

## FROM THE FELLOWSHIP OF THE NEW LIFE TO THE FABIAN SOCIETY

In the 1883, on the evening of 24 October Edward Pease invited fifteen people to his apartment, in Osnaburgh Street, London. The aim of this meeting was to discuss the possibility of the formation of a new society, the participants being dissatisfied with the program, ideas of all those societies that they were previously attached to, members of. Some of this sixteen people were young provincials "adrift" in the capital, having rather vague ideas about the possible aim, purpose of the new society, having one common resolution though – that they want to live in an intelligent sort of life, that they want – if possible – to change contemporaneous conditions to better from worse.

H.G. Wells summarizes very well this general feeling in his autobiography:

"I became what I may call a Socialist in the Resentful Phase, and what was happening to me was happening to millions of the new generation in Europe and America. Something- none of us knew how to define it but we called it generally the Capitalist System... was wasting life for us and we were beginning to realize as much. But at that time in the whole world there was really no explicit realization that this was due not to a system but to an absence of system". (1)

Sidney Webb also talks about this constant intellectual restlessness, revealing partly some vital characteristics in the mental life of the eighties, and revealing also that London was still the centre, the focus of contemporaneous radical thought:

"We were young in those days... and, I suppose, as eagerly presumptuous as young people ought to be.... We spent what free time we had, after earning our daily bread, in reading and talking - in studying everything from bluebooks, to art, from history and politics to novels and poetry; and perpetually discussing and lecturing, among ourselves and before anybody who would listen to us". (2)

This was the golden age of debating societies, Sunday lecture societies, radical clubs; we know, that the founders of the Fabian Society attended almost all the "important" and "interesting" associations of contemporary radical youth before founding their own. Among many others there was the famous Hampstead Dialectical Society, and its junior offshoot the Zetetical Society brought together Shaw and Webb. There was the Aristotelian Society (1881), the Society for Psychical Research (1882), Pease and Podmore met each other here.

There was also the Progressive Association (1882), not to mention the early socialist societies.

Edward Pease at the time of the first meeting was a young man of twenty six, and the partner of a Stock Exchange firm, what he himself considered immoral as he had become a sincere devotee of William Morris, and his socialist ideas. Besides some less known figures we find among the participants Havelock Ellis, Frank Podmore, but the leading spirit of the small gathering was Thomas Davidson, the wandering scholar, a Scotland – born American citizen, who worked as an educationalist in the United States. He was an ethical anarchist communist, basing all improvement on self – reform, developing an idealistic philosophy demanding its votaries to live according to absolutely unselfish, high ideals of love and true brotherhood.

Though Pease was the "host", the real organizer of the meeting was a young civil servant Percival Chubb, an admirer of Davidson, and as nothing serious happened at this first occasion besides Davidson's, and as nothing serious happened at this first occasion besides Davidson's reading his paper about the possibilities of the Vita Nuova of the Fellowship of the new Life, Davidson's disciples called very soon another meeting on November 7th, where they passed a resolution saying that "an association be formed whose ultimate aim shall be the reconstruction of Society in accordance with the highest moral possibilities".(3)

One of the participants, Dr. Burnes – Gibson, presented a draft "plan for a Fellowship of the New Life" in a month, of which the first two lines read:

"Object: The cultivation of a perfect character in each and all. Principle: The subordination of material things to spiritual." (4)

The whole plan and the inclinations, resolutions of the members revealed a strong influence of the Owenite self-improvement and small co-operation idea, but nothing really decisive happened at these early meetings.

After a few months the majority of the New Life members came to the conclusion that social reform through legislation was at least as important as self-reform through ethical contemplation. They left the Fellowship and settled down to the study of social questions. The outcome of these studies was the formation of the Fabian Society in January, 1884.

The Society adopted the name Fabian after Fabius Cunctator, - Fabius the Delayer – the Roman general, whose tactics in the third century B.C. – avoiding open battle – saved Roma from the Carthaginian army under Hannibal. The tactics of Fabius, which they undertook to imitate in their policy of careful advances, was defined as follows: "For the right moment you must wait, as Fabius did most patiently when warring against Hannibal, though many censured his delays: but when the time comes you must strike hard, as Fabius did, or your waiting will be in vain, and fruitless."

The text of this motto we can find in all the monographs, works written about the Fabian Society quoted by Pease, McCarran, Margaret Cole, M. Beer... we also know that both the name of the Society and the wording of the motto was supplied by Frank Podmore, and Margaret Cole adds:

"No one has ever found any version of it in Latin texts; but lapse of time and long usage have given it the air of historical authenticity. An attempt was once made to get it altered: but the voting was even, and the discussion lapsed." (5)

From this time on the relations between the Fabian Society and the New Life Fellowship were always friendly though two societies as regards aims and method had little in common and seldom came into closer contact. Mention should be made perhaps that James Ramsey MacDonald, later the Prime Minister of Britain, started his political career as a Fellowship member and for one year he was the secretary of it. The New Life association got finally dissolved in 1898.

At the first, 1884 meeting of the Fabian Society a resolution was taken in the following terms:

"Resolution I. That the Society be called the Fabian Society /as Mr. Podmore explained in allusion to the victorious policy of Fabius Cunctator... /"

"Resolution III .... It was ... decided to modify the resolution of 7th November, 1883, by inserting the words 'to help on' between the words 'shall be' and the words 'the reconstruction'."

