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Fact and Fiction

Radical politics are fertilised by catastrophe, and the catastrophes of the 1930s gave birth, outside Russia as well as inside it, to the 'Red Decade'.¹ In many countries, the decade began with widespread economic recession and ended with a second world war. The cataclysmic Wall Street crash of 1929 highlighted the vulnerability of capitalist monetary systems. Was this the end of capitalism? In an attempt to answer this question, British left-wing politics developed an unprecedented sense of cohesion and radicalism: the conceptual landscape shifted to a perception of an essential struggle between socialism and 'capitalist-imperialism', which, for many on the Left, could no longer credibly be fought with the old-fashioned tactics of gradualism.² Events at home, and even more abroad – fascism and nationalist aggression in Germany, Spain, Italy, and Japan, particularly – roused intellectuals, writers and artists to a new political seriousness about failures of the economic and social system. In 1938, Virginia Woolf's outspoken *Three Guineas* laid out the connections between nationalism, fascism, capitalism and patriarchy. Significantly, Woolf did not offer her devastating thesis as an academic text, but as a fictional reply to fictional letters requesting donations to worthy causes. *Three Guineas* was illustrative of another important aspect of the tenor of the decade: for those whose business was ideas, it was not only a dismal, but a radicalizing and inspirational time. People believed all sorts of things, and then changed their minds. Facts hid behind fictions. Sometimes it was difficult to tell the difference between them.

The single most important metaphor of the decade was the journey: the journey across countries and political systems; across classes, nations and genders; from public to private; from past to future; from one form of writing to another.³ Between 1932 and 1936, Barbara Wootton published her first three books: two were presented as fiction, and one was fact, although its business was disentangling fact from fiction. *Plan or No Plan*, published in 1934, was a 'magisterial'⁴ analysis of the advantages and disadvantages of planned and unplanned economies. The book is a systematic comparison of capitalism, a method of economic organization

based on price variations in 'free' markets, with a planned economy driven by the very different model of abolishing the profit motive and the expropriation of workers' labour this entails. Like much of the economic and political literature of the 1930s, *Plan or No Plan* was provoked by the 'experiment' of the Soviet Union which, following the 1917 Revolution, had embarked on what would more usually be considered the stuff of utopian (or dystopian) fiction. What were the truths about the Soviet experiment? What lessons might these have for societies which were unlikely to follow the Soviet example in violently disposing of their capitalist regimes? Barbara's only published novel, *London's Burning*, was written immediately after she finished *Plan or No Plan*. Theodore Frinton, the 'hero' of *London's Burning* (although, as the novel unfolds, his actions are seen to be far from heroic), is a benevolent capitalist confronted with an uprising organized by the International Unemployed Workers' League. In the novel, the structural weaknesses of capitalism undermine the British tradition of cosy liberalism, just as they do in *Plan or No Plan*.

Her first book was different: *Twos and Threes*, a volume of short stories, bears hardly a hint of these political issues. Barbara's job as Director of Studies for London University's Extra-Mural Department gave her free time during the day. *Twos and Threes* was written in the Hampstead flat she shared with Leo Simeon and published in 1933, when Barbara was thirty-six. It marked, she said, the end of an emotional phase in her life, but it did not have any particular success, and it was soon pulped to make paper for other more saleable works.⁵ For a biographer, the six stories in *Twos and Threes* form a tantalizing harvest. They are all about relationships between men and women, and probably reflect aspects of Barbara's own experiences – not because art mirrors life in any direct way, but because all our creative productions, whether artistic or academic, are rooted in our own locations in the social world. 'If it's any good it's your own experience every time, whatever strange form it may take; for the essence of sympathy is simply discovering your own experience in somebody else', as one of the characters in one of her stories remarks.⁶

In her autobiography, Barbara does admit that the second of the six stories in *Twos and Threes*, 'The Morning After', captures some of the atmosphere of a relationship she had with a character whose name she does not give us: he is 'J.T.' in the autobiography, Geoffrey in the story. When the autobiography was published, Barbara's brother Neil wrote to her and asked her who J.T. was.⁷ Her reply, if there was one, is not in Neil's archives in Southampton. According to the non-fictional account, Barbara and the real J.T. were given to travelling in the stormy years of their relationship (the late 1920s) through Normandy and Brittany on foot, drinking

calvados, and eating French bread and camembert by the roadside. He was a 'highly neurotic character with a passion for everything French, especially Flaubert'. They were 'deeply attached' to one another despite (or because of) the fact that he was the only person she knew intimately with whom she perpetually quarrelled.⁸

In J.T.'s fictional representation as Geoffrey the same is true: the story is about the disputed end of a relationship between Geoffrey and his woman friend, Nora. Geoffrey and Nora are in France, in a small hotel. Geoffrey's response to imminent closure is to be much occupied with timetables; Nora's is to agonize about fault, and responsibility, and the inability of learning from one's mistakes or from other people's sensible advice. He suggests having one more tomorrow together; she, taken aback, agrees. On the morning after this decision, they walk in the French sunlight and watch a kingfisher and remember all their delightful times together: 'So they had walked day after day in the spring when primroses smiled everywhere in the hedgerows and the orchards were in blossom. So they had walked in the first laughing days of love when there was nothing that would not shape itself to their liking.'⁹ Nora cries with a morbid passion that she wants to 'Damn the world with its Eastern incidents and oppressed minorities ... Damn it, Geoff! I only wanted to be me ... Why did we have to be conscripted with the rest? Conscripted into this blasted civilization and robbed of our birthright of simplicity?' Geoffrey tells her that she has got it wrong: 'Complexities, relations, problems – these are your daily bread and the only food you can stomach; and only the world you pretend to despise can feed you with them. You're no conscript, Nora! You're the readiest volunteer that ever wore the livery of civilisation – the civilisation that gives you your tangles, your situations, your subtle miseries of emotion.'¹⁰ After these *cris du coeur*, which have a ring of non-fictional truth about them, Geoffrey and Nora take a room in a dingy hotel and go to bed. 'They were animals, came together, and were satisfied. They were man and woman, separate, discordant, alone.'¹¹ The next day they go to the station, where Nora is to see Geoffrey off on a train, the final end of the affair. 'God,' says Nora, in another disturbing reminder of Barbara's own past, 'if only there was a war and I could be seeing you off to be killed.'¹² But the train never comes, because Geoffrey's watch is six minutes late.

