulfilling some duty to humanity’ (BW 1982: 25). Duty, however, is not self-legitimizing. For the non-negotiable to be self-enforcing, Beatrice insisted that it had to be backed up by a force that was not only super-individual but super-natural as well: ‘In order to serve Humanity we need the support and encouragement of a supernatural force above us towards which we are perpetually striving’ (BW 1982: 276). Hell is other people. Other people be damned. Hell is Hell.

It is double-barrelled enforcement. Durkheim traces externality and constraint to the collective sentiments engendered in the one-off by a riot,

a rally, a football match or, of course, Fustel's common flame: 'In all history we do not find a single religion without a church' (Durkheim 1912 [1915]: 44). Beatrice expressly superimposes the supernatural on the sociological. It is not clear what she expected the transcendental faith to be.

Coleridge's Church of England went beyond the Eye in the Sky to knit together the English soul: 'God is the unity of every nation' (Coleridge 1830 [1972]: 31). Comte's Church of Science employed rituals and costumes to put felt commitment into this-worldly positivism. Beatrice shared Comte's belief in fact-gathering and Coleridge's Church of the English (MA 38–9). In both cases, the unifying element had to be a religion. The Fabian Society and the Labour Party were quasi-religions. Beatrice felt that they were too secular, too right-brain to supply adequate cladding for the socialists' 'wholly disinterested purpose'. She continued to explore the great religions in the hope that she might chance upon the socialists' Shangri-La.

She did not find it. What she found was all-too-often self-seeking consequentialism when religion to her was the domain of self-sacrificing deontology. A case in point would be William Paley. Utilitarian and clergyman, Paley exhorted his flock to take Pascal's wager and to gamble on the good. Expediency purified of piety might be the this-worldly means to the higher end of salvation (Paley 1785: I 352). Beatrice had little sympathy with any doctrine that subordinated 'the great whole' (MA 96) to the prudence of maximisers who put bettering their own condition first. Moral absolutes are not supermarket tradeables. Good is right in itself. It would detract from the 'noble purpose' (WIN 79) of care to perform an altruistic deed in the expectation of a return gift.

Protestant Christianity, Beatrice felt, was too close to market economics. Catholic Christianity puts more emphasis on the harmony of the congregation. The communalism is just for show. At bottom, the Catholics as much as the Protestants treat responsible citizenship as the rational purchase of an entry-ticket to a future life.

Proper self-abrogation among the Christians is thin on the ground. Beatrice, determined to find the 'ultimate cause' (MA 88), went further afield into the Eastern religions of Hinduism and 'the agnosticism of Buddha' (MA 88). Adopting a more metaphysical confession, 'prayer might have to go, but worship would remain' (MA 90). Private communion might have to go. Community would remain.

Religion would remain. So, and even in Asia, would the *quid pro quo*. Hindus, lacking 'any conception of right and wrong', turn their back on

this world *because of* their ‘emotional and lively care for the next’ (WIN 211). Buddhists buy merit through conspicuous offerings and recorded sacrifices ‘*so that* gods and men may give them their due reward, in heavenly appreciation and in human approval’ (WIN 75, emphasis added). In Japan, Buddhists unashamedly aspire to ‘material benefits in this life and not for spiritual communion with the Buddha in eternity’ (WIN 75). Hindus, Buddhists, they are just as gain-seeking as Paley’s Christians who used their faith as the means to a narrow and private end.

Beatrice calls herself ‘an avowed agnostic’ (OP 135). She also states that the sacred alone is capable of putting meaning into life. Beatrice does not see it as a betrayal of her scientific creed to pray to a personal God or to attend services at St. Paul’s. She reproaches freethinkers like Shaw and Wells for insisting that the Fabian *Basis* by itself would be enough.

On the surface Sidney Webb was even more of a rational secularist: ‘He has never experienced the prayerful or religious attitude’ (BW 1983: 255). Sidney pronounced himself a ‘non-Christian’ (OP 273), in no way ‘a “religionist”’ (OP 257). Beatrice was not taken in by his ‘dread of being even remotely irrational or superstitious’ (OP 449). The ‘look in his eyes’ reveals the truth: an ‘unconscious form of religion ... lies at the base of all Sidney’s activity’ (OP 449). Sidney, she contended, was imbued with the sense of the supra-human. Even if he did not join her for services at St. Paul’s the truth is that ‘he believes’ (OP 449).

