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The Time Machine in the Development of Wells's Social and Political Thought

I want to suggest that we take seriously the idea that the later Wells emerged from the the earlier one. On the one hand, there are many Wells; on the other hand, there is one Wells, and I want to focus on the one rather than the many.

My argument is that Wells spent his life trying to fend off the future described in *The Time Machine*. At times he is hopeful; at times he nearly despairs. And, of course, he ends in something that at least approaches desperate. Quite a few commentators have argued that it is the inevitability of evolution leading to something like the degenerate human race that is found in the future of *The Time Machine*, or, as many put it, the death of the human or, some writers indicate, the death of Wells that one can see throughout his writings. But while I think there is room for such essentially psychological interpretations, I find them ultimately unconvincing. While all interpretations help us illuminate areas of Wells, I am unconvinced because I think that any reading of Wells's life must conclude that he finds nothing inevitable. He is constantly trying to shake people up, organize change, point a new direction. And, or course, sometimes people listen and sometimes they do not, and Wells knowing how important what he is saying is - after all the future of humanity rests on it - alternates between great optimism and profound pessimism.

In what follows, I use *The Time Machine* to set the stage, so to speak, because I think it does, but then I go on to look at both how Wells tried to ensure that the future of *The Time Machine* would not happen and his intense frustration as he recognized that each of his attempts was failing outright or only partially or temporarily succeeding. In a sense I use the Eloi and the Morlocks as metaphors for exploring Wells's social and political thought, and I find their trail everywhere.

Warren Wagar has neatly put Wells's position: "In the extension to social problems of the scientific spirit, the spirit of experiment, clearheadedness, intellectual honesty, and orderly thinking he placed his desperate hopes for the salvation of the species." The phrase "his desperate hope for the salvation of the species" may strike some as overly dramatic, but it is my position that Wagar has it absolutely right, and the futures of *The Time Machine* are scenarios of one alternative of what will happen if we

fail. On the positive side, again quoting Wagar, "The organic cosmopolis was the embodiment in practical social action of the emergent being of humanity; preparing the world mental climate for cosmopolis was the purpose of education; establishing cosmopolis by world revolution was the function of the Open Conspiracy" (212).

At one level the Eloi and Morlocks are clearly the bourgeoisie and the proletariat extrapolated to one logical conclusion, but that does not tell us very much because we do not know what happened between the late nineteenth century and their time to produce a society in which the proletariat procures goods for the use of the bourgeoisie but also eats those it clothes (I cannot recall any other gods used by the Eloi). It is easier to imagine the devolution of the Eloi than that of the Morlocks; in fact, the Eloi do not strike me as that much different from some of the more idle rich wandering the world today.

For Wells, I expect that the most worrisome aspect of the future of *The Time Machine* was the decline in intelligence of both the Eloi and the Morlocks. Whether Wells was afraid of falling back into the proletariat and envious of the bourgeoisie, as some have argued, is debatable, but he was clearly concerned about the necessity of encouraging those of high intelligence to apply that intelligence to social problems.

Robert Philmus once asked, "Why did the Time Traveller return to the future?" If it was not to indulge himself with an Eloi female, it must have been to change that future. Or perhaps he went into the past; but for an H.G. Wells, it could only be for the same reason - to make the world a better place. We must regret that he has so far failed.

Beginning with some of his earliest works, we can see that the descriptions of the Eloi and the Morlocks are prefigured in Wells's analysis of the class system.

The New society was divided into three main classes. At the summit slumbered the property owner, enormously rich by accident rather than design, potent save for the will and aim, the last avatar of Hamlet in the world. Below was the enormous multitude of workers employed by the gigantic companies that monopolised control; and between these the dwindling middle class, officials of innumerable sorts, foremen, managers, the medical, legal, artistic, and scholastic classes, and the minor rich, the middle class, whose members lead a life of insecure luxury and precarious speculation amidst the movements of the great managers. "The Story of Days to Come" (221-22)¹.

That word "slumbered" describing the "accidental" rich speaks volumes about the origins of the Eloi. And, later he says of the employees of the Labour Company that "nearly a third of the population of the world were its serfs and debtors from the cradle to the grave" (229); here is the origin of the Morlocks.

In the same year, Wells goes further with the same imagery and gives even stronger clues as to the origins of the future of *The Time Machine*. "He had already seen enough to realize that the ancient antithesis of luxury, waste and sensuality on the one hand and abject poverty on the other still prevailed" (*When the Sleeper Wakes* 42). Note the use of the word "sensuality" and think of the Eloi. "Out of the dim south-west, glittering and strange, voluptuous, and in some way terrible, shone those Pleasure Cities.... Strange places reminiscent of the legendary Sybaris, cities of art and beauty, mercenary art and mercenary beauty, sterile wonderful cities of motion and music whether repaired all who profited by the fierce, inglorious economic struggle...." (96). Are these the ruins in which the Eloi live? And the sentence ends "...That went on in the glaring labyrinth below" (96). Already the Morlocks are in their caves.

At times Wells suggests that all that can save the human race from its fate is accident, such as those in *The Food of the Gods* or *In the Days of the Comet*. At other times, he suggests possibilities. For example, in *Anticipations*, and many other places, he specifically rejects democracy, and suggests "a World State of capable, rational men" (299). This is also during this stage of explicit racism, where he says that the "vast proportion of the black and brown races" (280) cannot keep up with the white and yellow races, and that all racial and other inferiors will not be allowed to breed (315-17). By 1926 and *The World of William Clissold* he says that there are no racial groups incapable of participating in the great future, and in *The Outlook for Homo Sapiens* (1942) he argued that blacks should not be blamed for what whites did to them (138)².

But Wells enters a hopeful period, and during this period he seems to think that it is really possible to bring about wholesale change and produce a better future, and does not include his, or at least as many of his, usual caveats. I do not really want to date this period and Wells's moods fluctuate, but it is roughly between his two greatest eutopias, *A Modern Utopia* (1905) and *Men Like Gods* (1922), and including *The World Set Free* (1914). During this period, for some reason, Wells does not seem either as impatient as usual or sound as desperate as he did before and will again. For example, in *Mankind in the Making*, he writes, "the serious aspect of our private lives,

the general aspect of our social and co-operative undertakings, is to prepare as well as we possibly can a succeeding generation which shall prepare still more capably for still better generations to follow" (20). And in an essay entitled "The Human Adventure" originally published in *The Daily Mail*, he writes that the human race "will bring his solvent intelligence to bear upon the riddles of his individual interaction, transmute jealousy and every passion, control his own increase, select and breed for his embodiment a continually finer and stronger and wiser race" (*An Englishman* 20). And, perhaps most importantly for my theme, in "The Labour Unrest", first published in the *Daily Mail* in May, 1912, he says that "the wages earning, labouring class as a distinctive class, consenting to a distinctive treatment and accepting life at a disadvantage, is going to disappear" (60). This will happen by "making labour a part of everyone's life and the whole of nobody's life..." (68). Neither Eloi or Morlock will be possible as a result of this system.

But even in the major eutopias of this period, Wells's pessimism shows through¹. In *A Modern Utopia* no-one of the minimum wage was allowed to have children (141). There is, or course, no democracy, and the samurai generally run things, although even the samurai are restricted in that they cannot act, sing, or recite (289) or, more importantly, buy or sell on their own account (287). Perhaps his most positive statement is *The World Set Free* (1914), but the world has to be virtually destroyed to be set free. That freedom is based on the availability of unlimited energy resources and an educational system that uses what we now call behavioural engineering, a powerful and potentially dangerous tool. The promise of *The World Set Free* is based on the ability to seriously start over, and *Men like Gods* requires something very like gods to produce eutopia. These three main works of hope and optimism contain the seeds of Wells's future pessimism, and *Men like Gods*, seems to me to be the first step back to serious worrying.

In 1926, Wells writes, "It is only through a conscious, frank and worldwide co-operation of the man of science, the scientific worker, the man accustomed to the direction of productive industry, the man able to control the arterial supply of credit, the man who can control newspapers and politicians..." (*Clissold* 3: 619) that anything will be done. Wells seems to be arguing that the William Clissolds of the world have to be encouraged to take a leading role in the Open Conspiracy and the creation of the future world. Plato started with the Philosopher King, Wells with the samurai. Plato was imprisoned by the King he tried to make a Philosopher, Wells was simply ignored by the self-made men he tried to convince to become samurai. In *Meanwhile* (1927) he says that people cannot see the long term benefit against the inevitable

temporary dislocation of implementing a utopia. You can almost hear the doubt in "Idea must clothe itself in will" (171). All of this is an attempt to create a society in which there is no possibility of either Eloi or Morlock.

In 1930 in *The Open Conspiracy*, Wells writes that there are three "fundamentally important issues upon which unanimity must be achieved at the outset":

- Firstly, the entirely provisional nature of all existing governments, and the entirely provisional nature, therefore, of all loyalties associated therewith;
- Secondly, the supreme importance of population control in human biology and the possibility it affords us of a release from the pressure of the struggle for existence on ourselves; and
- Thirdly, the urgent necessity of protective resistance against the present traditional drift towards war. (171)

In our overpopulated world of rampant nationalism in which war is a constant, we can only say Wells was clearly right, but even at his most optimistic he had to be intensely aware of the unlikelihood of achieving "unanimity from the outset" on these issues. He was throwing away the support of all politicians, and the support for birth control in 1928 was minuscule at best. No wonder he was to become desperate; he knew what had to be done, but I expect he also knew it could not be done, that we were and are beyond hope. In the revision of *The Open Conspiracy, What Are We to Do with Our Lives?* just a year later, there is a chapter entitled "No Stable Utopia is Now Conceivable?" And in October 1931 in an essay in *John o' London's*, he writes:

When the Promised Land is cut off for ever, Homo Sapiens will be readily convinced that there never was a Promised Land. The last thing we human beings will produce is concerted effort; only under the spur of greed or panic do we produce that. We shake our heads at the "dreamers." As long as possible we will go on living the close, ignoble lives of thieves, bullies, and drudges to which we are accustomed, that dear old slummy, needy, down-at-heel human life, so pathetic and touching and all that. We will snuffle our satisfaction that we are not in any "fantastic Utopia." And when presently rifles are put into our hands again, we shall kill. The whips will be behind us and the "enemy" in front. Brave old World! The Old History will go on with us, because we had not the vigour to accept the new. (*After Democracy* 224)

You can hear the frustrated cry, "DAMN IT, YOU FOOLS, CAN'T YOU SEE!!!" This essay was collected with other pieces in the appropriately titled *After Democracy*.

But he actually manages to try again and produces *The Shape of Things to Come* (1933), but it, of course, fits the pattern. It is a positive, utopia, but it sweeps through the future rather like a novel of Olaf Stapledon, and Wells discusses the necessity of war, dictatorship, and a period of puritanism to cleanse the world and its people so that it will become possible to construct a new system with new people. And at the end he describes a humanity that sounds more like a Stapledon future being:

The body of mankind is now one single organism of nearly two thousand five hundred million persons, and the individual differences of every one of these persons is like an exploring tentacle thrust out to test and learn, to savour life in its fullness and bring in new experiences for the common stock. We are all members of one body. Only in the dimmest analogy has anything of this sort happened in the universe as we knew it before. Our sense of individual difference makes our realization of our common being more acute. We work, we think, we explore, we dispute, we take risks and suffer - for there seems no end to the difficult and dangerous adventures individual men and women may attempt; and more and more plain does it become to us that it is not our little selves, but Man the Undying who achieves these things through us. As the slower processes of heredity seize upon and confirm these social adaptations, as the confluence of wills supersedes individual motives and loses its present factors of artificiality, the history of life will pass into a new phase, a phase with a common consciousness and a common will. We in our time are still rising towards the crest of that transition. And when that crest is attained what grandeur of life may not open out to Man! Eye hath not seen, nor ear heard; not hath it entered into the mind of man to conceive. (429-30)

This is really the last time that Wells seems to think that the future of *The Time Machine* can be avoided, but it takes the active supersession of homo sapiens to do so. *The Shape of Things to Come* is also a fairly rare Wellsian excursion into the territory of Stapledon.

In *The Holy Terror* (1939), Wells presented a populist leader who looks suspiciously like a dictator but is presented as anti-authoritarian. In *All Aboard for Ararat* (1940), he says that what is needed is "Something quintessential for the elite and something very strong and clear and simple for the masses of mankind" (63). *The Holy Terror* and *All Aboard for Ararat* are making much the same point; the majority of the human race needs strong leadership. With it there is a possibility for improvement.

In *The Holy Terror* Wells still holds out hope for far reaching change, but in the last years of his life he is generally less hopeful and mounts the last two crusades of his life - a return to the idea of a world encyclopædia, and the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Man.

The idea of a world encyclopædia (*World Brain* 1938) which was, I noted, first suggested in 1913 in *The Passionate Friends* becomes one of Wells's minor reforms, at least in comparison to most of his works, that he tried to bring about in his own writings like the *The Outline of History* (1920), *The Science of Life* (1929-30), and others, and bore fruit in the popularisation of the family encyclopædia, great books programmes, and other mechanisms designed to make knowledge more generally available. The results have been somewhat less inspiring than Wells had thought.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights exists and was adopted by the United Nations in 1948. Since Wells spent years writing to thinkers and political leaders all over the world to reach agreement on its content, it can stand as one of the concrete positive results of Wells's work. Today, though, it has again become a centre of controversy; much of the Third World is unhappy with its provisions for individual rights; much of the capitalist world rejects its provisions for workers rights and social programmes. Still, it was the last successful reform that Wells helped lead. From the perspective of his far-reaching eutopias, the Universal Declaration is a small step, but we have to recognize that beyond the works on paper, we still have not been able to take that step. From Wells's perspective, I think the Universal Declaration was designed as protection from the politicians, as was, I think, the world encyclopædia. Knowledge of our rights might help stave off the depredations of the powerful.

Even war does not quite lead Wells to despair; *Phoenix* (1942) lays out what Wells thinks are the way things will have to be done and the order in which they will have to be done, but he fears that there will not be the "necessary mental and moral energy to bring about these changes" (7). As he puts it, "The salvaging of our species [note the word "species"] can only be achieved by doing the right thing at the right time and place in the right sequence and in the right proportions" (8). To do this requires the elimination of "political sovereignty", "private ownership", and the "master and subject relationship, by an equalitarian fundamental law throughout the world" (61). And in *Science and the World-Mind* (1942), Wells gives us a rather strident plea for the few to get it together and reorganise the world. These works present positive statements in a way that sounds more and more frustrated and desperate.

And, of course, he then comes to *Mind at the End of its Tether* (1945), in which he says that there is no longer any pattern. For Wells, who always sought patterns, this must have been devastating. But should it have been surprising? I think not, certainly not to those of us who can see the whole of Wells's writing. But perhaps no pattern should be seen as a positive alternative to the dominant pattern I see in Wells.

But is the pattern I see in Wells there or in my head? I see Wells spending his life trying to avoid the future in which we live and constantly hounded by the fear expressed in *The Time Machine*, the fear that we are headed for the end of the species.

When I was trying to write the ending to this paper, the radio was doing a tribute to Anne Frank on the 50th anniversary of her death. One of the readings was by the young girl from Sarajevo who had survived to see her own diary published. Wells was clearly right to despair. We have achieved nothing in the 100 years since he gave us his first warning in *The Time Machine*, let alone the 50 years since his all too correct cry in *Mind at the End of its Tether*. We can only hope that the Time Traveller finds a way to fix things, because I, like Wells, while remaining steadfastly a utopian, see no hope of us doing so.

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¹H.G. Wells, "A Story of Days to Come," in *Tales of Space and Time*, (221-22).

²*The Outlook for Homo Sapiens* was an amalgamation and modernization of two books, *The Fate of Homo Sapiens* (1939) and *The New World Order* (1940).

³Lyman Tower Sargent. "The Pessimistic Eutopias of H.G. Wells." *Wellsian* 7 (1984): 2-18.