Other points in these stories also touch the authenticity of Barbara's own non-fictional life. There are the middle-class academic pretensions ridiculed in 'The Happy Animal'; normally, says Francis, one of the two men in the story, 'there's only one right name for anything. Why should there be more? ... you can write off three-quarters or seven-eighths of the present literary output, which simply consists of using the long and complicated names and the fantastic images instead of the simple direct ones.'¹³ His wife interpolates another bit of Woottonesque

commonsense at the end of the story: 'No one who'd ever tossed a load of hay would have [the] patience to sit through ten minutes of the muck that's been talked round this table tonight'.¹⁴ In 'Turning Sixty', a rather sad story about a retired, widowed Colonel who makes a ridiculous play for a younger woman, the relationship with his daughter is tenderly and convincingly portrayed. In 'One Thursday', the fourth story, a young married couple, Denys and Molly, lead a daily life of relentless boredom. He is a civil servant, she a housewife. Every day he goes on the same train to the office and she thinks about whether they might have chops for supper. Going out one evening to the local cinema to see a Harold Lloyd film, they see, but hardly notice, a 'subdued-looking woman' who is on her way to post a letter. The woman has no interest in the pictures, which she considers vulgar, but she watches Denys and Molly going into the cinema: 'They were young, they were married, they were going out together, and until they were forgotten she hated them'.¹⁵ The statement is insufferably sad. Had the War not robbed her of Jack, Barbara Wootton might herself have been rooted, like Denys and Molly, in safe domesticity.

The remaining two stories feature triadic relationships (the 'Threes' of the title): two men and a woman in 'Odd Man Out', and two women and a man in 'So This is Adultery', a rather unsatisfactory tale which ends with a sudden suicide through a window. The main plot in 'Odd Man Out' is set in Norway, one of Barbara's favourite holiday destinations. She went there often with Leo, and would go there with George, her second husband, on their honeymoon in 1935, and also later with Barbara Kyle, in the second great female friendship of her life. In the story, the descriptions of Norway, entered on a boat, are satisfyingly lyrical: 'The last stages, when the fjord narrowed, made you feel as though you were taking the clothes off your soul. You shed layer after layer till there was nothing left at all except stillness and colour. It was just blue below and blue above and dark green walls on each side... suddenly we came round a bend and there was the head of the fjord; green valley, white wooden village, and the busy landing-stage running out into the sea.'¹⁶

The stories in *Twos and Threes* are competent diversions on the themes of gender, generation and class. Some elements jar – such as the suicide in 'So This is Adultery', the Colonel's break from habit in 'Turning Sixty', and the monochrome conversations in 'The Happy Animal'. But the characters are convincing, recognizable creatures from the world of the 1930s, and not all, by any means, came from Barbara's own circle. The book feels like an experiment. These were highly experimental times in literature, art, manners and politics. They were times when politicians, artists and intellectuals of all kinds were watching and noting the greatest experiment of the twentieth century – the building of a workers' state in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. 'I use the term "experiment" advisedly,' noted Barbara in her *Plan or*

No Plan, 'for during the whole period the Soviet regime has shown, and still shows, a power of trying out new and bold ventures, and of discarding lines of policy that prove unsuccessful, which is one of its most conspicuous points of contrast with the Western world.'¹⁷ She may have been somewhat mistaken in believing that systematic trial-and-error was the motif of the Soviet regime, but she was not alone in regarding the establishment in Russia of a centrally planned and managed economy as promising both a technical and moral solution to the mess in which Britain and other Western countries were then floundering.

Russia at the start of the twentieth century was still largely feudal: peasants made up eighty per cent of the population, there was little developed industry and no legal political parties or central elected parliament. The First World War exposed and increased the vulnerability of the old Tsarist regime. The economic machine had virtually shut down, and army and civil population alike were threatened with famine. In February 1917, a popular revolution led by women demanding bread disposed of the autocracy and produced a Russian Provisional Government; in October, a radical socialist network of Soviets (workers' councils) and the Bolshevik party, led by Lenin, overthrew the Provisional Government and created the conditions for a Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.¹⁸ After the Revolution, in the 1920s, came Lenin's brainchild, the New Economic Policy, 'market socialism': communism plus a limited private sector. After Lenin's death, and the rise of Stalin as General Secretary of the Communist Party, a programme of state-run Five-Year Plans established the ambitious goals of rapid industrialization and the collectivization of agriculture, to be achieved through the mechanism of a State General Planning Commission, Gosplan. But the importance of events in the USSR for many in Europe and North America was not only (or even chiefly) what was *actually* happening there, but what people *imagined* might be happening.¹⁹ Whatever else it was, Soviet Russia was the antithesis of the failing capitalist system. However, the Soviet experiment represented more than the economic expedients devised to drag a feudal society into the twentieth century; it symbolized a brave new world in which technology and rationality would be applied to social development in a process of levelling that should bestow on all citizens equal rights to the same reasonable standard of living. 'Russophilia' mobilized a desire for order that had been lost in the economic and social chaos of the inter-war years in Britain.²⁰