Number, weight or measure was not enough. For Beatrice, the facts were no more than permissive until passion and emotion had put backbone into the search. Beatrice had an artist’s sensibility to subjective *Verstehen* that could never be quantified but only experienced. It led her to contemplate a novel like her mother Laurencina’s fictionalised account of her own marriage in *Laura Gay* (1856).

Beatrice in her 20s had a need to give vent to her feelings: ‘Sometimes I feel as if I must write, as if I must pour my poor crooked thoughts into somebody’s heart, even if it be into my own’ (BW 1982: 16). She was desperate to create characters and situations on the model of Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* or Mrs. Gaskell’s *North and South*: ‘I want to have my “fling”. I want to imagine anything I damn please without regard to facts as they are’ (BW 1983: 67). In the late 1880s she was exploring the idea of a book, *Looking Forward*, that, in the tradition of Bellamy’s utopian *Looking Backward* (MA 398), would describe human life as it would be 60 to 80 years in the future. Fiction is the individual. Sociology, however, is

the whole. Dismissing the idea of a novel as self-indulgence, she threw herself into social reform instead.

What she did do was to keep a diary. Covering almost 70 years from 1877, she saw it as ‘a vent for one’s feelings, for those feelings in particular that one cannot communicate to other people’ (BW 1982: 19). Her notebooks reveal a remarkable fluency with words and an insight into psychological truth. Perhaps she did have the potential to become a major novelist.

Beatrice called the diaries her *Other Self*. Sections were published in two volumes (edited by Margaret Cole) in 1952 and 1956 and in four volumes (edited by Norman and Jeanne MacKenzie) between 1982 and 1985. Had she written an autobiography they would have been her *aide-mémoire*. There was no suggestion, although at times they are quite frank, that they should be destroyed at her death.

The first volume, called *My Apprenticeship*, appeared in 1926. It tells the story of her early life in advance of Sidney, ‘the Other One’, to whom it is dedicated. A second volume, begun in 1931 and never completed, was published posthumously (edited by Margaret Cole and Barbara Drake) as *Our Partnership* in 1948. It carries the story down to 1911. The third volume, *Our Pilgrimage*, was never written. It would have described her Bunyan-like voyage of discovery from Fabian socialism to the Soviet way.

Beatrice had both an artistic and a practical side. She was aware of the ‘doubleness of motive’ (BW 1982: 82), the ‘duplex personality’ (BW 1982: 188), the duality within. The opening line of *My Apprenticeship* confesses to ‘a continuous controversy between an Ego that affirms and an Ego that denies’ (MA xliii). It was a Faustian split between ‘restlessness and apathy’ (MA xliii), thought and action, instinct and logic, vocation and marriage, the intellect and the senses, the masses and the experts, the specific and the general, the individual and the collectivity, that she may have sublimated into the struggle between right and wrong.

Self-absorbed and self-obsessed, she was forever judging herself and finding herself wanting: ‘I suffer from remorse for lack of consistency between conduct and conviction’ (OP 471). Throughout her life Beatrice experienced bouts of psychosomatic illness, depression, toothache, neuralgia, colitis, eczema, headache, exhaustion, indigestion, insomnia, bladder problems and thoughts of death: ‘Life has always been distasteful to me’ (SBWL I: 50). Underneath the self-confidence there was self-doubt and anxiety: ‘I have always been the prey to fear’ (BW 1984: 261).

‘Fagged out’, overworked, she complained of ‘the misery of the over-excited brain’ (OP 471). She always felt that she was letting herself down: ‘All my little self-indulgences ... seem sins from which I can never shake myself free’ (OP 471). Neither Webb took much interest in music or painting. Trips to the theatre meant Shaw or Granville Barker. Daily life was viewed as service to others: ‘We must live the plainest, most healthful life in order to get through the maximum of work; and one must economise on all personal luxuries’ (OP 65).

The occasional cigarette is a sin. The ‘vanity motive’ (BW 1982: 133) is a sin. Fashionable dress is a sin. A cup of tea or coffee is a sin. Alcohol is a sin. Eating meat is a sin. A third meal in a day is a sin. Sin is all around: ‘Ought one ever to do anything that is against an ideal of perfect health, equality of income and the noblest use of money?... To a great extent Sidney and I are at peace with our ideal—in all the larger determinations of our life we do conform to the perception of what is best for the community’ (OP 471). Sin is dereliction of duty to the community. The inner call of conscience recalls the apostate to his post. Collectivism is the confessor who brings absolution to the divided self.

