

by the 1968 presidential campaign—was the need for some accommodation with the Soviets and, therefore, the Chinese. Détente resulted in early political and diplomatic triumphs, but did little to cure the basic economic problems. Because of that failure, the American consensus for détente remained fragile and even began to splinter. The Trilateralists in the Carter administration who thought they could substitute a Bonn-Washington-Tokyo axis for the Moscow-Washington-Peking relationship have done no better either in solving the West's economic downturn or rebuilding the domestic consensus.

We need no more books for a while on U.S.-USSR relations in the 1970s (Barnet has given us an admirable account), or on the international concert of power in the early and later stages of détente (Bell probably cannot be surpassed). We do, however, need an analysis of how the economic crisis beginning in the late sixties led to a decline of American power relative to other, particularly Third World, nations, and why some domestic groups have wanted to ditch détente no matter how much Old World realism and books on Positive Thinking they have been exposed to. In addition to a cool, modern-day Walter Lippmann, we badly need a Brooks Adams or a Thorstein Veblen to give us another perspective on the causes, content, and effects of détente.

**CHINESE SHADOWS, by  
Simon Leys. Viking Press,  
220 pp., \$10.00.**

## Watching the China watchers

W. J. F. JENNER

**W**HY IS IT SO HARD TO THINK straight about China? Normally merciless critics of society will gag mind and mouth when it comes to the People's Republic. Whether it is because of some sense of guilt stemming from history—earlier aggressions in East Asia for Europeans, the more recent events in Indochina for Americans—or whether it is because

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Chinese officials have ways of making us accept their sense of the desirability of belonging to orthodoxy, I do not know; but even now I feel uneasy at stating in public some such incontrovertible fact as that most Chinese peasants are virtually tied to the land. It is not just the fear of never getting another visa, for one cannot even think of writing honestly about contemporary China while trying to keep on good terms with the country's rulers. It is rather a reluctance to wound the religious sensibilities of one's Chinese friends about the sacred notion of China. The love of China becomes too easily a silent passion.

It thus took courage to write this book, which came out in Paris with a bang as a cheap paperback three years ago. *Ombres chinoises* shocked and excited because it said things that could not be decently said in public before. Since then, and in large part because of that book, the climate of discussion of China in France has changed. Its barbs wounded, and since they were tipped not with malice but with the author's painful sincerity, they cured some of their victims. The tone of China-reporting in *Le Monde*, for example, has improved enormously; and the independent Left now looks at the Peking regime more coolly and skeptically.

Even though *Chinese Shadows*, the long-delayed English-language version of the book, has already attracted much fashionable attention and been endorsed by leading liberal Establishment figures, it should not be ignored. The journey on which it is based was made five years ago, and the book was written four years ago. It has not been noticeably rewritten, save for the occasional extra footnote, for the American edition. Yet time has confirmed many of its judgments and predictions. It marks a stage in the development of Western attitudes to China—the end of innocence.

It will probably be the more effective in the United States for appearing now. In 1974 our European inhibitions about criticizing China's rulers had long needed shaking up, but American needs were different then. After decades of unremitting official hostility to China, culminating in the hideous Indochina adventure, it was not adulation of the People's Republic but blind hatred of it that had to be reconsidered.

Americans were suddenly very receptive to the good points of a society from which they had allowed themselves to be isolated for more than 20 years. The grotesque images of a hell on earth that had been part of the war propaganda were discarded so fast that there was no time to ask why they had been accepted for so long. In their place an instant myth of impossibly good, wise, and uniform Chinese, speaking with one voice, was created in many reports of visits to Peking. The ugly yellow bastards of the last two American wars in Asia were magically transformed by guilty conscience into supermen and superwomen. This was progress, but it fell far short of recognizing the full humanity of the Chinese.

**T**HE YEAR 1976 SEEMS TO HAVE been when popular American perceptions of China began to acquire some depth. The naked struggle for power before and after Mao's death; the contrast between the mood of the demonstrators in T'ien-an-men Square in early April, the dragooned but unenthusiastic marchers turned out to greet the fall of Teng Hsiao-p'ing, and the evident delight with which the arrest of Chiang Ch'ing and her friends was celebrated in the big cities; the savagery of political and personal abuse in official and private polemic; and the revelations of violent disagreements within the system all made even casual observers realize that neither Chinese society nor its rulers could be quite as wonderful as initial enthusiasm may have suggested. Hence, in part, the eagerness with which *Chinese Shadows* has been welcomed in 1977.

