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The Time Machine: A Polemic on the Inevitability of Working Class Liberation and a Plea for a Socialist Solution to Late-Victorian Capitalist Exploitation

In this paper I will argue that H.G. Wells intended *The Time Machine* to be a polemic on the inevitability of a working-class rise to power and, further, that he was attempting to reveal why the achievement of revolutionary Socialism was necessary, as against Fabian parliamentary Socialism, the latter of which strives for Socialism without eliminating class struggle from society.

Before embarking upon my discussion of the purpose of the book, I must analyse the attitude of the Time Traveller in order to reveal his standing on the issue of Socialism. The Time Traveller's position in the book is interesting. He was a scientist of the Wellsian type. By this I mean he was not a conventional late-Victorian inventor. I'll explain. Throughout the story the reader is led to believe that the meetings held at the Time Traveller's home occurred not just in the two weeks described, but in several preceding weeks also. They were casual meetings in the sense that different guests waded in and out of them without any apparent invitation or excuse. They were open, albeit to a select section of the community (i.e. the bourgeoisie, including a doctor, psychologist, provincial mayor, editor etc.). The discussions were led by the Time Traveller himself and appeared to progress meeting by meeting, preparing the guests for what the Time Traveller reveals as his invention in the penultimate session.

It is in that session that the Time Traveller demonstrates his model Time Machine. Although the assembly generally considers the experiment hocus-pocus, the very act is a huge gamble by the Time Traveller. Why? Well, he does not only reveal the nature of his work, but he gives a demonstration of it to a group of potential Capitalists. To do so without having the Time Machine patented or without having previous guarantees of investment in his project seems extremely risky. It is a security risk which puts his experiment at the mercy of any spying scientific plagiarist who might have attended the meetings. In late-Victorian times this was unheard of and a more typical posture can be found in the actions of Griffin in *The Invisible Man*, who experiments on invisibility in secret for fear of losing his discovery to the senior professors around him. (*The Invisible Man* et al, 79). Wells's major

criticism of the scientific world of his day was of its secrecy and scheming which led to militarism and war. The Time Traveller obviously did not subscribe to the scientific secrecy of his contemporaries. From this starting point, the Time Traveller's personality becomes apparent.

For a scientific mechanic, the Narrator revealed early in the book a strange invention made by the Time Traveller. He says, "our chairs, being his patent, embraced and caressed us rather than submitted to be sat upon" (2). A very strange invention by a man who strove to realise time travel! It appears to me that the Time Machine was not an end in itself. This is evidenced by the chairs. The Time Traveller made things to improve human comfort. He revealed his secrets to the public rather than tender them out for maximum profit. His home was fitted with chairs to "embrace and caress" their users. This sounds like a man intent on advancing human comfort to the best of his ability, from chairs sat upon to societies to be lived in. Thus, his masterpiece was a Time Machine. What better way of maximising human comfort than by learning from future generations? Thus, when the Time Machine was built, the Time Traveller chose a revolutionary descent into the past or, as Arnold Bennett put it: "the Time Traveller goes forward, not into 'the dark backward and abysm'" (Harris Wilson 274). Such was the Time Traveller's motive for time travel.

What does this motive tell us? It can mean but one thing: the Time Traveller was a Socialist. However, he desired Socialism without believing it likely to arise. This is revealed at the close of the book when the Narrator states:

he, I know - for the question had been discussed among us long before the Time Machine was made - thought but cheerlessly of the advancement of mankind, and saw in the growing pile of civilization only a foolish heaping that must inevitably fall back upon and destroy its makers in the end. (303)

The Time Traveller's attitude was such that his engagement in politics would have been pointless. To create a world where all people would be equal would only be possible by going forward and learning from our descendants. In this way, the Time Traveller could return to his own time and use his acquired knowledge for progress. This attitude may seem naive but it was the one held by the Time Traveller before he journeyed into futurity.

So we understand the position at the beginning of the book. A disillusioned Socialist has built a Time Machine with the ambition of making fundamental discoveries from the future in order to return to his own time and prevent human degeneration. This

plot goes hand in hand with Wells's later warning that "human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe" (*Outline of History* 725). The Time Traveller was determined to obtain education in order to prevent human catastrophe.

Having determined the aims of the Time Traveller, it is henceforth necessary to assess his evolved perceptions of the social situation in the world of 802701.

The Time Traveller, on his arrival in the future, quickly developed a Fabian Socialist critique of societal evolution. He anticipated, on his arrival in the year 802701, that the people "would be incredibly in front of us in knowledge, art, everything" (226). However, he learnt otherwise when an Eloi asked him in sign whether he had come from the sun in a thunderstorm! This primitive intelligence, combined with the simplicity of their clothes, "their frail white limbs and fragile features" (226) made the Time Traveller revise his prejudice/

But despite the seeming lack of mental development made by the Eloi, the Time Traveller does not despair of humanity. His initial Fabian interpretation of the future remains and later, when he discovers the lack of private property and the abundance of collective living, he infers, "communism" (231). With this thought in his mind, he rapidly reassesses the world around him along that line of thinking:

Seeing the ease and security in which these people were living, I felt that this close resemblance of the sexes was after all what one would expect; for the strength of a man and the softness of a woman, the institutions of the family, and the differentiation of the occupations are mere militant necessities of an age of physical force. Where population is balanced and abundant, much child-bearing becomes an evil rather than a blessing to the state; where violence comes but rarely and offspring are secure, there is...no necessity...for an efficient family, and the specialisation of the sexes with reference to their children's needs disappear. (231-32).

It is clear from this passage that not only did the Time Traveller believe he was in a Socialist Utopia, but that he also believed human evolution had continued beneficial to humanity. He was, in effect, drawing the equation that human evolution leads to Socialism. This again is a Fabian critique of the future: late-Victorian Capitalism need not be overthrown by revolution, as evolution will equalise society and create Socialism by design.

At this stage of the novel, therefore, Wells appears to be legitimising Fabian Socialist gradualism within a Capitalist society. The Time Traveller breaks off from his narrative in order virtually to say so:

The science of our time has attacked but a little department of human disease, but, even so, it spreads its operations very steadily and persistently. Our agriculture and horticulture destroy a weed just here and there and cultivate perhaps a score or so of wholesome plants, leaving the greater number to fight out a balance as they can. We improve our favourite plants and animals...gradually by selective breeding... We improve them gradually, because our ideals are vague and tentative, and our knowledge is very limited; because nature, too, is shy and slow in our clumsy hands. Some day all this will be better organised, and still better... The whole world will be intelligent, educated, and co-operating; things will move faster and faster towards the subjugation of nature. In the end, wisely and carefully, we shall readjust the balance of animal and vegetable life to suit our human needs. (233-34)

This legitimisation of Fabianism, by extension, declared redundant the need for revolution as a means of replacing individualist society with collective society.

This is the situation by chapter four of the book. The reader is lured into a false security with futurity. One is made to believe that all is rosy in the garden of 802701. The Time Traveller throws our vision of the future into chaos however on the last page of chapter four when he declares, with regard to this theory of Eloi life: "very simple was my explanation, and plausible enough - as most wrong theories are!" (236).

Having revealed the Time Traveller's first impressions of the future, I must now analyse his revised vision as dictated by the new circumstances which challenged his applied Fabianism.

In chapter five, the Time Traveller makes the fundamental discovery of the book. After encountering a Morlock and pondering over its significance, he declares:

gradually, the truth dawned on me: that man had not remained one species, but had differentiated into two distinct animals: that my graceful children of the Upper-world were not the sole descendants of our generation, but that this bleached, obscene, nocturnal thing, which had flashed before me, was also heir to all ages. (251-52).

With this discovery, the Time Traveller's utopian image of the future crashes down before him. He verbalises his ponderings thus: "What, I wondered, was this Lemur doing in my scheme of a perfectly balanced organization? How was it related to the indolent serenity of the beautiful Upper-worlders?" (252). Once he has questioned the future thus, a void exists for the Time Traveller. But once he has discovered the Morlocks' subterranean habitation, it was but a logical step to his new theory: "What so natural, then, as to assume that it was in this artificial Underworld that such work as was necessary to the comfort of the daylight race was done?" (253). With this discovery, the realisation of a class-divided inheritor-society occurred to the Time Traveller. By considering late-Victorian Britain, the Time Traveller deduces continued Capitalist divergence between the classes. The working class situation grew thus:

Proceeding from the problems of our own age, it seemed clear as daylight to me that the gradual widening of the present merely temporary and social difference between the Capitalist and the Labourer, was the key to the whole position... Even now there are existing circumstances to point that way. There is a tendency to utilize underground space for the less ornamental purposes of civilization;... there are underground workrooms and restaurants, and they increase and multiply. Evidently, I thought, this tendency had increased till industry had gradually lost its birthright in the sky. I mean that it had gone deeper and deeper into a larger and even larger underground factories, spending a still increasing amount of its time therein... Even now, does not an East-end worker live in such artificial conditions as practically to be cut off from the natural surface of the earth? (253-54)

The Time Traveller describes the ruling class evolution thus:

The exclusive tendency of richer people - due, no doubt, to the increasing refinement of their education, and the widening gulf between them and the rude violence of the poor - is already leading to the closing, in their interest, of considerable portions of the surface of the land... And this same widening gulf - which is due to the length and expanse of the higher educational process and the increased facilities for and temptations towards refined habits on the part of the rich - will make that exchange between class and class, that promotion by intermarriage which at present retards the splitting of our species along lines of social stratification, less and less frequent. (254)

Having this determined the Victorian seeds of futurity's evils, the Time Traveller defines the end product of Victorian exploitative Capitalism as thus:

So in the end you must have the Haves, pursuing pleasure and comfort and beauty, and below-ground the Have-nots, the workers getting continually adapted to the conditions of their labour. Once they were there, they would no doubt have to pay rent, and not a little of it, for the ventilation of their caverns; and if they refused, they would starve or be suffocated for their arrears. Such of them as were so constituted as to be miserable and rebellious would die, and, in the end, the balance being permanent, the survivors would become as well adapted to the conditions of underground life, and as happy in their way, as the Upper-world people were to theirs. (254-56)

The quotation of these lengthy passages has been necessary to make clear Wells's main argument of the book. The underground drudgery of the Morlocks and the relative luxury of the upper-world Eloi was a result of the continuation of late-Victorian Capitalism. The Capitalists' ownership of the land drove the workers below ground and exploited their labour through the threat of suffocation and starvation. Throughout the rest of the book there is no evidence to suggest that this Capitalist evolution, as assumed by the Time Traveller, was wrong. The means by which class-division continued was undeniably through the exploitation as described by the Time Traveller. However, Capitalist greed and individualism did not carry the day and the world of 802701 had a curious twist in its tail, as the Time Traveller explains in the next section of the book.

The Time Traveller finally discovers the truth about the social order of 802701 in chapter seven of the book. He realises that "the Upper-world people might once have been the favoured aristocracy, and the Morlocks their mechanical servants; but that had long since passed away" (263). The Time Traveller theorises that, although the Eloi may once have dominated the Morlocks, the old adage that "necessity is the mother of invention" still applied and, as the Time Traveller explains:

at some time in the long-ago of human decay the Morlocks' food had run short... Even now man is far less discriminating and exclusive in his food than he was... His prejudice against human flesh is no deep-seated instinct... These Eloi were mere fatted cattle which the ant-like Morlocks preserved and preyed upon - probably saw to the breeding of. (269)

Thus, from a position of advantage and privilege, the Capitalist descendants, the Eloi, had degenerated, through their mood of complacency, and the struggling masses, the Morlocks, asserted their power and reversed the status quo of late-

Victorian renown. Or, as the Time Traveller puts it, society had "committed suicide" (286). The way in which the Morlocks asserted their power was explained thus by the Time Traveller:

As I see it, the Upper-world had drifted towards this feeble prettiness, and the Under-world to mere mechanical industry... The Under-world, being in contact with machinery, which, however perfect, still needs some little thought outside habit, had probably retained perforce rather more initiative, and when other meat failed them, they turned to what old habit had hitherto forbidden. (287).

So, from late-Victorian Capitalism the world had continued, making no efforts to level out the disproportionate spread of wealth. Capitalism was perpetuated by the ruling class and the exploited masses were left to live in poverty conditions. This exploitative progression continued, it seems, for many thousands of years. Eventually, however, the ruling class, or Eloi, lost all ability to manage the world due to the perfect nature of their exploitation. The Morlocks became unable to throw off their yoke and eventually came to accept the divisions of society. As the year 802701 shows, that division developed to such an extent that humanity came to resemble two different species. However, Wells reveals that the exploitation of the Morlocks by the Eloi was doomed to fail. The repressive nature of the Eloi developed to such an extent that the Morlocks could not even maintain the basic lifestyle they came to know. Starvation occurred hand in hand with the Morlocks' development of oxygenation of their subterranean habitats. Once the Morlocks released themselves from dependence on the Eloi for oxygen they became, in effect, the ruling class. For, the clothing and food which the Eloi drove the Morlocks to produce thus ceased to be forthcoming under exploitative conditions. Although the Morlocks could not return to living on the earth's surface, they could turn the tables on the Eloi and themselves became exploiters. Michael Coren supported this point when he wrote: "the [Morlock],...forced to toil beneath the surface like its proletarian ancestors, has reversed the class equation and feeds on the flesh of the effete surface-dwellers" (50). Hence, the Morlocks became farmers of the Eloi and used their upper-world cousins as a readily-available food supply. It is this situation that the Time Traveller discovered. The point thus to be deduced from the story is that the working class is the inevitable inheritor of worldly power. Under Capitalism, the gruesome expropriation of the ruling class will occur as the Time Traveller described.

The working class's inevitable rise under a Capitalist system, however, does not herald the end of the need for a Socialist struggle. This is made evident by the last

section of the book, where the Time Traveller travels on to the dusk of life on earth. By depicting the end of the world as being empty of human life, Wells was demonstrating the ultimate failings of a Capitalist society. Within a Capitalist society there is, by definition, a struggle between the Haves and Have-nots. In a situation where that struggle is perpetuated by the maintenance of an exploitative society, only immediate class interests are protected and not long-term human stability. Hence, in *The Time Machine*, class struggle, through the continuation of a Capitalist system, provoked the short-term exploitation of one class by another and not the long-term guarantee of human and earthly protection. We see this today with the Capitalists' destruction of the ozone and the creation of an hemispheric greenhouse effect. In the book, human extinction was inevitable because an exploitative society was maintained. Michael Sherborne (formerly Draper) was therefore wrong when he wrote that "the new world...is a savage mockery of the ill-conceived promises of Marxism" (38). Rather, the vision of the year 802701 highlights the need for Marx's proletarian revolution and reveals the inherent flaw in Fabian Socialism. This is where the attractions of revolutionary Socialism covertly enter the story. Although not verbalised by the Time Traveller, the inference from the book is that while Capitalism can only lead to human disintegration, true Socialism (i.e. a world devoid of class, racial or gender inequality and conflict) will lead to long-term comfort rather than short-term antagonism. With long-term planning, the end of the world can be anticipated and action to prevent human extinction can be taken. Although the Time Traveller revealed to his guests that the world is doomed if it follows its course, there is nothing in the book to suggest that the future is fixed and unalterable. Indeed, Wells was later to write that "if the world does not please you, you can change it You may change it into something sinister and angry, to something appalling, but it may be that you will change it to something brighter, something more agreeable" (*Mr Polly* 184). The belief in a Socialist solution to societal degeneration is inferred and therefore given hope by one character at one time in the book. That character is the Narrator and the time when he offers humanity hope is in the epilogue. The passage reads thus:

[The Time Traveller] thought but cheerlessly of the advancement of mankind, and saw in the growing pile of civilization only a foolish heaping that must inevitably fall back upon and destroy its makers in the end. If that is so, it remains for us to live as if it were not so. (303)

"It remains for us to live as if it were not so." It is with these words that Wells transforms the novel from one of uncompromising pessimism to a symbol of hope for the future. The book represents a warning to humanity, not a definite vision of

things to come. This, I believe, is where Patrick Parrinder errs when he writes: "*The Time Machine* is an attack on Utopia" (19). The book is actually, in the words of Brian Murray: "the first in a long line of Wellsian attacks on the kind of crude industrial capitalism he watched operate in the closing decades of the nineteenth century" (90) and shows a vision of how things could go. This interpretation was supported by Wells himself when he declared that the book was about "the responsibility of men to mankind. Unless humanity hangs together, unless all strive for the species as a whole, we shall end in disaster" (qtd in Smith 49).

Before I wind up this paper, I would like to reveal a parallel novel which reflects a similar hope. In the latter stages of Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, Ebenezer Scrooge is taken to a graveyard by the Ghost of Christmas yet to come, and is directed towards an untended grave. The passage reads as follows:

"Before I draw nearer to that stone to which you point," said Scrooge, "answer me one question. Are these the shadows of things that Will be or are they shadows of things that May be, only?"

Still the Ghost pointed downward to the grave by which it stood.

"Men's courses will foreshadow certain ends, to which, if persevered in, they must lead," said Scrooge. "But if the course be departed from, the ends will change. Say it is thus with what you show me!"

The Spirit was immovable as ever.

Scrooge crept towards it, trembling as he went; and following the finger, read upon the stone of the neglected grave his own name, EBENEZER SCROOGE...

"No, Spirit! Oh, no, no."

The finger still was there.

"Spirit!" he cried, tight clutching at its robe, "hear me! I am not the man I was. I will not be the man I must have been but for this intercourse. Why show me this, if I am past all hope?"

For the first time the hand began to shake.

"Good Spirit," he pursued, as down upon the ground he fell before it: "Your nature intercedes for me, and pities me. Assure me that I yet may change these shadows you have shown me for an altered life!"

The kind hand trembled.

"...I will not shut out the lessons that they teach. Oh, tell me I may sponge away the writing on this stone!" (Dickens 67)

The message in this passage can easily translate into that portrayed in *The Time Machine*. The figure of Scrooge can symbolise late-Victorian Capitalism; the grave

can symbolise the Time Machine. Scrooge asks: "Why show me this, if I am past all hope!" (67). The same question could be put to Wells regarding the future. Why did Wells show us his bleak picture of the future if it cannot be altered? Wells did believe that the shadows of the future revealed in *The Time Machine* may be altered by a change in social relationships. That change is offered by Socialism and it is Socialism that Wells intended to propagate by highlighting the degenerative effect of late-Victorian Capitalism. What Dickens expressed regarding the individual, Wells expressed about society: with the necessary will power, change can occur. This is what the Narrator at the end of *The Time Machine* meant when he said regarding the Time Traveller's pessimistic prophecy, "it remains for us to live as if it were not so" (303). The attitude of the Narrator was the attitude of Wells and the idea that society can be changed was the cornerstone message of the book.

Although things have changed between 1895 and today, the basic ruling principles of society are the same. Injustice and inequality remain. Racism and international exploitation as well as class-division exist today as strongly, if not more so, than a hundred years ago. Since *The Time Machine* was published, humanity has lost a hundred years and the Socialist societal reconstruction of the world still remains as a job undone. Socialism may be at a low ebb at present but it is up to the likes of us here today to keep the hope of human liberation alight. The warnings of *The Time Machine* can aid us in the battle to fight injustice and I believe it was this message that H.G. Wells had in mind when he wrote this classic tract.

As early as 1895 Wells, the teacher of humanity, was preaching the collectivist message. I will finish this paper with the a closing plea: let us not lose sight of that Wellsian message.

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