Beatrice in the 1880s was moving from caring conservatism through reforming liberalism into the collectivist camp. Sidney was ‘born a little Fabian’ (Cole 1961: 97). Beatrice had to be persuaded. Biased initially ‘in favour of freedom of competition’ and ‘against any attempt to interfere’ (SBW 1932 [1975]: 36), she was her father’s daughter. The inquiry into sweated labour had convinced her that the causes and cures of poverty were enmeshed in the economic system. The exposure to mutual aid in Bacup and the East End had shown her that the balance of power could be redressed by self-help and banding. In 1889 she attended (unchaperoned) the meetings of the Trades Union Congress in Dundee and the Co-operative Congress at Ipswich. She had seen at first-hand what the working class could become. By 1890 the die was cast.

Beatrice was changing. The nation itself was losing its way. Complacency and the invisible hand were being called into question by the extended depression in trade and industry from 1873 to 1896. Riots and looting in 1886 and 1887 evoked Burke-like resonances of Paris in 1789 and the Commune in 1871. The matchgirls’ strike at Bryant and May in 1888 led by the Fabian Annie Besant showed that even the uneducated and the unskilled could put up a fight. The dockworkers’ strike in 1889 led by New Unionist firebrands John Burns, Tom Mann and Ben Tillett demonstrated that even the casual and the out-of-work could disrupt the going

concern. The Reform Act of 1884 had brought in near-manhood suffrage. The privileged classes in the ‘newly enfranchised democracy’ were experiencing ‘panic fear’ (MA 150). Pro-poor legislation to tighten up the Factory Acts was a tangible outcome of the wider debate.

As much as the narrowly political issues of Afghanistan, the Ottoman Empire and Irish Home Rule still dominated the press and the agenda, there was a growing awareness of poverty at home and the urgency of reform. In 1887 Sir William Harcourt was declaring in Parliament that, Liberal or Conservative, Britain was approaching the end of ideology: ‘We are all Socialists now’.

On 1 September 1890 Beatrice wrote in her diary that a sea-change was occurring. Unstoppable evolution was on the side of ‘a socialist community, in which there will be individual freedom and public property, instead of class slavery and private possession of the means of production’ (MA 408). A new social order was emerging based on ‘the deliberate adjustment of economic faculty and economic desire’ (MA 395). Ownership was becoming public. Control was becoming collective. After that there is the ringing declaration of independence: ‘At last I am a socialist!’ (MA 408).

3 MARRIED INTO REFORM

To please her parents Beatrice did the expected ‘coming out’ in the London Season in 1876. Her heart was not in it. Her sisters married well into banking, medicine, politics, manufacturing and law. Beatrice already felt that she did not need a man to climb the ladder. In 1883 she confided to her diary that what she really wanted was to learn, achieve and assist: ‘I feel like a caged animal...I can’t get a training that I want without neglecting my duty’ (BW 1982: 81). It was not easy. Only a few universities admitted women. After her mother’s death in 1882 she had responsibilities in the home. They could only become greater as her sisters married and moved away.

Beatrice assisted her father in the management of his investments, his business speculations and the collection of his Whitechapel rents. She had no choice but to act the dutiful daughter when, after his stroke in 1885, someone had to look after an ageing invalid. By 33 she was already calling herself, only half in jest, a ‘glorified spinster’ (MA 367): ‘I was not made to be loved, there must be something repulsive in my character’ (BW 1982: 75). On a private income from capital of £1000 a year for life, she

knew that she could afford to be independent. At least she would never want for money. Fame and fortune had little attraction for the Webbs. Such money as later came in from books and lectures was diverted into research and research assistants.

3.1 *Joseph Chamberlain*

Beatrice was more than presentable. She could hold her own in a serious conversation. At home with the rich and powerful, she had had socially favoured suitors. The only serious candidate had been the radical politician, wealthy businessman and purpose-driven reformer Joseph Chamberlain. As Mayor of Birmingham from 1873 to 1876, he had municipalised the public utilities into ‘gas and water socialism’. He had championed public services with the slogan ‘high rates and a healthy city’. Liberal Member of Parliament from 1876, President of the Board of Trade from 1880 to 1885, widely tipped to be a future Prime Minister, he was on the lookout for a wife who would not be out of place at the apex. His populist policies of ‘three acres and a cow’ and his conversion from free trade to protection effectively ended his political career. Beatrice might otherwise have become the wife of the Prime Minister, the stepmother of Neville Chamberlain and the châtelaine of Highbury, his considerable country seat.