When "Simon Leys" visited China in 1972, it was not as a political innocent. He is a Belgian Sinologist who had already used the *nom de plume* for his *Les habits neufs du président Mao*, a debunking of some accepted notions about the "cultural revolution." He was not hostile either to China or to the revolution that overthrew the old order in 1949: On his first visit in 1955 he had felt and responded to a mood of liberation, hope, and steady progress. His involvement in Chinese life and culture is neither recent nor shallow.

No doubt he did not expect to like everything he saw. It was frustrating but predictable that his contact with a country he loved should be restricted to a closely supervised itinerary along which gaggles of foreign visitors are hustled between set-piece visits, song-and-dance performances by schoolchildren, and compulsory banquets. What drove him to fury was the behavior of so many visitors, who managed to combine a lack of curiosity about people and things Chinese with a pathetic willingness to take down in their notebooks and repeat as best they could afterwards the clichés with which they were regaled.

The resulting book is mordant with anger. Anger not with the people of China, but at the Uncle Tom acts they are forced to put on for visitors and at the gratuitous connivance of intelligent foreigners, who should know better, in the obvious absurdities of Maoist orthodoxy. He did not set out to write a balanced, fair-minded account, assuming that his readers would already know some of the books by enthusiasts. He was not trying to discredit the Chinese Revolution as such (unlike the purveyors of American-accepted wisdom on China in the 1950s and 1960s), only to fill in the darker shades of the pictures that had been painted in unrelieved bright colors by Maoists and fellow-travelers. Perhaps it is unregenerate to prefer awkward truths to convenient lies and to ask the cost of the People's Republic's great achievements. But it cannot do the slightest harm to a state that is now a nuclear power, nor can it hurt

us to come to terms with the China that actually exists instead of a land of fantasy and to recognize the damage Mao caused in his last years.

*Chinese Shadows* must be read. Leys's more recent collection of essays, *Images brisées* (Paris, Robert Laffont), takes some of its points further, and is also well worth obtaining. Of course it would be quite wrong to accept uncritically everything Leys says; the last thing we need is yet another China orthodoxy. There are no comfortable and reliable general truths about that country, and given the wretched trickle of information, on most issues we can do little more than ask questions. □

**THE FABIANS, by Norman and Jeanne MacKenzie. Simon and Schuster, 446 pp., \$12.95.**

## The earnestness of being important

JOSEPH R. STROMBERG

IN THE FABIANS, NORMAN AND Jeanne MacKenzie chronicle the political and personal lives of the early Fabians from the founding of the society in 1884 to World War I. The three outstanding "Old Guard" Fabians, Sidney and Beatrice Webb, and George Bernard Shaw, gradually come to dominate the text, just as they dominated Fabianism. A wealth of anecdotal material on the Webbs, Shaw, and others makes for interesting and easy reading of this longish book. Although at times the historical context recedes into a backdrop, the authors generally hold a nice balance between biography and history. Indeed, they almost arm-twist one into sympathizing with these social engineers and rather constipated Victorian hippies, including the overserious Webbs and the brilliantly erratic Shaw.

The Victorian consensus was crumbling when the Fabian Society was formed. The great Gladstonian Liberal Party divided internally, eventually coming to grief over "social reform," tariffs, imperialism, and Ireland. Socialist ideas were in the air—those of Comte, Marx, Ruskin, and Morris—and activists called for a new labor poli-

tics. It was an age of Social Imperialism, a key concept that the MacKenzies don't explore.

Social Imperialism, not only in England, but in Germany, France, and elsewhere in those pre-1914 days, was a means by which paternalists of both Left and Right sought to reorder domestic society and sustain Empire abroad. The Fabians were right in the middle of the Social Imperialist trend and hoped to be its British brain trust. The first Fabians were mostly civil servants and unsuccessful businessmen whose dislike of trade went together with a belief in the saving mission of government experts. Their ideas, temperaments, and backgrounds ideally suited them for the self-appointed task of achieving maximum "National Efficiency."