The term 'fellow-traveller' – meaning someone who sympathized with communist ideas without being a Party member – first came into use in the 1930s.²¹ Membership of the Communist Party in Britain burgeoned during this period: from 1,356 in 1930 to 15,570 in 1938.²² The many Western fellow-travellers who thought and wrote about and visited Russia were sons and daughters

of the Enlightenment, believers in the doctrine of progress. Most were neither communists nor revolutionaries, but pilgrims and sightseers disillusioned with the failure of their own society to create liberty and equality out of the stuff of *laissez-faire* and (often un)enlightened self-interest.²³ Russia was 'the hope of the world,' declared Fabian socialist Margaret Cole: 'not merely had the Russians expropriated kings, priests, and capitalists ... their new State was boldly introducing most of the reforms which Socialists had been vainly demanding for generations'.²⁴ 'We were all interested, one way or another, in Soviet Russia,' wrote journalist Kingsley Martin.²⁵ And so they went to find out. Kingsley Martin went in 1932 with cartoonist David Low. They visited Leningrad, Moscow, Nizhni-Novgorod, Rostov, Kharkov, Kiev and the Dnieper Dam; they travelled down the Volga by boat. When they came back, they produced a book, *Low's Russian Sketchbook*, which was banned in the Soviet Union because Martin's text did not acknowledge the existence of a utopian state – though Low's cartoons made fun of 'the professional anti-Communist' who interpreted every delay before a meal and every mechanical failure (there were many of both) as proof that Communism was breaking down.²⁶

The journeys of inspection made by left-wing intellectuals to Russia started early. Two visitors – Arthur Ransome, author of *Swallows and Amazons*, and war correspondent for *The Daily News* – and M. Philips Price, war correspondent for *The Manchester Guardian* – were actually witnesses of the October Revolution.²⁷ The outspoken writer and socialist, H.G. Wells, went early enough (in 1919) to have a long conversation with Lenin himself, and to arrive at the view that only Lenin could save Russia from anarchy.²⁸ By the time of Wells' later visit in 1934 (which changed his mind), encounters with Lenin in his deceased form had become an obligatory part of the tourist experience, here described by politician and economist Hugh Dalton, who went with a Fabian party in 1932: 'We descended into a deep chamber All marble within, mostly a dark, speckled grey, but with a pink pediment There was strip lighting, a soft golden yellow, behind clouded glass. The central figure, Lenin, lay beneath a glass case, his head on a blood-red pillow, his hands resting on black and purple drapery.'²⁹ Bertrand and Dora Russell – philosopher and mathematician, and writer, socialist and feminist campaigner respectively – went to Russia in 1920 with 'a delegation of Labour men and women'.³⁰ Bertrand recoiled from what he called a 'glib and narrow philosophy';³¹ Dora was most interested in what the Bolshevik Revolution would do for the position of women. The list of voyagers glittered with the names of well-known political writers, poets, novelists and other artists – and scientists as well, for the rejection of religion and the espousal of technocratic planning were in tune with the ideology of science.³² The technical side of these pilgrimages was eased by the

formation in Russia of the All-Union Society for Cultural Relations with Foreign Countries (VOKS) in 1925 and the State travel company, Intourist, in 1929.

Barbara Wootton believed that you should never speculate without empirical data. The year, 1932, in which she went to uncover the facts behind the legends about the Soviet experiment, was a peak for curious British visitors. By this time, Labour politics in Britain were in obvious trouble. In August 1931, the working-class politician and first Labour Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald committed what many on the Left read as a betrayal of Labour politics when he jettisoned most of his Cabinet, and formed a 'National' government. After the election, Oswald Mosley and a group of independents defected, the latter to form the Independent Labour Party (ILP). The more intellectual members of this group split off to form the Socialist League, which, unlike the ILP, maintained a connection with the centre Labour party. The ILP moved dramatically to the Left, justifying its position at least partly with reference to its very favourable views of the Soviet Union.³³ As alignments shifted in this unstable kaleidoscope, many in Britain developed a deep-seated disillusionment with party politics, that 'grand old party game' into which the two elder parties seemed by this time to have enticed Labour.³⁴ The second Labour Government, in 1929–31, had failed to deal effectively with the growing financial and social crisis. Anyone with left-wing sympathies could see that the politics of gradualism deployed in the first two Labour Governments had not worked, and they had not worked because capitalism itself was rotten; socialism could not be embedded in any capitalist state. The whole debate captured the public imagination. Political literature and books about contemporary history encroached on sales of fiction and biography.³⁵ In 1936, politics and literature came together in the hugely successful Left Book Club, which dispatched monthly reading matter, bound in characteristic orange paper, to members for a small fee. The club's services to socialism extended to organizing Russian language classes and arranging Russian tours.

'A pilgrimage to the Mecca of the equalitarian state led by a few Fabians, all well over seventy years of age, will bring about the world's salvation!' exclaimed Beatrice Webb excitedly, and rather incredibly, as she set off with Sidney in May 1932 on the expedition that would produce their mammoth 1,007-page *Soviet Communism: A New Civilisation?*, first published in 1935.³⁶ The Webbs travelled by Russian steamer, seventy-four-year-old Beatrice complaining about the lack of chamber pots and hot water bottles; they arrived in Leningrad to a royal welcome, infused by their reputation as the authors of a key revolutionary work, *The History of Trade Unionism*, translated into Russian by no less a person than Lenin himself. Any hesitation suggested by the question mark in the title of their book was overcome in the book's second edition, when the question mark disappeared (it was also omitted

from the Russian translation³⁷), as the Webbs decided that developments in the two years since the first edition merely confirmed the practicability of the Russian approach to the total abolition of 'private profit-making'.³⁸ Encouraged by cheap trade union editions, their 'leviathan of fellow-travelling' had sold nearly 40,000 copies by 1939.³⁹ *Soviet Communism* was presented as 'a comprehensive description of the entire social order of the USSR', 'an objective view'.⁴⁰ In it, the Webbs drew repeatedly, usually in extensive footnotes, on Barbara's own *Plan or No Plan*, which they deemed 'able', 'the most serious of the economic examinations of the Plan', and 'the most complete analysis yet made'.⁴¹ In fact, the Webbs, like many visitors to Russia, already knew what they thought before they went. 'What attracts us in Soviet Russia, and it is useless to deny that we are prejudiced in its favour', observed Beatrice in her diary in January 1932, 'is that its constitution, on the one hand, bears out our *Constitution of a Socialist Commonwealth*, and, on the other, supplies a soul to that conception of government ... We don't quite like that soul; but still it seems to do the job.'⁴² It was this 'loyalty to their vision' that induced the Webbs to take at face value most of what the official Soviet authorities told them.⁴³

