

with Wells's critical purpose. Wells was far more interested in deriding the contemporary society he lived in than in passing judgement on the past, and, furthermore, the undergraduates and young Liberal intellectuals who made up the bulk of his audience were more likely to be interested in an indictment of the present day. Remington had therefore to be shown as a character moulded by the social conditions of the Edwardian period, just as the political scene described had to be that of the first decade of the century, which means that, in the span of ten years' time, he had to pass from adolescence to mature manhood. Thus, Wells was hampered by the fact that historical time is not expandable at will, and by the absence of distance between author and narrator. He had in fact to compress twenty years of his character's life into a clearly defined historical period which was unfortunately half the length.

The only way he could solve the problem was through a manipulation of time by means of narrative technique. Whether this is the reason why he decided to use the form of a fictional autobiography is of course impossible to assert with certainty, but it seems likely. The first-person narrative enabled him to present things from a single point of view and to create the illusion that Remington was, in the fictional present, looking at a very recent past, which was a historical past. He could then, by sliding his narrator along the time-axis, bridge the awkward gap between fiction and history. Presenting Remington's story in the guise of an autobiography helped him to create the illusion of reality and to keep the reader's attention away from the real issue which was purely technical.

The New Machiavelli thus appears as a good illustration of the kind of problems Wells had to face when he turned to the writing of novels dealing with the contemporary scene. In his autobiography he wrote:

"I set out to write novels, as distinguished from those pseudo-scientific stories in which imaginative experiences rather than personal conduct was the matter in hand, on the assumption that problems of adjustment were the essential matter for novel-writing." (*Experiment in Autobiography*, p. 488)

In the case of **The New Machiavelli**, this led him to blend purely fictional elements with others that were determined by historical facts. The result was a strange confusion between the world of fiction and that of reality, a confusion which resulted in a dilemma that could only be resolved by means of technical devices. The fact that we find in **The New Machiavelli** two different time-scales, each one of which is perfectly coherent within its own framework, leads one to believe that Wells was perfectly aware of the distortion he was imposing upon his narrative. His many declarations about his lack of interest in the way things are told, and the carelessness apparent in some of his later novels, have led to his earning the reputation of being a writer more interested in ideas than in his art. All the same, he was a very competent craftsman, to say the least, as is proved by most of his tales and early romances, and I feel that, in **The New Machiavelli**, he deliberately made use of the resources afforded by a changing point of view to solve a problem that was apparently insoluble.

J.P. Vernier

H.G. WELLS AND BEATRICE WEBB: REFLECTIONS ON A QUARREL

Patrick Parrinder

If we were to look among the titles of Wells's books for the one which best sums up his own life, we might well choose the Penguin Special that he published in 1939 -- **In Search of Hot Water**. Wells was always getting into hot water; he was a past-master at the art of creative quarreling. His quarrels were creative not because they ever led to compromise or agreement, but because they are the sort of quarrels that continue to fascinate us long after the participants themselves are dead. Vincent Brome wrote a book called **Six Studies in Quarreling** (1958), at least half of which was taken up by Wells's efforts, and one pictures the author struggling against the temptation to fill up the rest of the book with them as well. There is no doubt about Wells's most famous quarrel, which was with his fellow-novelist Henry James. This affair displays a remarkable temperamental incompatibility, and a good deal of personal infighting, in which Wells comes in for much of the blame. Yet it is also recognized as the expression of a clash between two fundamental attitudes to art and society, and that is why it is still of paramount interest. The same degree of interest, I believe, attaches to a quarrel which has attracted rather less attention, at least until recently. This is the quarrel of Wells and Beatrice Webb. The circumstances of this are widely known, but my concern will not be with the circumstances so much as with the underlying intellectual and political contrast that it reveals.

Wells first came into contact with Sidney Webb in the 1880s, during the period when, as a London student proudly sporting the red tie of socialism, he first attended Fabian Society meetings. But it was not until he had become famous as the author of **Anticipations** (1901) that the partnership of 'Webb and Webb' decided to seek him out. Wells recalled them arriving at Spade House, 'riding very rapidly upon bicycles, from the direction of London, offering certain criticisms of my general forecast and urging me to join and stimulate the Fabians.¹ And stimulate them he did. I shall pass quickly over the colourful events of the next few years, in which he tried to turn the Fabian Society into a popular socialist crusade, a kind of Edwardian C.N.D. The resulting battle is one of the best-documented episodes of Edwardian history, as well as one of the most richly comic. Wells initially had the support of a majority of the younger Fabians, and of respected older figures like Sydney Olivier. His antagonists were not Beatrice Webb alone, but her colleagues in the 'Old Gang' -- Sidney, Bernard Shaw, Edward Pease and Hubert Bland. The 'Old Gang' won, thanks largely to Shaw, and the Society continued as the small intellectual research organization that it has remained to this day.

The personal antagonism between Wells and the Webbs sprang out of this episode, but it had other causes as well. Chief among these was the impact that Wells's various Fabian love-affairs were having, both on the recipients of his advances and on the other members of the Society. Beatrice Webb played what seemed to Wells a highly compromising role in the most dramatic of these affairs, that with Amber Reeves. As a close friend of the Reeves parents (William Pember Reeves was High Commissioner for New Zealand and a long-time Fabian), she tried to act as intermediary between parents and daughter, and so attempted to manoeuvre Amber away from Wells. The story of this episode has been fully told for the first time in Norman and Jeanne Mackenzie's excellent biography, and probably all that remains to be revealed would be in the way of further quotations from

Beatrice's private diaries, which can be consulted at the London School of Economics. The diaries contain some very candid reflections on Wells and on Beatrice's feelings about him. The end of the episode came, as is well known, in 1910 when serial publication began of Wells's unmistakable caricatures of the Webbs in *The New Machiavelli*. These caricatures were repeated, on a more exaggerated and farcical note, in his next novel, *Marriage* (1912).

But there is more to the quarrel than a merely personal entanglement. At the beginning, it is very evident that Wells and the Webbs had high expectations of one another. The Webbs saw in Wells both an original thinker -- though Beatrice soon had reservations about this -- and a superbly gifted propagandist for their cause. Wells, for his part, was deeply impressed by their command of the details of social organization, and above all, I think, by their quality of mental dedication. They represented a standard of devotion to public duty to which he himself could never live up. The personal impact of the Webbs (and of other Fabians such as Graham Wallas) on him at this time is surely reflected in the portrayal of the Samurai in *A Modern Utopia* (1905). For the austere and clean-living Samurai were the 'specialized governing class' whose necessity -- so the Webbs had told him -- Wells had overlooked when writing *Anticipations*.² Wells, however, would soon be distinguishing sharply between the outlook of a governing class, or new aristocracy, and the merely administrative and bureaucratic concerns that he came to associate with the Webbs.

There is no difficulty in elaborating the differences that began to emerge. Wells had fought his way out of the lower class, but Beatrice Webb was the daughter of a wealthy manufacturer and had first become concerned with social problems as a 'slum visitor'. She and her colleagues were middle-class socialists who ruled out violence or insurrection as a way of achieving their ends. Their belief in 'permeation' enabled them to remain 'respectable' and to take a very active part in the social life surrounding Westminster politics. They saw their kind of socialism as inevitable, and do not appear to have envisaged that there could be concerted opposition to it. Failure was the destiny of anarchist and revolutionaries, but not of Fabians. Yet the freedom with which they took part in politics -- without, at that time, any party label -- could only have lasted while the 'permeators' remained a negligible force, and one determined to avoid open confrontation with the enemy. 'If there is to be any shooting,' Shaw wrote in 1908 with the fate of the Paris Commune in mind, 'the Fabian intends to be at the state end of the gun.'³ Wells, on the other hand, did talk of insurrection and proclaim his faith in revolution, though his commitment to these was rather intermittent.⁴ It would certainly be misleading to suggest that he and the Webbs represent the twin poles of 'revolution' and 'reform'. I would put their confrontation in rather different terms: it is that between 'utopianism' and 'social science'. It came to a head, I shall argue, in 1909, the year in which Wells published *Tono-Bungay*, and Beatrice Webb her monumental *Minority Report of the Poor Law Commission* -- though its seeds were sown much earlier.

The Webbs' belief in the permeation of institutions was emphatically not a belief in their *subversion*. Their aim was not to sabotage the institutions but rather to improve them -- to enable the various organs of government to attain their goals (which, by and large, the Webbs accepted as fixed) more efficiently and completely. This aim went together with their positivistic faith in social science. That is, social control -- the purpose of government -- was to be sought through the accumulation of sociological knowledge. If an institution, say the Ministry of Health or Labour, was seen as an autonomous body charged with the collection, digestion and appropriate regurgitation of the finite data about health or employment, then he who could best master the data would necessarily come to control the institution.

And the more scientifically the institution was run, the more it would realize its own inherent purpose of exerting control over a particular area of affairs. This was the administrative connection between knowledge and power which was so seductive to the Fabians. Wells, however, some time before he attacked the bureaucratic aspect of the Webbs' ideal, came out in opposition to the growing empire of social science. He wrote a paper on the 'So-Called Science of Sociology' (1906), in which he claimed that 'the creation of Utopias -- and their exhaustive criticism -- is the proper and distinctive method of sociology.'⁵ It was a brave thing to say at a time when the meticulous empirical research pioneered by the Webbs was already becoming far more prestigious than 'Utopian speculation.' In *A Modern Utopia*, again, Wells tried to put the intellectual case for Utopia; but the kind of dusty dismissal that he was liable to meet with is suggested by this extract from Beatrice Webb's diary (1906):

he is anxious to 'gore' everything and everybody -- the executive of the Fabian society, the family, the Anglican clergymen, the non-conformist conscience, the anti-puritan and the believe in regulation. But in the place of these worn-out institutions and new-fangled frauds he has nothing to suggest but a nebulous utopia by H.G. Wells.⁶

Wells's utopianism, nebulous or otherwise, is a familiar subject, particularly to Wells Society members. In this paper I shall look in more detail at its opposite -- Beatrice's social scientism. The implications of Beatrice's quarrel with Wells may be more fully brought out by looking at her own major achievement of the Edwardian years -- the Minority Report of the Royal Commission set up to enquire into the problem of poverty.

The fact that Beatrice was offered a seat on the Commission, set up in 1905 by the outgoing Tory government, was a victory for the Fabian policy of respectability. Moreover, the first overall review of the Poor Law since the Benthamite Act of 1834 seemed an ideal opportunity to secure the adoption of a Fabian programme as government policy. Beatrice no doubt saw herself in the role of her utilitarian predecessors, and believed that with a consistent, clear-cut socialist policy she could win over her colleagues on the Commission, or, failing that, that she could go behind their backs to convert one or other of the political parties to her approach. She believed that the policy eventually outlined in the Minority Report had a 'philosophic basis' -- the fundamental idea of the welfare state -- and that it constituted an immediately necessary and practicable reform.⁷

Beatrice was no ordinary member of a Royal Commission. She organized a private research team (including the future Lord Beveridge), and with their help wrote a report which was not just an expression of dissent from the views of the majority, but a vast alternative treatise reviewing all the evidence heard before the Commission and issuing in long lists of proposals which quite often duplicate those in the Majority Report. She arranged for the Minority Report (which was signed by three of her colleagues, including the future Labour Party leader George Lansbury) to be published commercially, in both hard-cover and paper-cover ('Fabian tract') editions, at the same time as its release by H.M. Stationery Office -- much to the dismay of the civil servants.

One of the main differences between the two reports is that the conservative Majority saw poverty as a question to be resolved (a) by piecemeal adjustments to the system and (b) by greater moral efforts from individuals, both the poor themselves and those charged with their welfare. Beatrice, on the other hand, subjected every question to the test of her own brand of Fabian 'administrative

science'. For example, the Majority blamed individual members of the Boards of Guardians for failing in their duties -- but Beatrice spoke of their 'devoted, patient, disinterested service to the community', and retorted that the fault was not in them but in the system.⁸ And the Minority Report ended up with a vision of a national system of labour exchanges coordinated under a Ministry of Labour (this was one of the best predictions in her report, since the Ministry of Labour was actually set up in 1916). But her Ministry of Labour was to forecast (and, presumably, prevent) economic recessions 'with more certainty and, we hope, with more practical result than the Meteorological Department forecasts the weather.'⁹ The Majority commissioners felt that ultimately poverty could only be abolished by individual efforts -- less extravagance, less cheap-quality manufactures, and so on. But Beatrice saw the adoption of her reforms as a part of inevitable social progress. Were her schemes 'Utopian', she asked rhetorically in the final chapter? Fifty years before, the spectacle of seven million children going daily to school would have seemed equally incredible, and in 1820 or 1830 the solution of London's sewage problems seemed 'beyond the bounds of possibility'. So with the abolition of poverty and unemployment.

The outline of the new scheme of social welfare provision that Beatrice put forward was itself dictated by her belief in the inevitability of progress. When she and her fellow commissioners looked round at the state of the Poor Law in the nineteenth-hundreds, they found that not only was poverty not decreasing, but the administration of social welfare was utterly chaotic, riddled with inconsistencies between different authorities and different kinds of social need. In her analysis Beatrice set out to reduce this chaotic appearance of welfare provision to its inner historical logic. She traced the 'principles of 1834', their uneven implementation, and the various pressures of the intervening decades. It appeared that a number of more specialized welfare agencies had grown up, usually under the direct control of the local authority, alongside the old Poor Law with its workhouses and Boards of Guardians. The solution was now simple -- it was a problem of administrative 'evolution' by natural selection. What was needed was to get rid of the old Poor Law, a lumbering dinosaur whose time had come for extinction, and to pass everything over to the newer, specialized agencies. In effect, Beatrice's recommendations follow a textbook, Victorian logic of 'social evolution'.

What she was tackling directly here was 'administrative inefficiency' or 'waste'. She tended to associate this with the actual human 'waste' caused by poverty itself, implying that to sort out the one was virtually to eliminate the other. This meant that the problem of poverty seemed urgent, but also somewhat isolated -- it was something that could be solved on its own. Not only did Beatrice compare her National Labour Exchange to a well-planned sewage system, but she spoke of the need to 'clean up' society, to dry up the 'morass' in which the lower stratum of the population was condemned to live.¹⁰ She brought to the task an air of cheerful, sanitary purpose, as well as a manner of discussing the poor as waste products which is obviously dehumanizing.

To the Webbs' enthusiasm for disinfectant must be added what I can only call their political naivety. That is, they believed that they could work as impartial scientific experts, the precursors of the denizens of today's think-tanks. Having defined the problem of poverty as one of inefficiency, they believed that their solution was non-ideological and would appeal to capitalist, imperialist and socialist alike.¹¹ They cultivated Liberal and Tory politicians, expounding their theories at every opportunity, and saw artists such as Wells (and also Granville-Barker and Galsworthy) as 'missionaries' to spread the gospel to the mass public. They saw

their plan for poverty as a political hot property which somebody was bound to snap up. But (as may be the case in all think-tanks) the flipper was on the other foot. The Liberal ministers opted for the National Insurance scheme, which Beatrice opposed because it was purely contributory and not financed out of general taxation. Once the Minority Report was published, she was no longer a backstage eminence but the leader of a publicly identified pressure-group which the government could afford to ignore. Far from taking the problem of poverty outside politics, the Webbs found their solution squashed by political manoeuvring. The result of this experience was to drive them towards the Labour Party.¹²

Sidney Webb later served as a minister in two Labour governments which notoriously and miserably failed to deal with unemployment. After the debacle of 1931, the Webbs were to undergo a further conversion, rejecting the whole faith in piecemeal reform and modified capitalism on which Beatrice's work for the Poor Law Commission had been based. (Ironically, they did so at the very time when, as the example of Sweden shows, the capitalist welfare state had at last become a possibility.) The Webbs now turned to Marx's prognosis of the inevitable breakdown of capitalism, and to Stalinist Russia as the model of the new society where the scientific basis of administrative socialism was already being constructed. Their capacity for unshakeable faith in the 'devoted, patient, disinterested service to the community' given by public administrators led to the idealization of Stalin's bureaucracy in their last major book, **Soviet Communism: A New Civilization?** (1935) -- a disastrous book not only in its ideology but in its betrayal of the scientific methodology that the Webbs had pioneered.

Wells, of course, disapproved of the pro-Stalinism of his old Fabian colleagues. This is to his credit, and so is the fact that he saw the theoretical problem at the heart of Webbian administrative socialism -- it is what he rather awkwardly called the 'Problem of the Competent Receiver'. How can social justice be pursued in a way that is both effective and fair -- or, parodying Marx, who inspects the tax inspectors? Wells wrestled with this problem in a socialist context, where the Webbs took its solution for granted, but it can hardly be claimed that he solved it, or that his efforts in that line from the Samurai to the Open Conspiracy were much more than bright ideas. But he was an effective critic of Beatrice Webb, despite the malice that sometimes coloured his comments, and he summed up his criticism light-heartedly in the obituary memoir of her that he wrote in 1943. Here he recalls his old comradeship with G.K. Chesterton:

In the old days of friendly leisure we amused ourselves with a toy theatre in which, he breathing heavily with earnest effort, we dramatised along other subjects the Minority Report of the Poor Law. The gist was that Bumble was captured, defeated after a violent struggle, cut to pieces, put into an immense cauldron, and presently came out of it again, not a penny the worse. That gives the flavour of my dissension from the Webbs.¹³

But what of their dissension from him? There are many expressions of this, but one of the most revealing is the entry Beatrice made in her diary on 24 February 1909, describing her reaction to **Tono-Bungay** and **The War in the Air**:

His two last books -- **War in the Air** and **Tono Bungay** are amazingly clever bits of work. I have the bad taste to prefer the former. Both illustrate the same theme -- the mean chaos of human affairs. But **War in the Air** is avowedly a sort of allegory -- or a parody -- In form, an extravaganza, it is, in substance, a realistic description of the lowest and poorest side of social life. **Tono Bungay**, on the other hand,

sets out to be a straightforward description of society as it exists today -- a sober estimate of the business world. But it turned out to be a veritable caricature -- and a bitter one. Moreover, it bores me, because its detail is made up, not of real knowledge of the world he describes, but of stray bits he has heard from this or that person. There are quite a lot of things he has picked up from me -- anecdotes about business men that I have told him are woven into his text, just all wrong -- conveying an absurd impression of meaningless chaos.¹⁴