Their on-off courtship lasted for five years from 1883 (when she was 25 and he, twice widowed, was 47) to 1887. Beatrice later described the years of their infatuation as ‘the catastrophe of my life’ (BW 1983: 190), a ‘black nightmare’ (BW 1982: 190) that left her ‘wounded, horribly wounded’ (BW 1982: 253). Politically, they shared a concern with the deprived, an antipathy to the rentier and a commitment to adult (male) suffrage. Temperamentally, Beatrice was attracted by his outstanding qualities as ‘a leader and controller of men’ (MA 127). It was, however, those very qualities that ultimately drove them apart: ‘He had energy and personal magnetism, in a word masculine force to an almost superlative degree. Instantaneously he dominated my emotional nature and aroused my latent passion. But my intellect not only remained free but positively hostile to his influence’ (BW 1983: 190).

Her intellect was recalcitrant to the ‘absolute supremacy’ (BW 1982: 101) of a natural autocrat who would expect his wife to be subservient. Drawn to him by ‘the worst part of my nature’ (BW 1983: 175), that same nature would forever be ‘at war with itself’ (BW 1982: 100). Marriage to

an ‘enthusiast and a despot’ (BW 1982: 104), opinionated and intolerant, would have robbed her of all sense of self: ‘All joy and lightheartedness will go from me. I shall be absorbed into the life of a man whose aims are not my aims; who will refuse me all freedom of thought’ (BW 1982: 111).

It was too great a loss to contemplate. As much as she was in love with Chamberlain she was not prepared to sacrifice her mission and become just another lady of leisure. Tired of waiting, he married Mary Endicott, daughter of the US Secretary of State for War, in 1888. She was 24. Mary had no moral objections to consumption without production or to being the devoted follower of a man who took an uncompromisingly conventional view of women.

Youth was over. Her ‘desperate clutches after happiness ... seemingly foredoomed to failure’, Beatrice concluded that ‘passion lies at my feet, dead’ (BW 1982: 220) and threw herself into her work. The Library at the British Museum was ‘filled with ugly nonentities, the “failures of life”, ... decrepit men, despised foreigners, forlorn widows and soured maids’ (BW 1982: 266). It would have to do. In 1891 she published *The Co-operative Movement in Great Britain*. German and Russian translations quickly followed. By then there was Sidney Webb.

3.2 Sidney Webb

Beatrice had read his section in the *Fabian Essays* and admired his ‘historic sense’ (MA 405). At some stage she had read his tracts and he her sections in the first volume of Booth’s *Life and Labour*. In a review in the *Star*, he praised her literary style.

Beatrice sought him out in 1889 in connection with her research on cooperation. They met again at the Co-operative Congress in Glasgow in 1890. Subsequently he commented on draft chapters of her book. Soon they were discussing a collaborative project on the trade union movement. She knew that as a Fabian and a (well-connected) socialist his advice was likely to be ideologically sound. She had not expected to end her days with a Londoner prone to saying things like ‘Keep your hair on, missus’ (OP 345).

Beatrice in her diary describes him as ‘the little figure with a big head who was to become the man of my destiny’ (MA 402). Physically, he was not attractive. Sidney Webb, she recorded, had a ‘Jewish nose, prominent eyes and mouth...somewhat between a London card and a German professor’ (BW 1982: 324). He had ‘bulgy eyes, bushy moustaches’, a

‘square-cut short beard’, a ‘small but rotund body, tapering arms and legs and diminutive hands and feet’ (OP 5). He was ‘very small and ugly’ (SBWL I: 382–3).

Sidney had ‘ridiculous ... ill looks’ and a ‘husky voice’: ‘His diction, though fluent and coherent, lacks style’ (OP 5). Beatrice was brought almost to laughter by his ‘tiny tadpole body, unhealthy skin, lack of manner, Cockney pronunciation’ (BW 1982: 329). Joseph Chamberlain had film-star good looks and the *savoir-faire* that comes from big-business success. Sidney Webb, ‘a London retail tradesman with the aims of a Napoleon’, little money and no social position, was ‘a queer monstrosity’ (BW 1982: 330). Some friends, aghast that she was keeping company so far down the social scale, would not have him in the house.

