

Wells, Plato, and the Ideal State

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One of the most trenchant attacks on Wells's utopianism is that made by George Orwell in his essay 'Wells, Hitler and the World State'. (1) The picture Orwell draws of Wells is a rather distorted one since, like other contemporaries of the later Wells, he overlooks the radical shifts of emphasis which had taken place in his subject's writings over the years. (2) However, Orwell is adroit in turning Wells's strength as a "true prophet" against him.

He concedes that important components of the Wellsian world-state — advanced technology and mass organization — have now come into being. What is missing is a general will to use these for peace, perhaps because people like Wells have not offered a really satisfactory vision of what the new life should be like. Now that a world of regimentation and high technology exists, we can see that those most at home in it are Fascists.

This reading of cultural history must have possessed force when published in 1941. I believe that it does register an important truth about Wells's utopianism, one that Wells himself is uneasily aware of when he makes his imaginary societies of the future waver between totalitarianism and liberty in *The Shape of Things to Come* and *The Holy Terror*.

As argument, Orwell's attack can be dismissed with ease, however, Wells never claimed that progress in technology would make social progress inevitable, only that it would make it possible. The fact that we have so far failed to construct utopia may only mean we need to try harder.

For a more fundamental critique of Wells's utopianism, what is required is not comparison with Hitler's vision, but with that of the thinker from whom in large part Wells's utopian ideal derives — Plato.

Wells first opened the covers of Plato's *Republic* in his teens, while at Up Park, the Sussex country house where his mother was housekeeper. His *Experiment in Autobiography* records what a decisive impression the book made on him.

Here was the amazing and heartening suggestion that the whole fabric of law, custom and worship, which seemed so invincibly established, might be cast into the melting pot and made anew. (3)

For an intelligent and assertive youngster in the 1880s, who had been born into the very bottom of the middle class, and who had since moved uncertainly from one position in life to another, Plato's vision of a secure, orderly meritocracy was inspiring.

In the Platonic utopia, provision is made for exceptionally gifted children from the lower class to be covertly absorbed into the ruling class. Otherwise, there is a rigid demarcation of class boundaries, to ensure total social cohesion. The demarcation is maintained by strict specialization in employment. The family, along with every other relation between the sexes, is organized in a rational manner (a notion which the adolescent Wells found so exciting that fantasies based on the *Republic* governed his sexual conduct "for many years"). (4) Women are treated as the equals of

men, marriage is part of a eugenic scheme secretly manipulated by the authorities, and at birth each child is taken from its mother and brought up owing a collective allegiance to its elders.

In Wells's fertile mind, Plato's utopia and Up Park as it might have been in its eighteenth-century heyday became fused into an ideal future, a future which might plausibly be realized through the growth of science and socialism.

Plato shared with the socialist movement the aims of abolishing private property and subordinating individual interest to the common good. Wells often co-operated with the British labour movement in short-term matters (for example, by mingling with hunger marchers during the Great Depression, to deter the police from baton-charging them) (5), yet the utopianism he had acquired from Plato separated him from most socialists in a fundamental way. Wells was not interested in the development of more democratic ideas and institutions through a conscious everyday opposition to the old order. He wanted to make sense of life through a vision of total social transformation which would be planned and implemented by a group like the Guardians, the elite corps of Plato's ideal state.

Labour socialism was foreign to Wells's way of thinking because it grew out of social conditions foreign to his experience. Plato's utopianism was relatively assimilable because it resembled the Christian concept of the millenium, with which Wells had been familiar since his childhood. The spectacular breakdown of the normal world, the emergence of a formerly oppressed group as an élite, and the realization of absolute justice, are all features of Christian mythology easily transposed into utopian terms.

Having rejected Christianity as a mythology of oppression which supported all that thwarted his desires, Wells substituted utopianism as a mythology of liberation. He adopted the ideal state as the ultimate goal of existence, a goal devised by man, to be brought into being in this world by deliberate human action. In orientating himself towards it, the individual could find a coherent meaning in life, such as religion offers, but without having to surrender to an omnipotent, omniscient god or defer hope of fulfilment to the next world.

