FABIANISM

Fabianism is a non-revolutionary socialist movement advocating the rational, empirical study of social issues with the goal of direct government intervention. Fabianism originated with the Fabian Society, which was founded in London, England in 1884 and is still currently active. The Society emerged out of the radical and progressive debating clubs and discussion societies of late Victorian London, and particularly the Fellowship of the New Life. The Society reportedly took its name from the Roman general Q. Fabius Maximus, known as “*Cunctator*” or “The Delayer,” who defeated Hannibal through a policy of attrition and careful timing. Gradualist in its approach to social change, the Society focused on research and drafting policy recommendations, which it then passed on to political decision makers. The Society is thus often considered to be a forerunner of the contemporary political “think tank.” After the First World War, the Society became associated with the Labour Party, although it remained organizationally independent. The high-water mark of Fabian influence in Britain came with the 1945 Labour majority government. More than half of the Labour MPs elected, including Prime Minister Clement Attlee, were members of the Society, and the welfare state they implemented drew on many Fabian ideas.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Fabianism played a large role in nascent currents of modernism. George Bernard Shaw was perhaps the most significant adherent in Victorian England, and any number of his plays, including *Mrs. Warren’s Profession* and *Man and Superman,* reflected Shaw’s sense that socialism in England was something of an evolutionary certainty: the class structure was destined to crumble under its own weight even without revolutionary upheaval. In a sense, this view combined the startling realism of Henrik Ibsen with a broader sense that scientific advances would themselves compel society to socialist ends. From later vantage points, this view had its limitations: Shaw was a dedicated believer in eugenics, the science of population control and breeding, and after the rise of Nazi eugenics many pointed to underlying similarities between Fabian and Nazi social science. From a rather different perspective, Fabianism also attracted many gathered around Virginia and Vanessa Woolf at Bloomsbury. The ameliorative and inevitable, rather than revolutionary and volitional, understanding of social change appealed to the far-from-working-class Bloomsbury circle, and it was a circle that included John Maynard Keynes, perhaps the most significant economist of the era. On a wider scale, Fabianism played an important role in the growing pacifist internationalism of the pre-WWI era, and actively supported the creation of the League of Nations in the war’s aftermath.

Bibliography

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