

Karel Hujer:

A Fateful Delusion

Last summer the London press frequently expressed concern as to who really rules England, the British government or the trade unions? This aroused my interest in the "socialist" corner of Westminster Abbey, the British National Pantheon, where a memorial plaque marks the spot where the ashes of Beatrice and Sidney Webb are deposited. Graves of other pioneers of British socialism are there who, during my studies in England, 1924-25, were in the prime of their activity and influence. As Beatrice Potter expressed it in 1890 when both she and her future husband, Sidney Webb, attended the Co-operative Congress in Glasgow, one night on the streets of that Scottish city "with glory in the sky and hideous bestiality on the earth, two Socialists came to a working compact."

There is no example anywhere of such a working relationship in the history of social concern as was to develop between the daughter of a rich merchant, active in the ruling-class, and the son of respectable middle-class parents. Four years later, a great classic volume, "History of Trade Unionism," resulted from their painstaking scholarly labor, recording in great detail the unions' histories. The impact of this work on the social and political life not only in England but the entire western civilization is marked by the fact that Lenin and his wife Krupskaya, at the turn of the century, translated this enormous volume into Russian while in their Siberian exile.

It is interesting that in the British empire's time we have examples of individuals in high position in bourgeois society who enter into a dedicated life of service to the neglected poverty as did Muriel Lester and her sister, serving in the slums of East

London, or Madilene Slade, daughter of a British admiral, washing the latrine as a disciple of Mahatma Gandhi. But it is Beatrice herself who has produced such lasting influence together with Sidney. Unlike the Lesters or Madilene Slade, Beatrice never renounced the comforts of privileged life with her two Scottish maid servants and a private income of one thousand pounds of sterling a year, yet before her marriage she worked as a laborer in several "sweated-labor" tailoring shops and wrote "Pages from a Work-girl's Diary," a scathing indictment of conditions in Dickensian London.

Before the failure of the first Labor government and the embarrassing betrayal of socialism by Ramsay MacDonald, Beatrice wrote in 1928 that "the Soviet Revolution was the greatest misfortune in the history of the Labor Movement" but with Stalin starting his reign of terror in the thirties, unknown to them, the Webbs completely changed their views. It was the time when George Bernard Shaw and other leading Fabians returning from their visit in the U.S.S.R. were not only filled with admiration but switched into besotted adulation, encouraged by the Dean of Canterbury, Dr. Hewlitt Johnson, who regularly proclaimed from the Cathedral pulpit that Stalin was busily constructing the Kingdom of Christ in Russia. Thereupon the Webbs, in 1932, engaged a Russian speaking secretary and started their triumphant four months tour of Russia, received everywhere with great honors.

"We fell in love with the Soviet Union" wrote Beatrice and a 1,200 page volume resulted with the exalted title "Soviet Communism — A New Type of Civilization." Sidney returned to the U.S.

S.R. in 1934 and came back rejoicing, "See, it works, it works," meaning communism and its collectivization.

The tragic aspect of the aging Webbs was that Soviet Russia under Stalin's terror, from which they were carefully shielded, was the answer to their life's efforts. Beatrice reminisced that their "chief mistake . . . had been to earlier reject the Marxist theory of the decay of capitalism." Thus, they abandoned the Fabian doctrine of the "inevitability of gradualness" (i.e., "creeping socialism"), acceding to violent revolution as practiced by Soviet communism. Nothing was wrong that Russia did, including the Stalin-Hitler Pact of 1939, which the Webbs sanctioned as a necessary measure of defense for the U.S.S.R.

There is a frightening contrast in reports sent from Russia by Beatrice's nephew, Malcolm Muggeridge, at the very same time the Webbs enjoyed their triumphant welcome in Russia. The Manchester Guardian of March 25-28, 1933, carries the story of the famine, planned and deliberate, not due to any natural catastrophe like the failure of grain but an administrative famine brought by forced collectivization and deportation of uncounted, unrecorded thousands of peasants, owners of the land, carted in cattle cars to an oblivion in Siberia. Only recently did the world obtain some shadow of the indescribable barbarism and tragedy in Solzhenitsyn's Gulag Archipelago.

Muggeridge has this description in a Kiev church at the time of the man-made famine. The scene was overpowering, the peasants turning to God in their great affliction. There was no help save from God. Where else were they to turn? Not to the Kremlin and the Dicta-

torship of the Proletariat, nor to the forces of progress and democracy and enlightenment in the West. It was the time when the Soviet government presented a picture of Lenin to the Webbs. Though stylized and cheap, as Muggeridge describes, yet Beatrice in her sumptuous residence in Passfield had set the picture up as though it were a Velasquez, with lighting coming from below.

It is an alarming tragedy that out of socialism which Beatrice, in her deep concern for human suffering, had hoped would heal England out of enduring Dickensian slums, Muggeridge says of his aunt: "Lenin had embodied for her the whole spirit of this age, showing her to be a true priestess and prophetess, pursuing truth through facts (in the History of Trade Unionism) and arriving at fantasy, seeking deliverance through power but arriving at servitude." Nevertheless, despite all the efforts of the Webbs, still approximately 50 per cent of Great Britain's entire wealth is owned by 5 per cent of the population.

I remember what Dr. Harper, son of the first president of the University of Chicago, said many years ago: "Is communism a menace? No, I would call it a challenge if the capitalist world does not learn how to distribute before the Communist world learns how to produce." Yet, distribution must neither be forced nor a giveaway program, rather a true equal opportunity program. Nicolas Berdyaev appropriately says, "My own bread is an economic problem, my neighbor's bread is a spiritual problem."

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