Actually, Plato's utopia depends very much on alignment with a transcendent order, although not with a god. For Plato, salvation is to be sought by reasoning on the basis of "necessary truths" or "universals": general terms like "justice", "roundness", and "chair". Plato does not regard these as constructs devised to give working relations between immediate facts, but as the names of actual things. Since absolute justice, a perfect circle, and an ideal chair are not to be found in human experience, it follows, according to Plato, that they must exist as a transcendent order, of which Earthly existence is an inferior replica.

It is the belief that the Platonic state is in harmony with this absolute order which justifies its totalitarian features. Fiction and drama have to be prohibited for fear they will distract the citizens from the ideal and offer them inferior models of behaviour. Even some kinds of music have to be avoided, since they encourage emotions, and therefore attitudes, which are incompatible with the maintenance of stability. There is no question of individuals being allowed to pursue original ideas or private desires. Plato's ideal state is by definition what Sir Karl Popper termed a "closed society". (6)

Unlike Plato, Wells emphatically did not believe in the absolute. His philosophy was one of "extreme nominalism", a position he held to be the opposite both of Christianity and Platonism. In his non-fictional works, Wells repeatedly declares that everyday reality is the only reality we can know, and that our ideas about it are only approximations to the truth, more and more liable to fail the more abstractly they are applied. (7) In 'The So-Called Science of Sociology', he conscientiously repudiates the utopian aspiration to certainty represented by Herbert Spencer and Auguste Comte, advocating instead competition between utopias, which he associates with Plato. (8)

Wells probably has in mind here Socrates, Plato's teacher and the central figure of his dialogues. Socrates sought truth through open discussion. An essay Wells wrote when a student compares the world of Socrates to the present one, and praises the disinterested love of truth with which Socrates approached it. (9) In championing a man who "resolutely turned his back on the study of extraneous matter" in favour of arguments about the ideal, Wells seems to have been defending his own neglect of scientific studies and his involvement with the college debating society and magazine. But Wells supports only the methods and way of life of Socrates, not the conclusions that are attributed to him by Plato.

In doctrine, Wells and Plato are deeply at odds. This can be seen by contrasting Wells's famous short story 'The Country of the Blind' with what Bertrand Russell identifies as its source, the Parable of the Cave in Book VII of the *Republic* (10)

Plato compares ordinary people to prisoners bound in a cave, able to see only shadows cast on the wall by a fire behind them, whenever objects are passed in front of it. The philosopher is free to seek the reality. However, when the philosopher returns to the cave to demonstrate his superior perception to the remaining prisoners, the readjustment of his eyes causes him to blunder and he is mocked by them.

In Wells's tale, Nunez, a mountaineer, falls into an isolated South American valley occupied by blind people. Recalling the Proverb "In the country of the blind, the one-eyed man is king", he assumes he will be able to impose his understanding of reality, and therefore his will, on the population. Instead, he is taken to be sub-human and forced to respect the conventions of the blind. At the prospect of having his eyes put out to ensure his conformity, he finally flees to the mountains, almost certainly to a welcome death.

Plato's allegory translates a conflict of outlook into directly opposed terms of light and darkness: one totally right, one totally wrong. Wells's story is also symbolic, but it is not a simple allegory. Its contents are presented realistically. Imaginative interest is primarily directed to persons, objects, and events in their own right.

An important consequence follows. Operating literally as well as metaphorically, Wells's antithesis between blindness and sight, unlike Plato's between darkness and light, cannot be taken as total.