/The original text of the 7th Nov. resolution was: ".... An association be formed whose ultimate aim shall be the reconstruction of Society in accordance with the highest moral possibilities."/

"Resolution IV.... Hold meetings for discussion, the reading of papers... Delegate some of its members to attend meetings held on social subjects ...in order that such members may... report to the Society on the proceedings... Take measures in other ways... by the collection of articles from current literature, to obtain information on all contemporary social movements and social needs..." (6)

The resolution revealed that the Fabian Society sincerely wanted to reconstruct the contemporaneous, competitive capitalist society but we have to emphasize here, that the resolution of one the earlier meetings /the one of 23rd Nov. 1883/ was considered also valid by the Fabians and on that basic principle they wanted to reconstruct society:

"The members of the Society assert that the Competitive system assures the happiness and comfort of the few at the expense of the suffering of the many and that society must be reconstituted in such a manner as to secure welfare and happiness." (7)

It is very easy to realize the obvious influence of Owen, Bentham, but also Morris and Shelley on the wording of this resolution. Therefore we may not

wonder that at this early period of the Society nobody mentioned the word "socialism" or "socialist". /it did not appear in the records till the sixth meeting, when one of the lady – members of the Society read a paper, entitled "The Two Socialisms" – meaning the comparison between the socialism of the Fabian Society and that of the Social Democratic federation./

The more interesting fact is, as almost at the moment of the birth of the Society, the first Fabian Tract was written and Published, bearing the title: Why are the Many Poor ?. The author was the only labourer – member of the Society, W.L. Phillips , a house – painter, and the Tract was considered for a long time a valid, concise summary of Fabian Socialism.

The members of the first Fabian meeting also elected an executive committee of there: Hubart Bland, Frank Podmore and Frederick Keddell. In a few weeks the number of the members rose to 20.

After the better living standards and security of the seventies, the great Depression at the end of the decade brought a considerable change. Economic insecurity, the slackening of reform, the general sense of social shame, and fear of the anger of respectable working men – these were the elements which created the mental atmosphere in which Socialist societies were born. Therefore it has often been observed, and observed correctly, that the eighties and nineties were the seeding –time for Socialist organizations in Britain. Mention should be made here to the four socialist groups that have been prevalent in Britain in this period:

1. The Guild of St. Mathew, founded by Stewart Headlam /Christian socialist Parson/ in 1877.
2. The Democratic Federation of Henry M. Hyndman /1842-1921/ founded in 1881, later /1884/ transformed into the Social Democratic Federation. William Morris joined the Federation in 1883 then seceded and organized...
3. The socialist League in 1884.
4. The Fabian Society in 1883 -84.

In September, 1883 G.B. Shaw was admitted to membership, and in January, 1885 elected to the Executive.

A fortnight after his admission he wrote his first tract /Fabian Tract No.2./ later published as a two – page leaflet, entitled A Manifesto.

In the same year several major events occurred. First Shaw brought along his friend, Sidney Webb, who worked as a clerk in the Colonial Office. Very soon Webb brought along Sydney Olivier, his colleague in the Colonial Office, one year later also Graham Wallas appeared – and they were admitted as members of the society. Later on they were often called the "Big Four" of Fabian Thought, but all these young men were practically unknown figures, unknown names in 1885-86. Therefore Margaret Cole calls the "most spectacular convert... of the infant Society". (8)

Annie Besant, the finest woman orator of those days, the famous colleague of Charles Bradlaugh.

In June, 1886 Sydney Olivier had taken over the secretary ship, to be succeeded in 1890 by Pease. In April, 1888 the elected Executive consisted of Annie Besant, Hubert Bland, William Clarke /admitted to membership in 1886/, Sydney Olivier, Bernard Shaw, Graham Wallas, and Sidney Webb; these were the seven who wrote the Fabian Essays, who formulated, shaped the basic principles of Fabian Socialism.

- (1) H.G. Wells: Experiment in Autobiography (London, Collancz, 1934) vol. I. p. 79.
- (2) Sidney Webb: Introduction to the 1920 edition of the Fabian Essays in Socialism. From the 1931 reprint of the Essays, London, Allan and Unwin p. XVII.
- (3) Pease: op. cit., p. 31.
- (4) ibid, p. 32.
- (5) Margaret Cole: The Story of Fabian Socialism, London, 1961. Heinemann, p. 1.
- (6) See: Minute Book of the Fabian Society; also Pease op. cit., pp. 33-35.
- (7) Pease: op. cit., p. 32.
- (8) Margaret Cole: op. cit., p. 8.

### Ամփոփում

#### Նոր Կյանք Միությունից դեպի Ֆաբիանական շարժման ստեղծումը

Հոդվածում ներկայացված է անգլիական Ֆաբիանական միության ստեղծման պատմության հիմնական փուլերը, մեկնաբանվում է Միության ստեղծման և կայացման գլխավոր քաղաքական և հասարակական դրոշմապատճառները 1880-ական թթ. ընթացքում: Հոդվածն անդրադառնում Ֆաբիանական Միության 1884թ. կանոնադրական որոշման հոդվածներին՝ առանձնացնելով դրանցից առավել կարևոր և էական դրույթները: