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James Dilloway

Wellsian Thinking Revisited

In this piece our purpose is to examine an area of Wells's enormous output that has received relatively little attention over the last five decades – that part of his non-fiction writing concerned with original analysis or proposals. This means that a vast field of metaphysical, biological, social, political and economic creativity and comment will have to be whittled down to an irreducible essence and defined in clear terms. We shall also have to leave out of account a rich commentary pursued through characters and situations evoked in his fictional output. From the major non-fiction must then be removed, or allowed for, several viewpoints that changed during his lifetime – e.g. in such areas as religion, international government, collectivism in the USSR or some aspects of political economy. After all due pruning of this kind, we might try to see how far the residue that remains may suggest a lifelong evolution of ideas and what might be its status – whether in the context of his own time or in the wildly different climate that has emerged today.

The Early Setting

First, ought we not to set the scene – to take some account of that unique setting in which his sudden individual surge of creativity came to arise? If the shape of ideas can be moulded by environment or circumstance, it is hardly in doubt that in Wells's earlier years the climate for change was certainly ripe. He arrived on the scene only eight years after Darwin and Wallace had wrought that biological bombshell – the theory of organic evolution by natural selection. When the Greenwich meridian became the datum for measuring time and longitude, Wells had reached the age of eighteen. Not long afterwards, Mendel's biological laws of heredity first reached public awareness. So far as concerned political and economic change he was, for his first seventeen years, a contemporary of Karl Marx, and longer still of Friedrich Engels. When *Das Kapital* arrived, with its theory seeking to unify history, economy and politics, he was one year old. Those founders of modern social science – Emile Durkheim, Max Weber and, in Britain, Charles Booth and L.T. Hobhouse – were all

only a few years senior to the young H.G. At meetings in London of the Sociological Society he was in direct contact with the main leaders in this field. He was fortunate, too, for many years, to be a contemporary of Alfred Russel Wallace, a major figure not just in biology and natural history but equally in respect of his forthright radical and social stance. It was in 1913, his final year, that Wallace, a cofounder of Darwinism, produced his last work – *Social Environment and Moral Progress*![1]

Despite, for us, its seeming stability, respectability and ultra-conservatism – all coexisting with a prevalence of extreme poverty and early death – we have, for our purpose, to remember that the first half of the period from 1866 to 1946 – the age of Wells – was in fact also a time of mental revolution. In its first half this period saw not just the battle for evolution, the rise of Marxism, the Labour Party and the Fabian Society, but the birth of heavier-than-air flight, wireless telegraphy, public electricity supply, mass communications, the cinema, relativity theory and, latterly in this country, old-age pensions and the raising of the school-leaving age to fourteen. By 1880, when Wells himself reached the age of fourteen, the British Empire had come to attain its maximum world supremacy in economic power. This, of course, was later to be succeeded by the first world war, the creation of a League of Nations, then the general strike of 1926 and the great depression that preceded world war two.

There were thus two contrasting strands in the opening-up to Wells of a world at once seemingly stable if economically backward-looking, yet full of the promise of an involuntary, technically impelled expansion towards a global scale of operations. This, however, was a world that never looked remotely like fulfilling its promise of security or plenty for all. The fact that, for all his uniquely latent potential, Wells was in some degree underprivileged rather than automatically destined for Oxbridge and the professions, served in the event to be a positive factor in the early flowering of his talents!

Because biology extends to encompass the basis of ***human*** existence, it can range without effort into the social sciences. Thus it was that, quite early on, Wells came to be inspired both by T.H. Huxley and to be in direct contact with contemporary pioneers of social and economic science in all their varied manifestations. When, at a meeting of the Sociological Society in 1904, he took part

[1] Alfred Russel Wallace, *Social Environment and Moral Progress* (London: Cassell, 1913).

in a discussion on eugenics introduced by the great Francis Galton, he was joined by other such pioneers as Karl Pearson, Benjamin Kidd, L.T. Hobhouse and, afterwards, J.M. Robertson and Bernard Shaw. Later meetings that year featured Charles Booth, Edward Westermarck, Emile Durkheim, J.A. Hobson – the radical pioneering economist – Bertrand Russell, Patrick Geddes and Victor Branford.[2] The last, in fact, was still Secretary of the then Institute of Sociology when I attended its meeting held, I think, at Ledbury in 1942. It was directly through the influence of Professor Geddes that the subject of civics came to bring an element of practical ethics to the public scene – a theme taken up and broadened much later by H.G. to encompass a world code of rights and duties.

As discoverer of the future at the dawn of a new century, Wells's gift for bold but realistic extrapolating was soon to be energized, first by far-reaching trends in pure science and communication and later by the onset of world war. Thus it was that he came to turn from first and last things to confront intractable human concerns in a *global* context. His scheme for aerial ropeways to speed goods transport on the western front served to show that ideals and practical realities were both to fall equally within his grasp.

It is with the breathtaking range of intellectual creativity that flowed from these and innumerable other explorations and encounters – and which later came to be displayed at such venues as the Oxford Philosophical Society, the Royal Institution, the Sorbonne, the Liberal Summer School, the Reichstag, the British, Australian and New Zealand Associations for the Advancement of Science, the BBC and elsewhere – that we shall have to be concerned. But here we do not seek to outline the history of H.G.'s intellectual development in public affairs or philosophy, history, education, economic, political or social science. Rather are we concerned to isolate, and in broad terms try to evaluate, the essence of any of his output in these fields that can be said to offer a contribution, actual or potential, to original thought, method or practice – that is as expressed consistently from the early days or as it emerged finally in the course of his lifetime. We shall have to ignore many transitory views, short-term reactions to events or even commentaries pursued through characters and situations evoked in the course of his fictional works.

[2] *Sociological Papers* (London: Macmillan, 1905).

But we can certainly be aided in understanding the main drift of H.G.'s key convictions by recalling the history that immediately preceded his day, and its rapid unfolding in the course of his lifetime. Highly exceptional in respect of intellectual capacity and range, as well as in innovative creativity and energy, it is also true that he came on the scene at a time, though not in circumstances, that can now be seen to have been highly propitious for the flowering of his special gifts. When he was fourteen, this country reached the peak of its global predominance in a world it had largely created. In 1880, and for the last time, its output exceeded that of any other country. The British empire and commonwealth was moving towards its peak of power, range and influence. Those economic and political systems, now obsolescent, that it had bequeathed to the world – the first from the pen of the philosopher Adam Smith, writing in Glasgow in 1776 on *The Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*; and the second from contemporaries of Jeremy Bentham some fifty years later – had served to open up the way to a new global scene of frenetic self-serving and conflict that today, a half-century after Wells, may seem to be moving towards some fateful climax.

Wells, then, arrived when this great eighteenth-century and Victorian construction was being permeated and challenged by many-sided advances in pure science, social philosophy, secular humanism, a vastly expanding time perspective and a new and combative economic ideology. For the first thirty-four years he was, too, a contemporary of the very radical John Ruskin. Under T.H. Huxley, Wells absorbed both the new biology – with its social implications – and a rapidly advancing prospect in geology, palaeontology and prehistory, the first taught by people like H.G. Seeley and the second eventually by his friend A. Morley Davies and other notable contemporaries. As a student he discussed metaphysical questions, and ultimate limits being opened up in respect of what we can really know or communicate. The climate, too, was then becoming propitious. As an indicator Hobhouse produced *The Theory of Knowledge* in 1896 and other pillars of social analysis like *Mind in Evolution* and *Morals in Evolution* some years later. Under dire necessity, and having quickly absorbed the scale and scope offered by this new prospect, H.G. mastered with genius the tricks of producing immediately arresting yet limpid prose, thereby coming to assume his farseeing, wide-ranging and progressive stance, with its stress on a newly-visible vista of past and future. At its best, and

recognisably individual, that sharply direct economy of comment, analysis and synthesis can still challenge us with a volume of output that it is now our task to distil.

The Non-fiction Essence

Here, if we can, we seek to isolate and define such of the elements of thought and ideals as might offer any consistent view proclaimed by Wells in his non-fiction prose, and to decide whether he was just a publicist, as some have implied, or if there are any items in his stated thinking which can rank as valid contributions, actual or potential, to knowledge or practice, to syntheses of knowledge, modes of analysis, or to public programmes of conduct or action.

First, the concise titles of H.G.'s non-fiction books or other published items chosen for special consideration will be listed in chronological order of publication, together – in parentheses – with their reference number in the H.G. Wells Society's comprehensive bibliography.[3]

1. *Anticipations...* (notably Chapters 3-5)	[19]	1901
2. *The Discovery of the Future*	[20]	1902
3. 'Scepticism of the Instrument'	[25]	1903
4. *A Modern Utopia*	[25]	1905
5. 'The So-Called Science of Sociology'	[276]	1907
6. *New Worlds for Old*	[34]	1908
7. *First and Last Things* (Books I-III)	[36]	1908-29
8. *The Outline of History* (notably the first 20 Chapters)	[74]	1920-32
9. *The Salvaging of Civilisation*	[76]	1921
10. *A Short History of the World*	[83]	1922-46
11. *Democracy Under Revision*	[97]	1927

[3] *H.G. Wells: A Comprehensive Bibliography* (London: H.G. Wells Society, 1986).

12. *The Open Conspiracy* (and revised version)	[101]	1928-33
13. *The Science of Life* (notably Book VIII)	[109]	1930
14. *The Work, Wealth and Happiness of Mankind* (notably Chapters 6-8)	[114]	1931
15. *After Democracy*	[115]	1932
16. 'The Informative Content of Education'	[130]	1937
17. *World Brain* (Preface)	[132]	1938
18. 'The Poison Called History'	[135]	1939[4]
19. *The Common Sense of War and Peace*	[140]	1940
20. 'I Believe' (among twenty-three personal philosophies)	[303]	1941
21. *Phoenix; A Summary of the Inescapable Conditions of World Reorganisation*	[146]	1942
22. *Thesis on the Quality of Illusion in the Continuity of Individual Life...*	[147]	1942
23. *The Conquest of Time*	[148]	1942
24. 'Memorandum on Survival'	[152]	1944[5]
25. *Mind At the End of Its Tether*	[154]	1945

Traditionally, H.G.'s role as a thinker has been subject to marked differences of view. Here we shall seek to appraise this selection from his non-fiction output to see whether or how far it may embody any of four types of lasting contribution: that is, contributions to knowledge; to syntheses of knowledge; to methods of research or intellectual enquiry; or to systems or principles for organizing collective life. These are the areas that suggest themselves when we examine the above selection of some

[4] H.G. Wells, *Travels of a Republican Radical in Search of Hot Water* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1939) [The text of Wells's address to the Education Section of the Australia and New Zealand Associations for the Advancement of Science is contained in Chapter IX].

[5] Contained in: *'42 to '44: A Contemporary Memoir Upon Human Behaviour During the Crisis of the World Revolution* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1944).

key works. Any such contributions would have either to be acceptable as currently valid or else remain open to eventual verification or acceptance.

A. *Metaphysics and Epistemology*. Early on, and even from his student days, Wells sought to clarify certain ultimate limits to the way we can apprehend and communicate the phenomena we experience. He was seeking, too, to define in a personal sense the nature of beliefs, motives and acceptable conduct. If we want to see how far Wells was abreast or ahead of his time in this field of epistemology, we can confirm his advanced stance by turning to L.T. Hobhouse's work, *The Theory of Knowledge*.[6]

It would seem, in fact, that H.G. was correcting a new trend then being created by evolution theory. In both our thinking and our language, we are unable fully to embrace the uniqueness that permeates all natural phenomena. What has happened since – and as Wells was already able to sense – is that we have come more and more to generalise, fruitfully, about greater and greater aggregates of smaller and smaller units. This has become increasingly possible and valid in respect of pure science – to some extent in social as well as in physical science. As a result a search is now on for all-embracing universal physical theories – mathematically-based 'theories of everything' – that for the moment must seems destined to fail.[7] Our world may get a little nearer to an answer in 2005, when a major physical experiment at CERN in Geneva – the European Centre for Nuclear Research – is due to come to fruition.

Early on, then, Wells was defining valid limits to our means for apprehending reality. Today, as in biology, such *de facto* uniqueness in the phenomena we experience – e.g. within species – can still present big problems. It is simply that, in the world we now inhabit, a vast expanding or globalizing of our everyday universe of discourse has tended to minimise or conceal, through a linguistic need to classify, a complex reality that in some degree must defy our everyday currency of verbal communication.

[6] L.T. Hobhouse, *The Theory of Knowledge* (London: Methuen, 1896).

[7] See, e.g., John D. Barrow, *Theories of Everything: The Quest for Ultimate Explanation* (London: Vintage, 1992).

B. *Method or Content of Knowledge or Enquiry*. Here we can look at a number of addresses by H.G. – to the Sociological Society or to the British or Australian and New Zealand Associations for the Advancement of Science.

In 'The So-Called Science of Sociology' (1905) Wells was proposing that, in view of those intrinsic difficulties that hold back social science, a more valid mode of analysis would be to define *ideal* societies and then, using the comparative method, to evaluate those that now exist. Today, we have found this to be more than a utopian idea. In the eighties such a method was first applied for international comparison. Since 1990 the United Nations Development Programme has developed and published annually for all member countries, and Index of Human Development – in each case related to existing maximum expectation of life at birth, literacy, educational attainment and GDP per head – and also a similar gender-related development index (see a brief reference to some results in Table B of my *Human Rights and World Order*).[8] Here, then, we find a genuine example of fruitful original thinking by Wells.

In 'The Poison Called History' (1939), an address to the Australia and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science, H.G. proposed a radical change in the method and content of historical study and presentation. His stress was on an overall as opposed to a national or sectional view of competing structures – a call for an all-embracing record of salient trends in the opening-up of humanness towards a self-aware and global process of development. If it is difficult to measure change in such a field as the writing of history, it does seem realistic now – even in our present era of self-centred global *disorder* – to sense some informed movement towards a more Wellsian interpretation of our own experience of past and present.

In 'The Informative Content of Education', H.G.'s presidential address to the Education Section of the British Association for the Advancement of Science, he set out to answer the question: "What is the irreducible minimum of knowledge for a responsible citizen today?" Linguistic, mathematical, artistic and moral training skills were not covered; but history, geography, basic sciences, political and social science were all included. In looking at this far-reaching conspectus today, we find in the UK an ever-changing effort to impart the essentials of basic learning – presumably angled more towards a global, and thus a Wellsian viewpoint – in a climate where

[8] James Dilloway, *Human Rights and World Order*, rev. edtn (Nottingham: H.G. Wells Society, 1998).

international statistics show illiteracy or semi-literacy to be on the increase in advanced states, where we might feel that to H.G. education would have seemed to have been pushed more and more towards mere computerised 'business-school' training, and where a growing need for prior conditioning to the arts of citizenship – and some glimpse of public service – has been sidelined and ignored. This is no reflection on a Wellsian conspectus, which may well have had some solid impact, but it does give some hint of how far the developmental process has been modified since 1973, and more markedly since 1989, by a fresh acceleration in socio-economic change.

C. *Synthesis of Knowledge*. The group of works covering universal history and prehistory, human affairs – "a comprehensive survey of human activity and a scientific review of human relationships" – and of life sciences, embracing patterns of life, its evolution and ecology, plus a close look at man's mind and behaviour, has come to be seen as an achievement that ranges far beyond the conventional introductions to history, biology or political economy. From the thirties onward there was some consensus that it offered a broad conspectus for the education of a politically-aware citizen of the world – the outcome of a sustained effort to move towards a humanly-oriented collective self-awareness. Whatever specialists will certainly have to say about the treatment of particular subjects, the original way in which parts of this enterprise have been brought together would seem to offer a model for any systematic unifying of knowledge.

D. *Organizational Imperatives for a Viable Human Development*. From his early days, and in a long series of writings which includes *The Open Conspiracy* (1928-32), Wells set out a consistent body of essential ideas which, as he saw it, defined the route and the principles that alone could produce a loose frame of global oversight, foresight and control – the irreducible basis for a continuing viable development of our species. This system of action was the means to avoid a political revolution that would otherwise be needed to bring traditional structures into accord with modern scientific knowledge and common ideals.

What, then, were these core humanistic concepts of law and political economy that fitted the insights offered by modern biology, psychology, productive technique and ethical practice? They were three in number. First, their scope must be *worldwide*, a condition imposed by a new opening-up to a global spread of communication,

transport and productive technique. Next, any scheme must be underlain, worldwide, by a universal common code of *basic rights and duties*. Finally, if war and mass conflict are to be eliminated or controlled; if those natural resources on which we depend, and that entire habitat in which we play out our lives, are to support a proliferation of people and productive power; if the potentialities of each citizen of a global community are to have an equal chance to offer their contribution to a common pool; then the logic of these imperatives *must* demand a loose but essential *collectivist* frame. This does not imply a world state, or the supersession of existing governments. What it does require is a scheme of federally cooperative world authorities, with essential powers delegated by governments already in being. This would be the true outcome of a consensual 'open conspiracy' – the public coalescence of an inherent logic of development arising from that advancing essence of human potential.

But if such a scheme is the consequence of our cooperative nature, how can it be that recent history is not now following such a path? The answer is that we did not start from a blank slate, but from a world in which a monopoly of power and privilege – exercised by a few – has been maintained and transmitted, largely by inheritance. If social mobility has increased, inherited wealth and power can still ensure that, on balance, the same traditional belief systems of political economy can be induced to prevail. That modest eighteenth-century discovery by the philosopher Adam Smith – a supposedly self-balancing equilibrium between free sellers and free buyers – has been magnified to become a grotesquely compulsive but perilously unstable and selective global creed.

Today, then, more than five decades later, we can see that, apart from the global success of his world code of rights, a crucial plank of Wellsian thought – an 'open conspiracy', the means of a triumph of reason over minority power without revolution – has not arrived! That easy option – his faith in an emergent role of reason – has so far been misplaced. Had it been lucky enough, before 1990, to attract some major publicist, an 'open conspiracy' might – just *might* – have flickered on, awaiting the arrival of a final catalyst!

Wells and Life Today

Thus far, then, this part of the Wellsian prescription has remained too far ahead of its time. Back in 1945, and facing his own demise, H.G. foresaw that incipient failure of humans to make, *en masse*, any decisive adaptation to new conditions of life. In the brief *Mind At the End of its Tether* (1945), he outlined the entire course of earth history and biological evolution – much as in the more substantial 'Memorandum on Survival' (1944) – to conclude that:

> Ordinary man is at the end of his tether. Only a small, highly adaptable minority of the species can possibly survive. The rest will not trouble about it, finding such opiates and consolations as they have a mind for.[9]

Though much affected by personal circumstances at the time, this verdict seems uncomfortably close to our human prospect as it appears to those who can call on a long memory! But a broad view and a long memory also suggest that in essence the *earlier* Wellsian prescription was a sound one, and that some looming catastrophe ahead can still enforce such real adaptive change as still lies within our power. That this is not a farfetched idea is clear enough to those familiar with some possibilities suggested by the relatively recent geological record, or with what is becoming known about our fresh but currently unfettered mid-latitude trends of man-made climate change. Large-scale disaster might now be the most likely means, eventually, to produce some counter to a new and frenzied socio-economic momentum released over the last decades, one that threatens to obliterate any attempt to retain objective aims or standards...

E. *Contribution to Today's Knowledge*. A final question may suggest itself. Did H.G. make any original contribution to knowledge? Here it can be said that comparatively little is still known about the whole subject surrounding his doctoral thesis of 1942, which at present is the object of intense research work in a field still

[9] H.G. Wells, *Mind at the End of Its Tether* (London: Heinemann, 1945), p.30.

stubbornly elusive.[10] The theme underlying his thesis served only to raise a query – one of several not yet fully answered.[11]

But, on the subject of how our present cultural, economic and political climate came to arise, Wells did have much to say, early on, that has thrown a good deal of light on the manner of its evolving. Remembering, say, Chapters 3-5 of *Anticipations*, much of *Democracy Under Revision* or some pieces from *After Democracy*, like 'Money and Mankind' – to cite a few examples – the progression of modern capitalism via parliamentary democracy has been illumined by what amounts to a contribution to our contemporary understanding![12]

Above all, Wells tried to create radical change without revolution. So far, he has failed! But, who knows? Perhaps that quest has not yet been in vain...?

W. Warren Wagar

The Road to Utopia: H.G. Wells's *Open Conspiracy*

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[10] See, for example, Francis Crick, *The Astonishing Hypothesis: The Scientific Search for the Soul* (London: Simon and Schuster, 1994), or Susan Greenfield, *The Human Brain: A Guided Tour* (London: Phoenix, 1998).

[11] See, in particular, Sir John Eccles, *Evolution of the Brain: Creation of the Self* (London: Routledge, 1991).

[12] For a full analysis of the world situation today, its causes, development, and reforms needed at global and national levels, see James Dilloway, *From Cold War to Chaos? Reviving Humane Development – or Remaking Market Man* (Westport and London: Praeger Publishers, 1999).