When the blind people prove to have a sense of hearing more acute than that of ordinary men, the reader has to concede that in this respect at least they are superior to Nunez. There is a complementary antithesis of lower and upper. Nunez descends into the world of the blind people from above, like a visitor from Heaven, but their valley is situated in the

mountains. He has previously had to ascend from "the lower world". (11)

Since the unseen reality Nunez champions is our own, the reader is bound to sympathize with him in his determination to place his life in a greater context than his fellow men acknowledge. But the same factor discredits Nunez as a law-giver. Indeed, his initial self-conceit and his abortive attempt to overcome the blind people by violence show him to be potentially tyrannous.

It would be misleading to suggest that Wells's fable is concerned with totalitarianism. What it conveys is the plight of an isolated and thwarted visionary in a society which denies the truth of his revelation. The precipitate behaviour of Nunez is valuable to Wells chiefly as a way of rendering the shattering of optimism more dramatic.

Nevertheless, an intuitive mistrust of totalitarian thinking is built into the very structure of Wells's story in a way that is not the case in Plato's. It is characteristic of Wells's fiction to take myth literally and so ironize it.

Wells's scepticism proceeded from the insecurity of his formative years. It may be that his own misclassification as a draper rather than as an intellectual prompted his lifelong suspicion of classification as such. In any case, his rapid lateral and vertical movements through the social order would have made him aware of partiality in the views of different social groups. As he grew up, he could also see fundamental Victorian assumptions being overthrown by the growth of knowledge and an industrial social structure.

Yet Wells's insecurity and doubt also nourished a desire to discover and affirm a scheme which would make satisfying sense of everything — and this tension lies at the heart of his work. (12) Wells's prophetic ambitions grew at the turn of the century, a time when it was widely recognized that profound social and cultural change was taking place. (13) Wells saw particularly acutely that the continuing industrial revolution required not only political changes, both in institutions and in attitudes, but also a new view of man's place in the universe, which would supply a comprehensive frame of reference for modern existence.

In *The First Men in the Moon* the alien society of the Selenites affords Wells the chance to experiment with an updated Platonism in response. When the explorers from Earth (Cavor and Bedford) awake as captives beneath the lunar surface, they are made to re-enact the Parable of the Cave. They are bound in a dark, enclosed place, able to see only the outline of a Selenite cast on the far wall as a door opens behind them. (14)

When they are unbound, they discover a totally stable civilization based on the principle that each citizen should only do the work for which he is judged fit. By depicting this state as inhuman, Wells takes account of criticisms which his former teacher, T.H. Huxley, has made against Plato. (15) Huxley argues that, because people are autonomous individuals who enter flexibly into co-operation with their fellows on a basis of mutual sympathy, ruthless regulation of their behaviour for a supposed collective good would actually bring about social disintegration by undermining human affection. According to Huxley, the kind of cohesion envisaged by Plato could only work in a society where each individual has been biologically predestined to fulfil a particular function, like that of the bee hive.

The insect-like Selenites illustrate Huxley's argument. Yet there are hints in *The First Men in the Moon* that the conditions of our own society are

bound to become more "Selenite" as the industrial revolution continues, so that we will somehow have to come to terms with the sort of alien prospect shown. There is a similar implication in the short story 'The Empire of the Ants', in which a new breed of super-ant challenges man's capacity to organize himself collectively as the planet's dominant species.

The First Men in the Moon was published in 1901, the same year as Wells's first non-fictional volume of "futurology", *Anticipations*. In this and its successor *Mankind in the Making*, Wells speculates that a new order may emerge from the confusions of the present, pioneered by an elite like Plato's Guardians. Significantly, he names it the "New Republic". (16) Much could be written about what Wells advocates in these books and in many later ones like them. For the present, we may take as representative of these *A Modern Utopia*, which is Wells's chief attempt to reconcile, on the one hand, the Platonic ideal of a closed society and, on the other, his own scepticism and humanity.

It is an exceedingly paradoxical book. Wells insists that,

The fertilising conflict of individualities is the ultimate meaning of the personal life, and all our Utopias no more than schemes for bettering that interplay. (17)

Yet he also feels obliged to provide his ideal state with

a clear common purpose, and a great and steadfast movement of will to override all . . . egoistical dissentients. (18)

Its agents are the Samurai, an elite explicitly based on Plato's Guardians. The resemblance encompasses an interdict against acting. Although there is no censorship, the reading of the Samurai is carefully directed, its principal content being a Canon containing orthodox ideas and sentiments. For the Samurai, only one version of reality is valid, the one which they are engaged in articulating. Truth is not to be established by critical discussions to which any citizen is a potential contributor. It is a faith into which suitably receptive individuals may be initiated.

The absolutism of the Samurai gives the entire utopia its structure. It was brought violently into being by a Samurai rebellion against existing governments. There is no institutional provision for opposition to the status quo based on genuine conflicts of interest or opinion. Dissidents are considered to be mere egoists.

Despite all this, *A Modern Utopia* is a fascinating, and sometimes an entertaining work, with many attractive features. Wells was clearly aware of its limitations as an ideal. He not only discouraged readers who wanted to put its proposals into practice, (19) but equipped it with a complicated fictional framework that permits the introduction of verbal and dramatic ironies which relieve and challenge the absolutism.

The book opens with a "Note to the Reader" which confesses that the formal problem of combining didacticism with irony has proved taxing and asks that the result be read with an informed sympathy. Wells's aim, he assures us, has consistently been "a sort of lucid vagueness". Next, an italicized section entitled 'The Owner of the Voice' dissociates Wells from the narrator and his sometimes strident tone. A lecture to the Oxford Philosophical Society, 'Scepticism of the Instrument', is appended to the book as an attempt to indicate the ultimate conceptual difficulties entailed.

In this paper, scepticism is yoked with faith in an evolutionary god,

"synthetic in relation to men and societies". A common device of nineteenth-century thought (20), the evolutionary god reappears in Wells's later books, abstracted as the Mind of the Race, and personified as God the Invisible King. Its function is to provide assurance that a total order is emerging through culture, without requiring the submission to a pre-existing order which the Christian God and the Platonic absolute would demand.

The narrative of *A Modern Utopia* is ambiguous and equivocal. The narrator is said to be lecturing in a hall, using the idea of a better world as a device and amending it as his reflections prompt. At the same time, he is a powerless outsider miraculously transferred to another planet that is identical to our own, save in culture, trying with limited success to make sense of its various perplexing features. In his explorations, he is accompanied by another person from our world, a botanist who refuses to endorse the utopian ideal. In the last chapter, the botanist dispels the utopia and the two men find themselves in Trafalgar Square. Their exploration is now explained as a conversation begun on holiday in Switzerland, elaborated with reference to the world about them, and objectified into an alternative world in the imagination of the narrator.

Although this complicated structure incorporates irony, it does so confusedly. The irony cannot be fully integrated, because to do so would reveal that Wells's utopian project is misconceived. In order to provide a credible goal for human existence, Wells has to convince us and himself that we are being shown a self-consistent ideal which he cannot quite bring into focus. What we are actually seeing, on the contrary, is a myth incapable of resolving the issues to which it is applied, in particular those concerned with the reconciliation of individual liberty and social cohesion.

At the end of the book, Wells does manage to be remarkably frank about the deficiencies of the vision he has presented:

. . . this Utopia began upon a philosophy of fragmentation, and ends, confusedly, amidst a gross tumult of immediate realities, in dust and doubt, with, at the best, one individual's aspiration.