It is not quite clear who went with whom in that summer of 1932. The New Fabian Research Bureau (NFRB), a radical offshoot of Fabianism set up by Margaret Cole's husband, G.D.H. Cole, in 1931, organized one deputation of 'experts': economist and social historian H.L. Beales; Margaret Cole; Hugh Dalton; engineer Graeme Haldane; film-maker Rudolph Messel; Dick and Naomi Mitchison, Labour politician and writer respectively; farmer John Morgan; politician and supporter of women's suffrage, F.W. Pethick-Lawrence; writer and historian (and brother of Margaret Cole) Raymond Postgate; Communist lawyer D.N. Pritt; and architect Geoffrey Ridley. The NFRB party took a Russian boat to Leningrad and thence travelled to Moscow. They spent some four to six weeks in Russia, some going as far as Saratov on the Volga and Magnitogorsk in the Urals. Like the Webbs, most of the NFRB visitors rejoiced in seeing what they wanted to see: 'the "spirit of the Revolution", the sense of collective purpose and planning so notably lacking in Europe and America in 1932'.⁴⁴ Doubtless they were also shown what their hosts wanted them to see, for example, the Trekhgornaya (Three Hills) cotton mill, a cradle of the 1917 Revolution. 'The many sleeping-places built over the looms, where the weavers had slept before the revolution, many of them having no homes, were still to be seen, although not in use; and the mansion of the former owner, just across the road, had been turned into a crèche for the weavers' babies'.⁴⁵

Barbara is not mentioned as a member of the Fabian party, and in her autobiography she refers to going with 'a group of well-mixed educationalists, drawn from practically every type of English school or college, and including at least one clergyman'.⁴⁶

Among them was the teacher and writer Edward Upward, who had recently converted to Communism, and who later recorded some of his experiences in the autobiographical trilogy *The Spiral Ascent*. Barbara's group of explorers travelled by train, third class, from Ostend to Leningrad, in spartan conditions. From Leningrad, they took the 'well-worn tourist route' to Moscow and the Ukraine. 'Travel in Russia in those days was a good deal rougher than it is now,' she recalled, 'and we sometimes had to make train journeys of more than twelve hours without any provision for refreshment other than occasional stops for tea. Forewarned of this I had come equipped with several tins of almonds and raisins ... This made me very popular with our fellow-travellers.'⁴⁷ (Barbara was using the term in a literal sense.) They were shown Parks of Culture and Rest, schools, clinics and factories – the latter were obligatory for all tourists – but she earned herself black marks by declaring that she was not interested in machinery; she had come to Russia to see living conditions. The focus of her interest is clear from the forty-five tiny black and white photos tucked away in her Girton College Archives: rows of unsmiling children sitting in classrooms; men drawing water; people queuing with shopping bags. Barbara herself stands in a long pale coat and glasses in a posed and rather misty snap of her delegation. Everywhere they went, they were presented with 'before-and-after' contrasts: 'Before the Revolution only x per cent of the children were in school: now the figure was x + y ... Just as grace is said before dinner at formal functions in this country, so every headmaster, every factory manager or hospital superintendent had to deliver himself of his ritual lecture, before anything else could be done.'⁴⁸ The group had difficulty getting to see collective farms, being fobbed off with excuses about impassable roads and melting snow. When they said there was nothing else they wished to see, so they would have to leave Russia forthwith, they won the argument.

Barbara gives no motive for her trip, other than observing that people were interested in Russia because in the West, 'the lunatic expedient of reducing everybody's income and spending', meant that public policy (aside from in wartime) had 'never been more abysmally stupid'.⁴⁹ This was the era before Keynes had shattered conventional economic thinking with his proposal that increased spending is the only sensible way out of a recession. Barbara Wootton was one of forty-one economists, including Keynes himself, who signed a letter to *The Times* in July 1932, putting forward the kernel of this approach.⁵⁰ The increased government spending they advocated was a form of state intervention, but discussion of the relationship between planning and state intervention was not at this time very far advanced. It is said that the idea of economic planning as a strategy for British government originated in 1930 with Oswald Mosley, who tried unsuccessfully to get it on the political agenda.⁵¹ During the 1930s, planning became a central

plank in Labour's refurbished socialist ideology, although 'romantic' ideas of what it meant continued to be bolstered by uncritical Russophilia.⁵² By the time Barbara came to write *Plan or No Plan*, discussions of planning embraced, not only the Russian experiment, but the growing fascist threat in Europe, from corporatist state planning in Mussolini's Italy, to German National Socialism.

Everybody, it seems, wrote a book when they came back from their Soviet journeys. 'Of the writing of books about modern Russia there is no end,' complained Ethel Mannin, who wrote another one.⁵³ Among the early visitors, Ransome produced *Six Weeks in Russia* in 1919, Price, *My Reminiscences of the Russian Revolution* (1921), Wells, *Russia in the Shadows* (1920), and Russell, *The Practice and Theory of Bolshevism* (1920). Disposing of the Webbs' treatise as 'the most preposterous book ever written about Soviet Russia',⁵⁴ historian A.J.P. Taylor recommended instead Malcolm Muggeridge's *Winter in Moscow* (1934). The product of the NFRB journey, *Twelve Studies in Soviet Russia*, was a mixed bag, veering between Pritt's uncritical adulation of the Soviet justice system, and Morgan's sad honesty about the victims of the Soviet agricultural policy. 'I looked for tractors at work. Camels passed. Old women sat on the platforms of reapers as old-fashioned as one can find anywhere, drawing the swathes into little heaps that dotted a landscape at times as wide as an English county. Here and there horse-drawn wagons loaded and unloaded the tail-ends of a hay crop, spoilt with rain. But scarcely a tractor anywhere to be seen; not at work on the land, anyway.'⁵⁵ The Five-Year Plan was all very well, but it did not allow for droughts and freak weather, nor, most importantly for the intractability of the Russian peasant, who had enjoyed free access to land in the years immediately following the revolution, and was unwilling to be told what to do.