Yet there is more to friendship than looks alone. Beatrice was quick to spot a rough diamond when she saw one. Sidney, she soon discovered, had ‘encyclopaedic’ knowledge, a phenomenal memory and a ‘genuine faith’ (MA 408, 409) in the collectivist cause.

Sidney was assiduous and focused: ‘The continuous activity of his brain is marvellous ... He is never without a book or a pen in his hand’ (OP 176). He was a quick study, ‘sensitive’, ‘ready to adapt himself’ (BW 1982: 330). He was energetic, ‘ingenious’, ‘informative and logical’, forever insinuating ‘wise thoughts’ and suggesting ‘subtle qualifications’ (OP 5, 6). Sidney was an intellectual self-starter. He had a ‘unique aptitude for documentary research’ (OP 12).

He was also very, very bright. He had ‘the self-complacency of one who is always thinking faster than his neighbours’ (BW 1982: 324) and ‘twice as fast as his colleagues’ (BW 1983: 192). Beatrice saw early on that he was ‘admirable as a social engineer’ (BW 1983: 192) if also lacking in the charisma, magnetism or ‘make-up of a popular leader’ (OP 6). Sidney was not a natural orator. It was just as well that he had no ambition to lead or personal ‘itch for power’: ‘Popular approval he does not enjoy; it bores him ... He is the ideal “man at the desk” ’ (OP 6, 472).

It was a point in his favour. Sidney in the 1880s was a civil servant, a committee-man, an administrator, a wire-puller and, last but not least, an ‘ideal draftsman’ (BW 1983: 192). He would intrigue tenaciously for gradualism and reform. He would be an *éminence grise* in the back room. He would become ‘*the* Intellect of the Labour Party’ (OP 7, emphasis in original). He would, however, never become Prime Minister of a truly Fabian Britain.

His personality complemented his intelligence. Level-headed, indifferent to criticism (OP 414), he was ‘totally unself-conscious’ (BW 1982: 324). Sidney was eminently ‘sane’, ‘economical in personal expenditure, abstemious without being faddy, untroubled by vanity or large appetite’ (OP 471). He was grounded, open-minded, sensitive and sensible. She was emotional, impatient and moody. Beatrice had the social position, the self-presentation and the financial cushion that he lacked. They brought out the best in each other. Nonetheless, it would always be Beauty and the Beast.

In 1890 they began to meet and to correspond. Their letters soon branched out from socialism into personal disclosure. It transpired that Sidney was a loner, unable to find a ‘congenial spirit’, aware that he was ‘left out’, fearful that he would ‘remain outside’ (SBWL I: 118) once his friends like Pease and Shaw had married.

Sidney from the start was smitten. Before the end of 1890 he was calling himself ‘a man deeply in love’ (SBWL I: 163) and declaring that he had ‘love enough for two’ (SBWL I: 213): ‘You are an inspiration to me such as I have never yet known’ (SBWL I: 223). While she was still thinking of friendship, research-projects and public service, he was already planning ahead to something that would last. Within a year, well-informed about Dante’s Beatrice, Comte’s Clothilde and Goethe’s *ewig Weibliche*, he had made her his muse: ‘You are to me the Sun, and source of all my work’ (SBWL I: 142). She was telling him to wait and concentrate on their scholarship.

She must have sensed that things were taking their course. In 1890 she was inviting him to meet her sisters. In 1891 they became engaged. In 1892, once the death of her father in January had freed her from her responsibility as his primary carer, they were married in July in a civil ceremony at St. Pancras. He was 33, she 34. They began as they meant to go on. The Webbs spent their honeymoon studying labour relations in Ireland and at the Trades Union Congress in Glasgow.

4 TWO BECOME ONE

It was a marriage made in socialism. Some people marry because of the pleasure that is ‘*passively self*’ (BW 1982: 188, emphasis in original). The Webbs teamed up because of the self-abnegation that spreads out from the home hearth to the community as a whole: ‘The only real happiness is devoting oneself to making other people happy’ (BW 1982: 19). Beatrice