

**H.G.Wells:
Champion Revisionist, Reformist and Perestroishchik**

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H.G. Wells's *A Modern Utopia*, published in 1905, definitely established the writer's reputation and standing both among serious readers and in critical opinion. The book may be justifiably called his most important and classical utopian treatise.

The title itself has a clear and indisputable significance. A modern utopia, while maintaining general links with its predecessors, insofar as it sheds the social, economic, political, educational, cultural and legal ballast of earlier epochs, should at the same time differ from them fundamentally while resorting to "our hypothesis of freedom from tradition".

A salient feature of a modern utopia in its topography: it must not be local, regional, peripheral, parochial, closed - it encompasses the world and its dimensions are planetary. It should be based on technology and mechanization, not on human or animal muscle. It is a migratory utopia, not settled and fixed, guaranteeing a full freedom of movement from end to end. But simultaneously, contrary to the collectivist ideal, it sanctions individual rights to privacy and seclusion, without interference from above in matters of sex and marriage.

Freedom is therefore a basic element of Wellsian utopia.

The idea of individual liberty is one that has grown in importance and grows with every development of modern thought. To the Classical Utopists freedom was relatively trivial. Clearly they considered virtue and happiness as entirely separate from liberty, and as being altogether more important things. But the modern view, with its deepening insistence upon individuality and upon the significance of its uniqueness, steadily intensifies the value of freedom, until at last we begin to see liberty as the very substance of life, that indeed it is life, and that only the dead things, the choiceless things, live in absolute obedience to law. 2

This is an important statement, a declaration, a credo, and it has consequences. The Wellsian utopia is differentiated and diversified - not regimented and standardised, resulting from a strict, undeviating model, ordaining exact performance, bearing no irregularity and precisely defined to the very limits of tension. The Wellsian version, on the other hand, will become synthetic, not uniform as

The tendency of all synthetic processes in matters of law and custom is to reduce and simplify the compulsory canon, to admit alternatives and freedoms. 3

To proponents and guardians of traditional purities this came dangerously close to "eclecticism".

In view of this, another feature of the modern utopia becomes apparent - its dynamism. Like standardisation, the static qualities - changelessness and motionlessness - of the classical utopia result from unyielding pattern and design in society, economy, politics and manners, their virtually clockwork structure. An excellent instance of that calculating mode is James Harrington's *Oceana* (1656). In the traditional utopia a fixed, constant number of inhabitants must be maintained, so as to exclude a possible source of unrest, anything that might unsettle its flowing harmony. This is the way in Plato, Thomas More, Cabet, where surplus population is simply deported. Utopia thus renounces history and opens a period of "ahistoricity" (Geschichtslosigkeit)⁴:

This form and fashion of a weal-public, which I would gladly wish unto all nations, I am glad yet that it hath chanced to the Utopians, which have followed those institutions of life whereby they have laid such foundations of their commonwealth as shall continue and last not only wealthily, but also, as far as man's wit may judge and conjecture, shall endure for ever. 5

However, we have spoken about the anxiety, which can be mastered only with difficulty, because despite mental discernment not everything can be presented in numbers, despite acumen not everything can be measured, despite constructional potency not everything can be combined, and because of this incapacity to ascertain by reckoning, to measure and to combine, forces might emerge at any moment which could defy and even annihilate the system of utopia. 6

Aware of this, Wells sets against that static model his own scheme of a developing, dynamic utopia: "the Modern Utopia must be not static but kinetic".⁷ Similarly, "the old static conceptions of human life with limited resources were giving place to kinetic ideas of a continually expanding life".⁸ The New Republicans therefore "will not conceive of (the future state) as a millennial paradise, a blissful inconsequent stagnation, but as a world-state of active ampler human beings".⁹ And therefore also the Utopian Sungold says to Mr. Barnstaple: "We grow in power, we grow in courage".¹⁰

And, last to be discussed here, associated with both the outer configuration and inner structure of modern utopia, is its experimental nature.

Let us first examine the inner aspect. Traditional utopia is a perfect model, an ideal picture of the human community. "Plans for unconditional perfection of state and society.... which should guarantee mankind untroubled happiness upon Earth"¹¹ are its basic premise. The original subtitle of More's *Utopia* runs: *de optimo rei publicae statu*. The author mentions "perfection" a number of times. Plato's *Republic* is a dialogue about an ideal system contemplated twenty-five centuries ago, Campanella's *Civitas solis* - a likewise ideal state and social perfection. In Wells's words: "Those were all perfect and static states".¹² In his own model, however, "there is no perfection, there is no enduring treasure.... In a modern Utopia there will, indeed, be no perfection; in Utopia there must also be friction, conflicts and waste, but the waste will be enormously less than our world".¹³

A modern Utopia realises its ideals "in the key of mortal imperfection",¹⁴ because, as a Samurai says to his earthly double: "Life is still imperfect, still a thick felt of dissatisfactions and perplexing problems, but most certainly the quality of all its problems has been raised".¹⁵ Therefore

*We are to restrict ourselves first to the limitations of human possibility as we know them in the men and women of this world today, and then to all the inhumanity, all the insubordination of nature. We are to shape our state in a world of uncertain seasons, sudden catastrophes, antagonistic diseases, and inimical beasts and vermin, out of men and women with like passions, like uncertainties of mood and desire to our own. And, moreover, we are going to accept this world of conflict, to adopt no attitude of renunciation towards it, to face it in no ascetic spirit but in the mood of the western peoples, whose purpose is to survive and overcome.*¹⁶

And so

*The real world is a vast disorder of accidents and incalculable forces in which men survive or fail. A Modern Utopia, unlike its predecessors, dare not pretend to change the last condition: it may order and humanize the conflict, but men must still survive or fail.*¹⁷

Likewise, in Men Like Gods

*Essentially, it was still a stone-age race, it was not twenty thousand years away from the days when it knew nothing of metals and could not read or write. Deep in its nature, arrested and undeveloped, there still lay the seeds of anger and fear and dissension.*¹⁸

And, in The Shape of Things to Come

*this world is not yet a paradise for every man.*¹⁹

Wellsian courses therefore resemble hurdles and tracks studded with obstacles and impediments of all sorts and kinds rather than the closed alleys of excellence in the earlier utopias unctuously trodden by their dignified and unperturbed inmates.

Perfection is essentially exclusive, interdictive, prohibitive; this also applies to the ways and means of achieving its desired aims. Plato implies as much in Book Five of his Republic. Imperfection, on the other hand, involves variety, diversity, differentiation.

We thus pass on to the external aspect of the matter. A.L. Morton writes:

*The very fact that he found it necessary to write so many utopias suggests that Wells was never able to convince himself with any of them, and this was clearly the case.*²⁰

Similarly, George Sampson points at Wells's apparent inconsistency:

*In his later utopias he seems to forget the former.*²¹

It would appear that the validity of the points of view thus formulated in a disapproving spirit might well be questioned in both cases. Ernst Bloch states objectively: "It is characteristic that each of those [Wellsian] schemes shows a different landscape".²² It would suffice to listen to Wells's own pronouncement on the subject - the following quotation has a fundamental significance in this respect: "There will be many Utopias. Each generation will have its new version of Utopia...."²³ The multiplicity and manifoldness of utopia results from the imperfection of the human apparatus which calls it into being. Each has its defects, failings and faults, and therefore none transcends the framework of experiment and trial, although these are not blind but steered. Specific examples could here be adduced. "The Tyranny of the Second Council" in The Shape of Things to Come is an experiment which cannot develop further and must give way to another socio-economic model; abandonment of the Samurai combining traits of a mediaeval fraternity and a modern political party in Wells's later works; different interpretations of property: private property exists in A Modern Utopia, but not in The Shape of Things to Come; of marriage: the institution of family exists in A Modern Utopia, but not in Men Like Gods. Insisting on "the experimental spirit",²⁴ the writer himself generalizes on the subject: "the world is for experiment, experience and change; these are the fundamental beliefs upon which a modern Utopia must go".²⁵

It is precisely this insistence on variety of openings and options, multiplicity of vistas and perspectives that places Wells in the forefront of the liberal and democratic left, the spirit of revision, reform and perestroika in the twentieth century, and elevates him to a position of undisputed prominence there. This, as we have seen, applies both to his vision of Utopia and to practical politics (which can be but mentioned here), like the campaign for human rights centering about the activities of the emergent United Nations, where the Englishman closely co-operated among others, with the Polish writer and freedom fighter, Anthony Slonimski.

The official so-called world labour movement for long years clung spasmodically to its inviolable dogmas and doctrines, such as class struggle, socialist revolution, dictatorship of the proletariat, leading role of the party.

In Wells social struggles are waged without any special emphasis laid on strictly determined limits of class (and if at all, then psychological rather than social distinctions are made); revolutions are brought about without adjectives attached; dictatorships are shunned - and no claims made for a commanding role of the Samurai.

In Wells's lifetime official attitudes in the eastern bloc hardened, if anything, and even the Second World War, despite appearances to the contrary, changed nothing in this respect. One would have followed with fascination Wells's reactions to manifestations of oncoming change, first wary and cautious, then growing apace - down to the final disintegration. After all, he was a master dealer in the catastrophic. But then he can be referred to in this regard only in the Conditional Past.

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NOTES

1. H.G. Wells A Modern Utopia (Leipzig: Tauchnitz, 1914), p.79
2. Ibid. pp 36-37
3. Ibid. p 184
4. Hans Freyer Die politische Insel (Leipzig: Bibliographisches Institut, 1946) p.38
5. Thomas More Utopia (Berlin: Deutscher Verlag der Wissenschaften, 1955) pp 183-184
6. Freyer op.cit., pp.37-38. Translation mine.
7. Wells op.cit., p.15
8. H.G.Wells The Shape of Things to Come (London: Hutchinson, 1935) p.224
9. H.G.Wells Anticipations (Leipzig: Tauchnitz, 1902), p.267
10. H.G.Wells Men Like Gods (New York: Macmillan, 1923,) p.303
11. Andreas Voigt Die sozialen Utopien (Leipzig: Goschensche Verlagshandlung, 1906), Preface. Translation mine.
12. Wells A Modern Utopia, p.15
13. Ibid. pp 201, 224
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid. p.238
16. Ibid. p.17
17. Ibid. p.121
18. Wells Men Like Gods, p.173
19. Wells The Shape of Things to Come, p.327
20. A.L. Morton The English Utopia (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1952), p.183
21. Stopford A. Brooke and George Sampson, English Literature (London: Macmillan, 1935), p.209
22. Ernst Bloch Freiheit und Ordnung, Abriss der Sozial-Utopian (Berlin: Aufbauverlag, 1947), p.203. Translation mine
23. Wells. A Modern Utopia, p.316
24. Wells. Experiment in Autobiography (New York: Macmillan, 1934) p.204
25. Wells. A Modern Utopia pp.84-85

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