

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*

[The Editor is grateful to the World Future Society for permission to reprint portions of an earlier version of this article, which appeared in *Frontiers of the 21st Century*:

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).

Prelude to the New Millennium, ed. by Howard F. Didsbury, Jr. (Bethesda, Maryland: World Future Society, 1999), pp.141-7.]

In *Foundations of Futures Studies*, the sociologist Wendell Bell explores the methods by which futurists can acquire conjectural knowledge, first, of the likeliest futures of humankind; and, second, of the best futures for humankind. Appropriately, he devotes a whole volume to each of these two formidable tasks.¹ As Bertrand de Jouvenel observed many years ago, our principal motivation for studying the future is to help make the future conform to our desires and preferences.² Which of all the many credible futures of humankind will give us the world we wish for? And how can we make our wish come true?

It is also appropriate that Bell prefaces his second volume, on normative futures inquiry, with a chapter examining the utopian tradition in ancient and modern literature. Utopias are imaginative architectural plans for the Good Society. They may be pre-scientific, in Bell's sense, but they encapsulate humanity's highest aspirations through the centuries.

I would only add that utopias come in two quite different models, the first found chiefly in the period before about 1775, the second most prevalent during the past two and a quarter centuries. The traditional pre-modern utopian vision, in both Eastern and Western thought, is the *static* utopia, the utopia located in the distant past or in a distant place, the utopia that serves as a timeless standard against which to measure the performance of humankind here and now. The Garden of Eden, Plato's Republic, More's Utopia, Bacon's Bensalem are familiar examples. The second model, a product of modern historicism and the belief in progress and perfectibility, is the *dynamic* utopia, the utopia that may or will exist in future time after certain preconditions have been met and certain courses of action have been followed. This is manifestly the model with which H.G. Wells worked in his many utopian and dystopian scenarios. The bridge between the two varieties of utopia is perhaps the Judeo-Christian vision of a future great felicity as the culminating event in a series of

¹ Wendell Bell, *Foundations of Futures Studies: Human Science for a New Era* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1996-1997).

² Bertrand de Jouvenel, *The Art of Conjecture* (New York: Basic Books, 1967), p.19.

happenings along a rectilinear timeline, from Genesis to Rapture. From one perspective at least, modern dynamic utopias are nothing more than secular mutations of the Heavenly City.

It follows that one of the most distinctive features of modern utopianism is the attention it directs to the process of getting from here to there, from a perilous present to a fortunate future. Modern utopias are descriptions not only of ideal worlds but also of the making of ideal worlds, the future-historical story of just how humanity can or will get from here to there. Whether by the baron Turgot or the marquis de Condorcet, by Auguste Comte or Karl Marx, by Edward Bellamy or William Morris, by B.F. Skinner or Ernest Callenbach, by Arthur C. Clarke or Doris Lessing, the typical modern utopia is vitally concerned with process. And the same is true of our major dystopian visions – from *The Time Machine* to *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Most modern utopias and dystopias embody histories of the future, as well as visits to a fixed point in future time.

In short, the typical modern dynamic utopia is an exercise in normative futures inquiry. One of the many opportunities for interdisciplinary cross-fertilization that most futurists have so far missed is an exploration of the common ground shared by futures studies and utopian studies. Whatever the differences between the two, the intersections are of much greater moment. Let us hope that the first chapter of Bell's second volume is a harbinger of more serious attention by futurists to the utopian tradition.

Attention to the utopian tradition was surely not lacking in the work of Wells himself, the man I have long regarded as the founder of modern futures studies.³ In more than a dozen volumes of journalism and amateur sociology, from *Anticipations* in 1902 to *The Outlook for Homo Sapiens* in 1942, he peered tirelessly into the human future, all the while beating the drum for his vision of a new world civilization. At the same time he was well versed in the utopian tradition in Western literature, not to mention its knowing son and heir. No serious writer of the last century did so much to keep that tradition alive. Ten of his novels belong to the genre in one way or another: *A Modern Utopia* (1905), *In the Days of the Comet* (1906), *The World Set Free* (1914), *Men Like Gods* (1923), *The Dream* (1924), *The King Who Was a King* (1929),

³ I make the case for Wells as the first serious futurist in W. Warren Wagar, *The Next Three Futures: Paradigms of Things To Come* (London: Adamantine Press, 1992), pp.15-23.

The Shape of Things To Come (1933), *Things To Come* (filmscript, 1935), *The Brothers* (1938), and *The Holy Terror* (1939). As Mark Hillegas has argued, Wells was also the inventor of the modern "anti-utopia" (I prefer "dystopia") in such seminal works as *The Time Machine* (1895), *When the Sleeper Wakes* (1899), and *The First Men in the Moon* (1901).⁴ His life's work was a sustained, wide-ranging effort both to probe the future and to define in imaginative detail what the future should – and should not – be.

In many ways the work that most completely integrates Wells's utopian impulse with his futurism is his largely forgotten manifesto, *The Open Conspiracy: Blue Prints for a World Revolution*.⁵ This little book, first published in 1928 and reissued in various revised editions under various titles down to 1935, is not quite a utopia – certainly not in the same sense as *A Modern Utopia* or *Men Like Gods* – not because it fails to contain a vision of the Good Society, but because it focuses throughout on the process of how we can arrive there. Nevertheless, since the dynamic utopia nearly always provides, somewhere in its pages, a narrative that takes us from here to there, such narratives clearly fall within the purview of both the student of utopia and the historian of normative futures inquiry.

The importance that Wells attached to *The Open Conspiracy* may be judged by the number of editions it went through. He was by temperament a rapid, impatient writer who seldom revisited his texts. Once he wrote something, he published it, and then promptly moved on to the next project. Lingered and dawdling and fussing over a book was not his way.⁶

But *The Open Conspiracy* proved to be an exception. In 1930, two years after bringing out the first edition, Wells published a second edition with the revealing additional subtitle, *A Second Version of This Faith of a Modern Man Made More*

⁴ Mark R. Hillegas, *The Future as Nightmare: H.G. Wells and the Anti-Utopians* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), especially chs.1-3.

⁵ H.G. Wells, *The Open Conspiracy: Blue Prints for a World Revolution* (London: Gollancz, and New York: Doubleday, Doran, 1928).

⁶ "My journalistic experiences since my student days had bitten into me the primary need of sending in copy on time or even a little in advance of time. All my life I have been 'delivering the goods' even if the packing has been hasty and the execution scamped at any rate, if not actually scamped. The habit is ingrained. I had meant to loiter over this autobiography for years – and perhaps not publish it in the end. I sketched an opening for it two years ago. And here it is being pressed to a finish." Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography* (New York: Macmillan, 1934), p.510.

Explicit and Plain.⁷ This also did not satisfy him, and in 1931 he produced a substantially enlarged third edition with a new title, *What Are We To Do with Our Lives?*.⁸ But even the third edition was not quite the end of the story. Soon after bringing out *What Are We To Do with Our Lives?*, Wells authorized yet another British publisher to reprint three of his books in an omnibus volume, leading off with a slightly retouched version of *What Are We To Do with Our Lives?*, but now under its original (and I think far more inspired) title, *The Open Conspiracy*.⁹ This is the final, most definitive edition of the book, and the one I have chosen to reprint in the series *Adamantine Studies on the 21st Century*.¹⁰

What we have in all the editions of this singular book is a narrative in non-fictional form of the making of a utopian future. But *The Open Conspiracy*, in my judgment, is much more than a historical curiosity or a quaint forerunner of today's futures studies industry. I see it as a political and cultural manifesto of urgent relevance to our species in the 21st Century.

In brief, what did Wells have to say? He opened his last edition, the one I shall cite here, with a succinct overview of "The Present Crisis in Human Affairs." The year was 1931. Until late September, 1931, when Japan began its invasion of the Chinese province of Manchuria, the world was more or less at peace. The apocalyptic scale of the Great Depression, which had just started, was not yet apparent to anyone. In retrospect Japan's unpunished aggression marks the beginning of the grim degrading of the precarious post-Versailles world order, but no one living in 1931 could have known that.

The crisis to which Wells referred was a crisis not in this or that place, but in the whole structure of the international system. From 1914 onward Wells had been

⁷ Wells, *The Open Conspiracy: Blue Prints for a World Revolution. A Second Version of This Faith of a Modern Man Made More Explicit and Plain. Revised Edition.* (London: Hogarth Press, 1930). For details of the publishing history of *The Open Conspiracy*, see Wagar, *H.G. Wells and the World State* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1961), p.186, n40; and David C. Smith, *H.G. Wells: Desperately Mortal. A Biography* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1986), p.291.

⁸ Wells, *What Are We To Do with Our Lives?* (London: Heinemann, 1931). Watts also reprinted this edition as the 55th volume in its popular series, *The Thinker's Library*, in 1935.

⁹ Wells, *The Open Conspiracy, and Other Writings* (London: Waterlow and Sons, 1933). The remaining works in this volume are *First and Last Things* and *Russia in the Shadows*, an incongruous trio.

¹⁰ Wells, *The Open Conspiracy: H.G. Wells on World Revolution*, ed. and with a Critical Introduction by W. Warren Wagar (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2000). This is a volume in *Adamantine Studies on the 21st Century*, under the general editorship of Jeremy Geelan.

among the most vocal supporters of the idea of a postwar league of nations, but he was also one of the first to brand the actual League that opened shop in Geneva in 1920 a pitiful travesty of world governance, hopelessly inadequate to the tasks at hand. It was "this homunculus in a bottle," "this little corner of Balfourian jobs and gentility," "a blind alley for good intentions, a weedy dump for all the weaknesses of European liberalism." In Wells's view the continued division of the world into a swarm of armed sovereign national states beholden to no higher authority guaranteed future war, just as it had caused the Great War of 1914-1918. The management of these nations by an elite of politicians in the service of nationalism, capitalism, and entrenched privilege guaranteed future social injustice worldwide, just as it had perpetuated mass misery throughout the 19th Century.

Wells's remedy was blunt. He invited men and women of vision, intelligence, and expertise to join a worldwide "Open Conspiracy" to overthrow the existing world system. The "functional" classes, as Wells thought of them, the people who possessed the actual know-how to run the world's business – scientists, engineers, doctors, managers, inventors, builders, and the like – were enjoined to scheme together to bypass, if possible, and displace, if necessary, the old élites. One is reminded of the similar plans of an earlier utopian socialist, the Comte de Saint-Simon, and his division of humanity into two classes, "les industriels" and "les oisifs," the busy people who actually do the world's work and the indolent people at the top of the social pyramid who claim most of its wealth.

In the chapters that ensued, Wells envisaged his Open Conspiracy as a loose-knit organization operating in the full light of day. It would conspire, but conspire openly, through the media, through the schools, in all available venues, and across all national boundaries. It would begin as a spiritual and intellectual reawakening, a reinvigoration of the secular worldview of modern science. In the vision of science all men and women everywhere were brothers and sisters, members of a single species with the capacity to transform their planet into a glorious garden with freedom and abundance for all. Such a vision was for Wells not merely attractive: it was his faith, his religion, the successor of all the dreams of all the religions of humankind.

But of course the faith of the Open Conspiracy was not an end in itself. It meant nothing if it failed to stir conspirators to concerted action on a global scale as soon as possible. The goal of such action was the establishment of what Wells termed

“a scientific world commonweal,” not a democratically elected world government analogous to the existing governments of the United States, Great Britain, or France, but rather the global management of human affairs by “suitably equipped groups of the most interested, intelligent, and devoted people...subjected to a free, open, watchful criticism.”¹¹ In short, by degrees and in due course, the Open Conspiracy itself would become the central guidance system of the world, pledged to fair, efficient administration of public life. Existing national governments, and their ludicrous puppet, the League of Nations, would be dissolved. The old armed sovereign states would vanish.

Did Wells imagine that all this could happen with a swish of his wand? Not at all. He devoted several chapters to the obstacles that blocked the path of the Open Conspiracy. In what he called the “Atlantic nations,” where he expected the Open Conspiracy to begin and to make the most rapid progress, the old ruling élites would not go quietly into oblivion. Wells entertained high hopes for the more enlightened and liberal sort of emergent multinational corporations, whose captains, he suggested, might be among the first to see the advantages of scrapping the fragile present-day world order. But the crusty old guard of politicians, diplomats, generals, bishops, landed aristocrats, and conservative businessmen who were committed to maintaining the status quo would resist fiercely.

Outside the Atlantic community, the Open Conspiracy would encounter stout opposition from the teeming nations of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, most of whom (in 1931) were still part of this or that European colonial empire or sphere of influence. Not all the peoples of these less developed parts of the world would be opposed. Progressive elements would see membership in the Open Conspiracy as a way of both escaping the sway of their imperial masters and of transcending the squalor and obsolescence of their own traditional cultures. But many others of a more conservative stripe would fight the Open Conspiracy, either in the service of European masters or in defense of antiquated ways of indigenous life, or both.

So Wells concluded that the Open Conspiracy would not be allowed to go about its educational and organizational work unhindered. Its experts might infiltrate governments and corporations and gradually erode their power, but at times the old

¹¹ Wells, *The Open Conspiracy, and Other Writings*, p.31.

order – both in the South and East and in the West – might conceivably rear up and show its fangs. In such cases, the Open Conspiracy had to be well prepared for battle, in the most literal sense of the word. If and when necessary, it would form armed militias to counter the physical resistance of the old order – or, as he put it, “nationalist brigandage.”¹² Just how such militias might spring into existence and who would finance and command them, Wells did not specify, but at least he was not oblivious to the threat posed by national states and their armies.

At the same time, although later in the text he questioned his own optimism, Wells expressed the reasoned hope that the democratic states of the Atlantic world would not oppose the Open Conspiracy with force. Looking at Britain, France, Germany (then the democratic Weimar republic of pre-Hitler days), and the United States, he opined that the weight of progressive common sense would, in the main, prevail against the old order without requiring resorts to violence. It was more likely that the Open Conspiracy would need to use force to disarm and pacify oppositional elements in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. In any case, the Open Conspiracy would not subscribe to pacifism. Anticipating Winston Churchill’s great 1940 speech to the British Parliament, Wells warned: “The establishment of the world community will surely exact a price – and who can tell what that price may be? – in toil, suffering, and blood.”¹³

Now what, you may ask, is the relevance of *The Open Conspiracy* in the vastly different world of 2000? This is surely a fair question, but I challenge its premise. I submit that our world is not so vastly different. Although Bolshevik Russia is long gone, it remains unclear what will replace it, and at this writing a more or less authoritarian, even neo-Bolshevik Russia would seem the likeliest bet. Republican Weimar Germany is now Republican Bonn/Berlin Germany, democratic and capitalist much like its predecessor. The League of Nations is now the United Nations, a somewhat more effective but otherwise comparable collection of diplomats and civil servants. The sovereign nation-states against whom Wells thundered have relinquished some of their power and influence to the great multinational corporations, but it is premature to proclaim, as some social scientists do, that the corporations have supplanted them. The states retain their vast budgets and

¹² *Ibid.*, p.71.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.91.

bureaucracies, their immense bristling armed forces, and the essence of their sovereignty. What Benjamin Barber has aptly called "McWorld,"¹⁴ a globalized, standardized, mass-consumption culture marketed by the multinationals, spans the planet; yet anyone who looks back at the world of 1931 can see its already well-sprouted seeds. Hollywood, Ford Motor Co., and Coca-Cola would not have been mysterious entities to anyone living in 1931.

If we turn our gaze to Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean, everything seems to have changed, tumultuously. The European and North American empires of yore have been replaced by a glittering panoply of sovereign successor states, more than a hundred in all, each with its own flag, anthem, postage stamps, beauty pageant contestants, and seat in the United Nations. But the imperialism of 1931 survives lustily in the neo-imperialism and McWorldism of 2000. The nations and peoples and technologies of Wells's Atlantic community still pipe most of the tunes and enjoy most of the discretion and initiative as we plunge into the 21st century. I sympathize with Ziauddin Sardar and his colleagues (in their *Rescuing All Our Futures*), when they seek to change the provincially Western character of futures studies and empower non-Western peoples too long colonized by Eurocentric value-systems.¹⁵ But they have their work well cut out for them. I also sympathize with Andre Gunder Frank (in his path-breaking book *ReOrient*), when he maintains that Western hegemony in the world-system is quite recent, a mere blip in the steady pulse of world-historical Asian preeminence.¹⁶ But that "blip" shows no signs of going silent.

My heartfelt conclusion is that the world of 1931 and the world of 2000 are lamentably much the same, that the threat of interstate violence has not disappeared, that imperialism and the armed sovereign state are not dead, and that the "Atlantic (or American) Century" could well extend far into the 2000s. In sum, if Wells's prescription for world revolution made sense in 1931, it should still make sense today.

In the short run, it is arguable that we need more UN and NATO fire-fighting operations around the globe to maintain the precarious stability of the world-system.

¹⁴ Benjamin R. Barber, *Jihad vs. McWorld* (New York: Times Books, 1995).

¹⁵ Ziauddin Sardar, ed., *Rescuing All Our Futures: The Future of Futures Studies* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1999).

¹⁶ Andre Gunder Frank, *Re-Orient: Global Economy in the Asian Age* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998).

If Wells were still alive, he might not have opposed the efforts of the Atlantic nations in the 1990s to "pacify" Panama, Iraq, Somalia, Bosnia, Serbia, and the like. He would not have mistaken any of these interventions for the Open Conspiracy itself, but it is possible that he would have seen them as crude anticipations of the new world order of his prophetic vision.¹⁷

In the long run, however, Wells would have wanted us to do much better. Make no mistake: I am repelled by his suggestion that the Open Conspiracy should bypass the democratic process. The only excuse I can make for him is that 1931 was a dark year for believers in democracy.¹⁸ Yet it is also certainly true, and has always been true, that revolutions need élites. Spontaneous mass uprisings invariably result in the ruthless repression or slaughter of the masses. Acephalous movements are never effective. Today more than ever, we need an organized, self-aware Open Conspiracy of men and women of vision and courage who can lead humankind to something not unlike the Cosmopolis that Wells envisaged at the end of modern history's trail. The so-called "advanced" Atlantic nations may or may not supply the chief leaders of such a 21st-century Open Conspiracy. It would not trouble me in the least if all or most of such leaders came from Asia, Africa, and Latin America. I suspect it would not have troubled Wells, if he could speak from his resting place. He would have been surprised, but not, I think, troubled.

Of course from our perspective in 2000, Wells's Open Conspiracy is a pipedream, a will-o'-the-wisp without a shred of plausibility or tangibility at our present moment in world history. But what are the alternatives? National self-interest and corporate greed cannot provide rational or humane or just solutions to the environmental, social, economic, and political quandaries of the 21st century. Neither can the dark turbulent forces of what Barber has labeled "Jihad" (a word he uses in the generic, not in the literal sense). The nativist cultures that oppose globalization, including Western fundamentalisms, are not powerless; but they do not speak for

¹⁷ "It lies within the power of the Atlantic communities to impose peace upon the world and secure unimpeded movement and free speech from end to end of the earth. This is a fact on which the Open Conspiracy must insist...It is fantastic pedantry to wait for all the world to accede before all the world is pacified and policed." *The Open Conspiracy*, pp.93-94.

¹⁸ See in particular Wells's *After Democracy: Addresses and Papers on the Present World Situation* (London: Watts, 1932), which contained his controversial talk to the Liberal Summer School at Oxford. "I am asking for a Liberal Fascisti, for enlightened Nazis; I am proposing that you consider the formation of a greater Communist Party, a Western response to Russia," p.24.

humankind. They speak for the antediluvian utopias of pre-modern times. They are divisive, mutually antipathetic, and irrational. They represent a dead end. They will not prevail.

I can only hope that as the new century wears on, the gist of the argument of H.G. Wells's masterpiece, *The Open Conspiracy*, will reappear in some form or other, and help to inspire the kind of world revolution he dreamed of. His vision of what I once called the City of Man¹⁹ and would now call the Human Commonwealth – social-democratic, liberal, and secular, led by our best and bravest Open Conspirators – remains humankind's most hopeful chance of surviving into the 22nd century.

David J. Lake

Port Burdock in *The Invisible Man*: Where Does Griffin Die?

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¹⁹ Wagar, *The City of Man: Prophecies of a World Civilization in Twentieth-Century Thought* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1963); and *Building the City of Man: Outlines of a World Civilization* (New York: Grossman, 1971). I am also much indebted to Wells for my idea of a "World Party": see my *A Short History of the Future* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989; 3rd edition, 1999).