Her visit made a great impression on Barbara, though she did not follow the Webbs in buying the Soviet success wholesale: she found 'depressingly childish ... the black and white mentality, the reluctance to recognize shades of goodness or badness or of success or failure, the kindergarten children singing songs about achieving Five-year Plans in four, the inability to admit the existence of, or to talk over, the real problems of the present'.⁵⁶ She was not quite so balanced in the piece she wrote for the WEA magazine *The Highway* in December 1932, celebrating there for a different readership the 'extraordinary unity and consistency of Soviet ideas in every field',⁵⁷ and so getting a stern ticking-off from the Marxist economist Edgar Hardcastle: 'Mrs Wootton ... knows little of Russia, not very much about capitalism and understands nothing at all of Marx'.⁵⁸ But what she did understand was the value to a society of citizens sharing a common purpose, and that there was not much difference between communists and capitalists in their esteem of hard work and material output. As the Webbs had appreciated in their many footnotes, her *Plan or*

No Plan took the Russian experiment and subjected it to the piercing analytic gaze which would come to be recognized as her trademark. Of the book's six chapters, the first two examine the nature of an unplanned economy and the Russian planned economy respectively; the next two the achievements and possibilities of unplanned and planned economies; in the last two chapters she asks, What next?, and finishes by considering the conditions of successful economic planning. At this point in her intellectual life, Barbara is still an economist, but she has developed an impatience with theory for its own sake; thus, she finds it delightful to be able to refer all those philosophical contentions about capitalism versus socialism which abound at the time to the concrete example of a real socialist society. Can socialism create full employment and abolish poverty? Let us look and see. How effective is the price mechanism in allocating scarce resources? What are the other consequences of allowing prices to set who gets what and what is produced by whom? How does central planning as practised by the Soviets compare with this? What disadvantages does it have? Again, we must take a hard look at the facts of the case.

Plan or No Plan draws on Barbara's own experience, not only of her sojourn in Soviet Russia, but of capitalism. For instance, ten years before, when she was working for the TUC and the Labour Party, one of her tasks was to handle some of the schemes produced by local authorities for creating employment and improving amenities. One such scheme involved cutting a canal across Scotland, converting the Severn tides into electricity, building roads and bridges, and planting hundreds of trees. It is difficult to believe, comments Barbara, that such projects would be among those 'the need of which would have first struck a visitor from another planet who had been asked to look over our economic system and suggest enterprises which he thought might usefully be set on foot to meet genuine public needs'.⁵⁹ Surely such a visitor, after touring our cities, would argue for plans to create thousands of extra pairs of boots, more milk, underwear, pots and pans, and chairs and tables, and houses. In other words, a planned economy can make choices which are in the interests of *most* of the people, choices which aim at the goal of providing *everyone* with jobs and a decent standard of living. The rhetoric of capitalism giving us what we want ignores the reality that it makes us want what we are given.⁶⁰ Planning is about ethics, as well as economics. Buried in the middle of *Plan or No Plan* is a statement of Barbara's central belief that the ethical objections to capitalism are more powerful than any others: 'the system is guilty of grave and widespread and continuous injustice, such as is degrading to those who suffer, and tormenting to any decent-minded person who prospers, under it'.⁶¹ Since the evidence is that the Russians are 'enormously much nearer' to economic equality than any industrial capitalist country, their approach must have much to recommend it.⁶²

Barbara's scrutiny of fact versus fiction in the new civilization of communism left her with some substantive criticisms. For example, the Russians seemed to have no monetary policy as such, so there was a danger of the Government issuing more and more money to support its industrial and employment goals, and this would lead to an uncomfortable price inflation. As to lessons for Britain, it was a matter, she considered, of accommodating the model of central planning to a very different social structure and political system, a goal that did, indeed, call for a more gradualist approach. But there was nothing gradualist about her proposal that Britain imitate Russia by setting up a Planning Commission, a public body which would enjoy nation-wide authority. Key to Barbara's argument here was her starting point that, 'There is no part of their job which Parliaments do worse than their economic work, and no department of affairs in which the theory of democratic control is further removed from actual practice'.⁶³ *Plan or No Plan* was 'a strident demand for insulating planning from politics',⁶⁴ a call for economic policy to be separated off from the game of party politics, and given the stability and consistency that only a body of non-partisan evidence-minded experts could impart. Unlike its Russian prototype, the British Planning Commission should be composed of expert members appointed by Parliament, and their duties would be both to initiate, and to execute and monitor, economic policy.

Plan or No Plan made a distinctive contribution to the vast literature of the period on the Soviet experiment. It stood out from the rest for being a judicious attempt to disentangle fact from fiction: to separate out political, economic, social and ethical questions; to define terms; and to interrogate and weigh the evidence. The book prefigured Barbara's later analysis of the shortcomings of economics as a method for analysing social systems. It was a step on the path of her journey away from economics to the more broadly-based platform of a social scientist, or a scientist of social studies, as she would probably have preferred to put it. It distinguished itself for the absence of emotion and passion; what Barbara was passionate about was the *method* of considering the facts, and arriving at a judgement, but all such procedures throughout her life were informed by a very clear notion of the supremacy of moral values in determining the ends to which plans of all kinds should be geared.