It is evident that Beatrice is judging the two books as 'realistic' or 'straightforward' descriptions of society. When considering **Tono-Bungay**, she was faced with a novel in which a scientist-narrator gives us what he claims to be a scientifically-minded report on his society and himself. Beatrice judged it by similar standards to those that she would have applied to sociology of a different kind, such as she herself practised. She is irritated by Wells's 'misuse' of data which she supplied to him, and which she would have used more responsibly and accurately. **Tono-Bungay** in her view conveys not a 'straightforward description of society' but an 'absurd impression of meaningless chaos'. This is a telling phrase, because an 'impression of meaningless chaos' is pretty much what Wells intended. It is chaos because, as he constantly stresses, the society seen by George Ponderevo is anarchic, it is a 'spectacle of forces running to waste'. In **Tono-Bungay**, having chosen a realistic and not a Utopian perspective, Wells cannot offer a prediction of the social future, and his uncertainty is symbolized in the final evocation of the destroyer, leaving traditional England behind and rushing off to nowhere. Beatrice Webb, as we have seen, reduced the apparent chaos of social problems to an innate historical logic; but Wells's outlook is more sceptical and more nihilistic. 'Waste' in **Tono-Bungay** is not a sanitary problem to be cleared up -- it is a quality that enters all George Ponderevo's experiences, and personal relationships, and which not only sums up his society, but is an alternative title for the book as a whole -- 'I have called it **Tono-Bungay**, but I had far better have called it **Waste**.' **Tono-Bungay**, then, expresses a kind of existential pessimism rather than social optimism, and it is also a very subjective, even modernistic novel, rather than a straightforward description of society. 'An absurd impression of meaningless chaos' -- that is the kind of thing many people would be saying, a few years later, about Cubist painting or Stravinsky's music.

Many conclusions might be drawn from the historical picture that I have tried to put in this paper. My own -- perhaps controversial -- conclusion is that Wells was not really qualified as a political thinker. The Webbs may have been politically naive in some respects, but this did not prevent them from working out ideas fundamental to the British welfare state. Wells saw the shortcomings of their ideas, but was not able to work out concrete alternatives any more than he was himself qualified for political leadership. His essentially imaginative vision of society oscillates between utopianism and the kind of pessimism -- an artist's pessimism -- exemplified in **Tono-Bungay**. Had he been more politically-minded, he would have had to make his peace with the Webbs, who in Edwardian England were his only plausible political allies. But politics weren't really Wells's metier. He was a prophet -- essentially a medium-to long-term prophet -- and a great educator, as he discovered after the First World War. He was also an artist, with an artist's impatience and self-preoccupation. The undeniable impact that he had on Edwardian left-wing politics, and his stream of pamphlets and books on political subjects at this time have perhaps helped to obscure not only his own unfitness as a political thinker, but the weakness of radical political thought in the period as a whole. The quarrel of Wells and Beatrice Webb is the quarrel of Utopianism and social science. The lesson

that we might draw from both sides of this quarrel, I suppose, is that really effective thought about a revolution in society must be thought centred upon the problem of revolution itself.

(Talk given to the London Branch of the H.G. Wells Society, 14 December 1973.)

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NOTES

1. 'Introduction to the 1914 Edition', **Anticipations**, London 1914, xi.
2. Ibid.
3. **Fabian Essays in Socialism**, ed. G. Bernard Shaw, London 1920, viii.
4. Eg. the letter to R.A. Gregory, December 1901: 'I am going to write, talk and preach revolution for the next five years'. Quoted W.H.G. Armytage, **Sir Richard Gregory**, London 1957, 46.
5. **An Englishman Looks at the World**, London 1914, 204.
6. Quoted Norman & Jeanne Mackenzie, **The Time Traveller**, London 1973, 209.
7. Beatrice Webb, **Our Partnership**, London 1948, 452-3.
8. **The Break-Up of the Poor Law**, London (Longman's) 1909, xi. This was part one of the commercial edition of the Minority Report of the Poor Law Commission. Part two was entitled **The Public Organisation of the Labour Market**. Subsequent references are to these editions.
9. **The Public Organisation of the Labour Market**, 319.
10. Ibid., x-xi.
11. Ibid.
12. **Our Partnership**, 423.
13. 'Beatrice Webb', reprinted in **H.G. Wells Journalism and Prophecy 1893-1946**, ed. W. Warren Wagar, London 1965, 270.
14. Quoted in **H.G. Wells: The Critical Heritage**, ed. Parrinder, London 1972, 150.