The MacKenzies lay considerable stress on the religious background of the leading Fabians, who tended to come from evangelical homes. When they abandoned religion in the face of science, evolution, and Darwin, their inherited moralism sought secular outlets such as positivism, which in turn readied them for authoritarian socialism. The sad turn of latter-day Benthamite Radicalism toward the positive state was another influence. The conception of society finally generated by Benthamism and positivism was surprisingly unsophisticated. Society was a machine, it seemed, and the experts, armed with factual data, would do good by using the state to better align the machine's parts.

Social engineering was the Fabian way. Their attitude toward poverty was characteristic. The state was a benign, neutral tool to be used to eliminate poverty as soon as the "studies" demonstrated the best line of attack. That the state with its wars, taxes, regulations, and restrictions on trade could have something to do with causing poverty never occurred to the Fabians. At an earlier time, Radicals like Richard Cobden and John Bright—autodidactic businessmen who had a shrewd idea of how society really works—would have made such a connection. But if the Fabians agreed totally on any one thing it was the abandonment of classical liberalism and the earthbound business ethos at home and abroad.

THE FABIANS' PRACTICAL POLITICS reflected their elitism. Disdainful also of the working-class activists of the trade unions and embryonic socialist parties, they sought to reform England through "permeation," working with and influencing people and parties already in power or likely to get there. There is an amusing side to the MacKenzies' account of permeation, an endless round of tedious, self-sacrificing dinner parties, meetings, and discussions, which ended in general failure when the Fabians repeatedly bet on the wrong set of politicians. Ultimately, the Fabians found themselves the brain trust of a Labour Party they had never especially cared for.

The Fabians' chief success lay in the

long-run influence of their ideas and programs, which were an internally consistent set of piecemeal reforms all going in the direction of state interference with every aspect of life. The "National Minimum," "National Efficiency," and—most significant—an "Imperial Race" were slogans underlining Fabian concern with order and power. Within the society itself, the Old Guard considered their top-down leadership perfectly natural. The MacKenzies show that this was the case, but unlike, for instance, Josephine Fishel Milburn, another student of Fabianism, they show little concern that the Webbs' domination drove out too many potential leaders.

THE LONDON SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS also enhanced the Fabians' prestige. Financed by a legacy from a wealthy member of the society, and with a subsidy from the London County Council (engineered by Sidney Webb, who served on it), the school became a world-famous center of research and thinking. Sidney Webb, the driving force behind the school, clearly understood the importance of winning the intellectuals over to the Fabian *Weltanschauung*.

Up to his neck in clever paradoxes, George Bernard Shaw carried on the war of ideas in his many plays. Mixing evolution, socialism, and Nietzsche, Shaw promoted the idea of the socialist Superman who would *force* society to develop in the most favorable direction. His embarrassing defense of Italian fascism and Mussolini followed logically from his Fabian views, as did the Webbs' elaborate apologies for Stalinism. Shaw's advocacy of (for those days) radical views on sex and marriage highlights one of the paradoxes that *The Fabians* brings out. As a group, the Fabians tended to the individualistic and sexually irregular (whether in the direction of promiscuity or celibacy didn't seem to matter). Yet, intent as they were on tightly restricting liberty, they believed in such freedom only for the superior elite. It was Shaw, too, who shocked even fellow Fabians by defending the odious Boer War, on the ground that small states were just in the way. For Shaw and the Webbs, larger units of power were better than smaller ones any day.

That the major bias of the Fabians was toward authoritarian measures is illustrated by Beatrice Webb's suggestion in her famous *Minority Report to the Poor Law Commission* that "industrial malingers" be sent to severe detention colonies if they declined to work (as it turned out, she was never one to gag on Gulag). Her favorable evaluation of Mormon polygamy likewise rested on grounds not, say, of religious liberty, but on the fact that here had been the possibility of a marvelous experiment in eugenics—the breeding of a superior race. Throughout the entire Fabian worldview, leaving people alone was the one option they never deemed to consider, much less the notion that people had a *natural right* to be left alone. Hilaire Belloc was surely on target when he wrote

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