When academic Jenifer Hart joined the newly formed British Communist Party to explore 'an English brand of communism which would be humane and not involve a bloody revolution', her decision was partly influenced by Barbara's *Plan or No Plan*. She thought the book provided 'a thorough, balanced, undoctinaire analysis of the achievements and possibilities of planned as contrasted with unplanned economies ... I was particularly impressed by her belief that the authorities in a planned economy could eliminate our kind of unemployment if they wanted to.'⁶⁵

But, since planning and Russia were topics which aroused strong opinion, *Plan or No Plan* was variously regarded at the time as exaggerating or minimizing the achievements of Soviet planning. One reviewer deemed it the 'Intelligent Socialist's Guide to Economics', considering it 'quite brilliant', 'a magnificent fight' on 'difficult ground', 'the Soviet experiment's first subjection to purely economic reasoning'.⁶⁶ Another praised 'Miss Wootton' for raising the controversy to a more intelligent plane: 'It is not that she has said anything new to economists, but rather that she has said with clarity and no little felicity of style what has heretofore lain imbedded in a jargon which the layman finds insupportable'.⁶⁷ *The Political Quarterly* reviewer tackled *Plan or No Plan* along with a book on *Reconstruction* by the young Tory MP (and future Prime Minister) Harold Macmillan: Mrs Wootton's book, he opined, possessed 'the rare qualifications of being entirely readable by the layman and wide in scope, while none the less managing to examine with great impartiality the causes underlying all the major economic problems of today'. And the book was good value for money (only 5s) – an approbation that would surely please any economist author.⁶⁸ Somewhat more critical was a University of Chicago reviewer who argued that the book's 'readable sprightly style' concealed unsound economic reasoning, but even he, after six pages along these lines, decided that the most serious statement he had to make was that 'it is really an extraordinarily good book'.⁶⁹ George Halm at the University of Würzburg also found it 'exceedingly interesting' but unrealistic on the role of the price mechanism, which was essential even in a planned economy and would not work in the absence of private property.⁷⁰ The lack of a worked-out economic theory for the socialist state equivalent to the equilibrium theory of free enterprise beloved among capitalist economists, was a serious problem, but the criticism was not quite merited, as Barbara herself showed in the attention she gave around the same time to a book called *The Russian Financial System* by the young Cambridge economist William Reddaway. Reddaway's exposition went some way towards elucidating the questions of principle raised by the use of money in a planned socialized economy; she liked his book.⁷¹

In her autobiography, Barbara records the question with which she ended *Plan or No Plan*: whether we should rejoice or despair in the fact that successful economic planning is more likely to be inhibited by failures of the human will than by anything else. 'No sooner had I finished this book,' she says, 'than I was seized with a desire to answer myself.'⁷² National Socialism was on the rise in Germany, and Oswald Mosley's blackshirts were disrupting the streets of Britain. Could rationality really prevail against such forces of evil? Her answer took the form of a novel called *London's Burning*, with the subtitle 'A Novel for the Decline and Fall of the Liberal Age'.

Theodore Frinton, a man in his fifties, is Personnel Manager of Watson's World Wide Biscuits, a factory located on an industrial estate rising out of Hackney Marshes. He has a wife and a frivolous twenty-something daughter, Kitty, who is living at home without gainful employment, as was the custom of the day. The Frintons live in Barlow, a village not far from Cambridge, distinguished by its fine elms and by a church whose size is quite out of proportion to the religious zeal of the Barlow villagers. The Frintons live lives of regulated middle-class simplicity, lives made up of 'happy, trivial things'.⁷³ Theodore goes to the office during the week and reads the papers at weekends; Mrs Frinton manages their domestic affairs and Kitty enjoys her dalliance with Dick, who sells motor cars, and is regarded by her parents as not good enough for her. There is a maid called Milly from a Durham mining village who thinks the Frintons speak like radio announcers.

Theodore is a benevolent capitalist: he contributes to many good causes; at Watson's he has set up a Works Council and provided other important fringe benefits, including sports pitches and a heated swimming pool. The cosiness of his professional life overlaps with that of his domestic one, but into both the declining economy interpolates its counterpoint of misery: unemployment, bankruptcy and '(not very voluntary) Voluntary Liquidations'.⁷⁴ Theodore must get rid of five hundred staff by the end of the month. Into his office comes Rose Salmon, aged twenty-one, from the packing department, to warn Theodore that there will be trouble on a grand scale if his plan goes through. Rose helps to organize the International Unemployed Workers' League (IUWL). In a scene of studied ambiguity, she suggests to Theodore that the two of them might come to an understanding which would involve Theodore becoming better acquainted with the 'over-developed breasts'⁷⁵ she hangs over his desk, and would also result in her keeping her job and the IUWL not causing Theodore any further bother.

His disposition – to ignore these signs of changing times and hope they will simply go away – fights against the contrary evidence of mass demonstrations and marches accompanied by mounted police. That evening he is to preside at a meeting of another League, the League of National Service, a somewhat sinister outfit to which members devote ten per cent of their incomes to various schemes designed to promote 'National Well-being'. At the meeting, most of his attention is taken by Rose Salmon, whom he spots in the audience sucking sweets and ranting with her friends about the League, and by a literary member of the National Committee, a Miss Hester Lomax, who has intelligent grey eyes, elegant ankles and a melodious voice. He walks home with Hester, who invites in him for a drink, but, faithful to the Barlow idyll, he declines.

The 31st of October is to be a day of national demonstrations, October being a good month for revolutions. As the demonstrators assemble on the marshes below the Watson Biscuit Works, Kitty turns up in her father's office and with her usual mindless frivolity asks him to buy her a car. The demonstrators burst through the factory gates, smash glass, call for a general strike, and resist Theodore's attempts to negotiate. In the ensuing fracas, biscuits and biscuit tins are hurled through the air and a fire is started which cannot be put out, since Rose Salmon and her friends have thrown all the fire extinguishers out of the window. There is an explosion and Watson's Biscuits is reduced to a pile of debris. As these dramas unfold, Kitty returns to her boyfriend in London. The pair of them go to the cinema and afterwards walk through streets replete with crashed cars, broken shop windows, and dozens of bodies dead or dying; the statue of Eros in Piccadilly Circus is decked out with underwear from the department store Swan and Edgar's. Kitty misses her train and stays the night with Dick. The inevitable happens. 'How can we wait?' pleads Dick. 'I might be shot.' He promises her there is no chance of pregnancy – it never happens the first time.⁷⁶

After the conflagration at Watson's, Theodore feels relief: he is no longer responsible for property and for making decisions. He puts on a smart suit and goes to a party in Bloomsbury, where he waits in vain for Hester Lomax to turn up. In the novel's last scene, we are back in Barlow on a Saturday afternoon, though now there are no papers to read – a national strike has paralysed the country – and Milly, the maid, has developed a new insolence. Theodore, looking at her, perceives that the familiar world crashing down around him prefaces what is to her the creation of something altogether new and good. The Frintons try to reimmerge themselves in trivia: the chimney that needs sweeping, and the dog's skin condition. Mrs Frinton tells a story about a girl in the village who has got herself pregnant. Kitty is upset. A letter arrives telling Theodore of Hester Lomax's death in the street fighting. It is then that he realizes he had loved Hester, that he should have been her lover, and that there is something despicable and claustrophobic about his cosy middle-class life. But this is the life he has to live.