. . . Ever and again, contrasting with this immediate vision, come glimpses of a comprehensive scheme, in which . . . personalities float, the scheme of a synthetic wider being, the great State, mankind, in which we move and go, like blood corpuscles, like nerve cells, it may be at times like brain cells, in the body of a man. But the two visions are not seen consistently together, at least by me, and I do not surely know that they exist consistently together. The motives needed for those wider issues come not into the interplay of my vanities and wishes . . . Nevertheless, I cannot separate these two aspects of human life, each commenting on the other. In that incongruity between great and individual inheres the incompatibility I could not resolve, and which, therefore, I have had to present in this conflicting form. At times that great scheme does seem to me to enter men's lives as a passion, as a real and living motive . . . But this is an illumination that passes as it comes, a rare transitory lucidity, leaving the soul's desire suddenly turned to presumption and hypocrisy upon the lips. One grasps at the Universe and attains - Bathos. (21)

Despite this confession, Wells produced further utopian fictions (*In the Days of the Comet*, *The World Set Free*, *Men Like Gods*, *The Shape of Things to Come*) in all of which the necessary element of irony is damagingly reduced. Many of these books have features which repay reading. Wells's non-fictional advocacy of a "world-state" should not be dismissed indiscriminately either. Nonetheless, Wells's most coherent and

illuminating works are not those where his fascination with apocalyptic change and his idealism result in an attempt to envisage perfection, but those where the idea of a new, perfect world is applied figuratively or in parody — books like *The History of Mr Polly* and *The Time Machine*.

Here Wells is writing in the spirit he himself praised in an uncollected essay on J. F. Nisbet:

to me, at least, it has a touch of the heroic, that feeling, as he certainly did, a strong attraction towards certain aspects of devotion, he would defile himself with no helpful self-deceptions to anticipate his call, but remained, as he was meant to remain, outside, amid his riddles. (22)

NOTES

1. George Orwell 'Wells, Hitler and the World State' (1941) *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters* ed. Sonia Orwell & Ian Angus (Secker & Warburg) 1968, Vol. 2, pp. 139-145.
2. The turning point in the study of Wells was Anthony West 'H.G. Wells' (1957) in Bernard Bergonzi ed. *H.G. Wells, A Collection of Critical Essays* Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey (Prentice-Hall) 1976 pp. 8-24. West over-compensates, however, in suggesting a complete change of attitude between the early and the late Wells.
3. *Experiment in Autobiography* Ch. 3:6.
4. *Experiment in Autobiography* Ch. 4:4.
5. David Rubenstein ed. *People for the People* (Ithaca Press) 1973 p. 226.
6. K.R. Popper *The Open Society and Its Enemies* (Routledge & Kegan Paul) 1966 edition, Vol. 1, pp. 173-174.
7. See 'Scepticism of the Instrument' appended to *A Modern Utopia*.
8. *An Englishman Looks at the World* Ch. 14.
9. 'Socrates' *Science Schools Journal* (December 1886) pp. 18-21.
10. Bertrand Russell *Portraits from Memory* (Allen & Unwin) 1956 p. 80.
11. *The Short Stories* (Benn) 1927 p. 191.
12. Cf. Patrick Farrinder *H.G. Wells* Edinburgh (Cliver & Boyd) 1970 pp. 22-23.
13. Frank Kermode *The Sense of an Ending* New York (Oxford University Press) 1967 pp. 96-98; Malcolm Bradbury *The Social Context of Modern English Literature* Oxford (Blackwell) 1972 pp. 42-43, 60-62, 85-90.
14. *The First Men in the Moon* Ch. 11.
15. T.H. Huxley *Evolution and Ethics* (Macmillan) 1894 pp. 22-29.
16. The name may have been suggested by W.H. Mallock's book *The New Republic* (1877), a discussion-fiction which Wells later took as a model for *Boon* and, to a lesser extent, for *A Modern Utopia*. His intended reference is clearly to Plato, however.
17. *A Modern Utopia* Ch. 1:2.
18. *A Modern Utopia* Ch. 4:3.
19. *First and Last Things* (1908 version) Bk. III, Ch. 11.
20. See W. Warren Wagar *H.G. Wells and the World State* New Haven (Yale University Press) 1961 pp. 106-107.
21. *A Modern Utopia* Ch. 11:5.
22. 'J.F.N.' *The Academy* (May 6th. 1899) pp. 502-504.