Looking back on *London's Burning* thirty years later, Barbara saw it as a dated political tract, redeemed only by the chance it gave her to write about the East Anglian countryside she loved.⁷⁷ She did this very well. Take, for example, Theodore Frinton's drive through the villages on a lovely golden day: 'Ten, twenty, thirty, the familiar miles went by – past Buntingford where from week to week the hurdles of the cattle-market stood under the roadside trees; over the switchback stretch to Puckeridge, where in May the white hawthorn rose and fell with the dips of the road; across the Lea at Ware, where horse-drawn barges still floated

along their painted ways; on and on, past meadow and ploughland, spreading, clean and spacious, under a generous sky'.⁷⁸ Buntingford is a real village, the site of many WEA Summer Schools Barbara attended. Theodore Frinton is, even, Barbara herself. He is a man after her own heart – a man with a classical education who riles against common misuse of the English language, a man who knows 'that the great thing to remember is that one must deal always with the obvious – or rather deal in terms of simple primary things'.⁷⁹

Barbara admitted the affinity between herself and Theodore Frinton in a later correspondence with the writer and poet (and then part-time WEA tutor), Andy Croft. In 1981, Croft wrote to Barbara in connection with a study he was doing of British fiction in the 1930s. *London's Burning* was one of the most interesting novels he had read: why did she write it? Did she have any particular literary models in mind? Was Theodore intended as a satirical figure? How did the novel sell, and how was it reviewed?⁸⁰ By then, age had worn down Barbara's ability to engage in dialogues with strangers about the past, and her response was not sympathetic: 'Even if I had the time (which I haven't) I could not possibly answer all your questions ... because (as you may some day yourself discover) at the age of eighty-four one simply does not remember details of one's work and objectives forty-six years ago.' It did not help that Croft misspelt her name.⁸¹ According to the writer Tony Gould, a friend of Barbara's, she wrote her novel 'just to see if she could do it'.⁸² She did not answer Croft's question about reviews, but there were at least two – in *The Manchester Guardian* and *The Sydney Morning Herald*. The first gave a rather ambivalent appraisal. On the one hand, Mrs Wootton evidently has 'a graphic and incisive pen' and a shrewd eye for the idiosyncrasies of her characters, but only the 'futile flapper Kitty' and Dick, the 'ineffectual motor salesman', really come to life: unlike the curate's egg, Mrs. Wootton's novel is excellent in all its parts, but 'as a whole there is something unsatisfying about it'.⁸³ The Australian reviewer decided that *London's Burning* was a very readable novel: the author had wisely kept to material she could handle, and the result was a credible and logical narrative with a good level of human interest.⁸⁴ In the early 1980s Barbara raised the issue of republication with Croft, and also with Gould. Both Virago and Penguin were approached, but neither was interested. Inside Tony Gould's copy of *London's Burning*, is tucked a rejection letter addressed to him from Carmen Calil at the feminist publishing house Virago: 'Three of us have now read "London's Burning": I wish any of the three of us had liked it enough to want to publish it. Whilst we all found good things in it, we honestly do not see that it would be successfully re-published now Can you think of something tactful to say though to Baroness Wootton whom I much admire on every other front!'⁸⁵

Croft's study was published in 1990: *Red Letter Days: British Fiction in the 1930s*.⁸⁶ Barbara was not aware at the time she wrote it that her novel belonged to a whole genre of politicized literary writing, a manifestation in art of the shift to the Left that was happening in politics during the Red Decade. Her novel's dystopian narrative, occupying 'a liminal space between history and fiction, between reformist ideology and revolutionary politics',⁸⁷ classifies it with some 300 novels published in the 1930s that were exemplars of the new socialist literary culture. Many of these were 'future-fictions' – imaginative speculations on the utopian or dystopian forms that might arise from the real chaos and disintegration of contemporary social conditions. During this period, the format of utopian fiction changes its colour, becoming not simply the depiction of societies outside history, but the creation of 'believable characters confronted with the problem of how to create and live in an often ironically "ideal" society while still retaining their humanity'.⁸⁸ The violent demonstrations described by Barbara in 1936 which confronted Theodore Frinton on the Hackney Marshes in 1940 were her future prophecy about the presence of fascism in Britain. Herein lies, however, one of the puzzles of the novel – perhaps a consequence of Barbara's immaturity as a fiction-writer: the claims she makes in her autobiography of *London's Burning's* status as an anti-fascist novel hardly seem supported by the events with which Frinton has to deal. Rose Salmon and her colleagues are, surely, just aggrieved workers – well, not 'just', but certainly justifiably, given that many were about to be sacked. Benevolent capitalism creates a violence of its own.

But, if *London's Burning* is to be classed as an anti-fascist novel, it is in good company: Terence Greenidge's *Philip and the Dictator* (1938), Storm Jameson's *In the Second Year* (1936), Naomi Mitchison's *We Have Been Warned* (1935) and Montagu Slater's *Haunting Europe* (1934) are better known examples. Orwell's *Animal Farm* has come to be emblematic of the Red Decade's literary preoccupation with political futures, though it was not published in England until 1945 (publishers did not like its anti-Soviet stance). And when it comes to the business of people experimenting with 'fantastic' novels, Barbara was also in distinguished company: Fenner Brockway, Malcolm Muggeridge, Eric Linklater, C.S. Forester, Harold Nicolson, Herbert Read, C.P. Snow, Hilaire Belloc and Stephen King-Hall were all prominent public figures who wrote at least one futuristic novel. Even Beatrice Webb nearly managed it: in her thirties, the same age as Barbara was when she penned her fiction, Beatrice was overcome by what she called 'the vulgar wish to write a novel'. Perhaps Barbara Wootton would have echoed Beatrice Webb's words: 'There is intense attractiveness' she reflected, 'in the comparative ease of descriptive writing. Compare it with work in which movements of commodities,

percentages, depreciations, averages and all the ugly horrors of commercial facts are in the dominant place.'⁸⁹ The novel Beatrice was contemplating was to be a utopian one, *Looking Forward*, but she was seduced by Sidney into writing *The History of Trade Unionism* instead. Five years later the utopian novel had been renamed *Sixty Years Hence*, but again Beatrice was deflected.⁹⁰

The Red Decade was a time for women's literary voices to be heard, but, in much subsequent literary criticism and history, they come through weakly, if at all.⁹¹ Katharine Burdekin's *Swastika Night*, which was published in 1937, was reissued in 1940 by the Left Book Club as one of its rare ventures into fiction. *Swastika Night* is a feminist dystopia set in Nazi Germany seven centuries forward in time; the descendants of Hitler's Nazis have taken over and women are reduced to their biological function. The novel prefigures many other more modern versions of this disturbing fate, for example, Margaret Atwood's, *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), which takes as its context the totalitarian dictatorship of post-nuclear America. Burdekin shared Virginia Woolf's understanding of fascism and war as central discourses of masculinity. This was a perspective which Barbara Wootton never overtly entertained; nothing particularly dramatic related to their gender position (except perhaps the suicide in the short story 'So This is Adultery') happens to any of the female characters in her fiction. The representation of gender (like that of class) in *Twos and Threes* and *London's Burning* is conventional, even stereotypical: men are men and women are women, and the sense that this is why they have difficulty relating, and why femininity and masculinity may have different impacts on the social system, is never made explicit.

The crisis of European civilization, combined with the thirties' metaphor of the journey, also produced an immense growth in travel writing, much of which toyed with the Russian theme.⁹² Of course, returning intellectuals accompanied their own serious reflections with entertaining side-notes about travelling. The journey, painstakingly and exotically described, spiced up the political text at a time when few people travelled beyond their own communities and countries. It was amusing to record what the roads were like, how the trains were prone to sudden derailing, and the reception given by local peasant women selling milk and eggs and apples and tomatoes at stations the trains passed through. Charlotte Haldane, the first British woman war correspondent to visit Russia, went on behalf of the *Daily Sketch* at a time when the War Office had a rule that no women were allowed at the front. She inveigled her way to the Red Army front and wrote a book about this and the lives of the Russian people at war with Germany: *Russian Newsreel* (1942).⁹³ The same year, scientist Marie Curie's daughter, Eve, a war correspondent for New York and London newspapers, charted a journey through the Near East and Russia

to Asia and back to the USA. 'On the road to Volokolamsk I had seen girls in uniform sitting in the open, on gun carriers coming back from the front. I knew that there were still other women in Russia – famous ones – leading a real warrior's life, such as Major Valentine Grisodobova, a well-known flyer whose job it was to take bombers over the enemy lines, to wound and to kill Germans.' Stalin was calling these women 'Heroines of the Soviet Union'; the Germans called them 'Nachthexen' (night witches).⁹⁴

'The confusion of thought over Russia arises from the fact that almost everything you read about it, both for and against, is true,' pronounced writer Ethel Mannin.⁹⁵ Certainly, the division of views about the Soviet experiment among British politicians and intellectuals on the Labour Left during the 1930s, the different conclusions they drew from the material available, including the evidence of their own eyes, had a paralytic effect. Its legacy was the lack of a single convincing political programme which could rescue Britain from the dismal excesses of the decade.⁹⁶ Confusion jostled with betrayal, a major theme of 1930s literature: the pain of betrayal, of broken promises and expectations, runs through narratives of both individuals and societies.⁹⁷ Although Barbara Wootton's view of Russia was appreciated as objective in a way that the Webbs' was not, the British fascination with Russia tended to be weighted on the side of fiction. Communism might be an ideology of equality, but, pulling the veil of fiction aside, Stalin was a dictator. Adherence to his Five-Year Plans caused multiple deprivations. Everyday life for the Soviet citizen was a matter of endemic police surveillance, webs of bureaucratic red tape, and endless queues. Moscow was the show city, but most Soviet towns lacked roads, public transport and sewerage, and public spaces were dangerous;⁹⁸ millions died during the Stalinist regime of famine, for counter-revolutionary offences, or through banishment to camps and forced expatriation.⁹⁹

In the light of these contrasts between imagined utopias and real dystopias, Barbara Wootton should perhaps be commended for the 'counsels of restraint and moderation'¹⁰⁰ she offered in *Plan or No Plan*. In favour of central planning – no-one interested in the facts could not be – she found the notion of violent revolution repugnant on rational grounds. Violence bred more violence; the chances of failure were too high; and revolution involved a suspension of the normal framework of everyday life which would cause all aspects of the system to break down. In the end, the scientist in her won over the novelist and over the imaginer of possible futures. At the end of the penultimate chapter in *Plan or No Plan*, she speaks directly, and prophetically, given that her words were written five years before the second world war of the century started:

Neither do I offer apology for having sketched no Utopia, but merely indicated what appear to be the better among alternative possibilities of which none is perfect. For to do otherwise is to ignore both the plainest lessons of human history and the nature of human material. In neither is there ground to suppose that imperfect humanity will evolve perfect social and economic institutions. Yet even within the degrees of partial accomplishment that are open to us lie opportunities of choice, upon which possibilities of happiness or misery for nameless millions depend. We may already be set on courses which lead straight to disaster: disaster from which few perhaps will survive, and which will blot out, even for those few, all hope of the simple pleasures and interests which are the most satisfying substance of ordinary human lives. Such disaster is avoidable. Courses can be changed, and at human will. Because we cannot step straight into Utopia is no ground for despising the limited step, the partial reform, the measure which makes things not perfect, but better than they were before.¹⁰¹