

humanity to keep burning the fire of hope, the United Nations where all races of people on earth meet and work together.

Tom Miller

W. Warren Wagar and *The Open Conspiracy*: A Rejoinder

The 2000 number of *The Wellsian* carried a defence of H.G. Wells's *The Open Conspiracy* by W. Warren Wagar. While entertaining great admiration for Professor Wagar's scholarship and humanity, the author doubts whether Wells's formula is significant, or applicable today.

Professor Wagar is right in assessing *The Open Conspiracy* as Wells's central political statement. It is possible to draw all sorts of conclusions from Wells's work, but Professor Wagar is correct in thinking that the novelist would have liked to be remembered by *The Open Conspiracy*.

To take an historical point, Professor Wagar is wrong to suggest that in 1931, when the revised version of the book was published, the world was not obviously in depression. Conditions later deteriorated, but 1931 was a bad year: for example, contemporaries witnessed the stock market disasters of September–November 1930 and August–October 1931; the currency crises of 1931 that destroyed *inter alia* the British Labour government; the Japanese attack on Manchuria, which Professor Wagar mentions; and the gains made by Hitler's Nazis in the German elections of September 1930.

Professor Wagar rightly says that not everything has changed since 1931. Britain's problem now, as it was then (though it was hard to see this in 1931), is to decide whether the country should be a satellite of Germany or the US; and the withdrawal of colonial rule in Africa was to a large degree a charade – it is plain that the IMF and the World Bank (institutions of which Wells would have approved) will have effectively to govern large areas of that continent for most of the 21st century.

But is Wells now worth consideration as a political thinker? It is not enough to say that he was a great artist; comparable imaginative writers came up with all manner of nostrums, and their admirers are not obliged to share their heroes' conclusions.

(Thus Shaw, whose opinions came under attack by Benedict Nightingale in *The Times* on 29 August 2000, D.H. Lawrence, Chesterton, Belloc, Kipling, Pound, T.S. Elliot and Sartre entertained ideas unfashionable today; of Wells's literary contemporaries the wisest was probably Aldous Huxley, who, though he defended some bizarre theories, did in the 1950s suggest the ecological concerns of the 2000s.)

Wells was an autodidact in political matters, as he admits at the beginning of *The Open Conspiracy*. He claims that, because he has written *The Outline of History*, *The Science of Life* and *The Work, Wealth and Happiness of Mankind*, he is uniquely qualified to prescribe political theories; no serious student could accept this assertion, particularly as Wells's remedies are vague, and self-contradictory. As Professor Wagar recognises, Wells is ambivalent about whether the Open Conspirators should use force. He does not mention the paranoid undertones of the book, or the hostility that Wells directs at working-class politicians ("Labour, awakened, enquiring, and indignant, is not necessarily progressive [...] Either the Labour revolution hopes to cadge the services of exceptional people without acknowledgement or return on sentimental grounds, or he really believes that anyone is as capable as anyone else – if not more so [...] The deep instinctive jealousy of the commonplace individual for outstanding quality and novel initiative [...]"). There would be no reason for a Conspiracy if Wells thought he could win power at the ballot box, and implicitly he admits that he cannot do so. Therefore, even if one agreed with Wells's programme, one could disagree with his suggested manner of its implementation.

Generalising from *The Outline of History* and *The Open Conspiracy*, there are four specific objections to Wells's inarticulate premises:

- 1) He is ignorant and contemptuous of the Law, and does not see that, if his Utopia was brought into being, a huge corpus of Administrative Law would be required, or the operation would soon become a tyranny.
- 2) There is nothing in *The Outline of History* about the Romantic Movement, which had huge, and not always beneficial, consequences.
- 3) Wells discloses no appreciation of the two-party system, which probably descends from the struggle between Pope and Emperor after 1000. This is endemic in the politics of the West and is perhaps our greatest

constitutional achievement – in practice, under a two-party system, the ordinary person has a chance of acquiring justice against the state.

- 4) Wells never admits the possibility of the existence of a set of goals different to his own. It is not facetious to draw attention to the Hindu attitude, shared by a large fraction of humankind, that the world is a malign illusion, incapable of improvement.

Probably Wells, as a precocious teenager with the run of the Uppark library, drugged himself with eighteenth-century books (we know that little changed at Uppark over the years, and Victorian books were not bought), and that their influence stayed with him. This is why he was right to call himself an autodidact in the humanities. He never grasped the objections, coming largely from the Romantics, to the Enlightenment views that dominated the Uppark library. This explains the note of authoritarianism in Wells's writings. The Enlightenment thinkers were anxious to preserve Royal Absolutism (a result of the revival of Roman Law at the time of the Renaissance and Reformation) in order to accomplish worthy objectives. It took nineteenth-century theorists to point out that the thinkers of the French Enlightenment, if given power, would have restored the slave states of Egypt and Rome. The culture of the German tribes, preserved by our Common Law, was always opposed to Absolutism, which is partly why it never caught on in England.

However, a World State (an idea going back at least as far as Zeno), in the sense of central control of nuclear weapons, is probably necessary, and will perhaps evolve from the UN; however, local variety and individuality should be preserved, and the World State should be denied unfettered economic authority.

In the meantime, Professor Wagar is wrong to call upon Wellsians to conspire openly. He rightly identifies the evils of "national self-interest and corporate greed", but, rather than turning to Wells's panacea, it would be better to improve matters from within; we all have votes, and politicians are timid when confronted by the writers of strong letters. The internet gives anyone a chance to broadcast his or her views. Big businesspersons are not obviously attractive, but Bill Gates is far less of a threat to the ordinary English or American than were Hitler or Stalin a few decades ago. Corporate misdeeds should be, and often are, addressed by legislation. Better laws may take time

to enact, but action by existing legislatures would be more effective than a comprehensive revolution.

Leon Stover

An Invitation to Respond by the Editor of *The Wellsian*

The editor of *The Wellsian*, that most important of single-author journals, asked me to further explain 'The Annotated H.G. Wells', now completed in eight volumes. He thinks my statement in the Society's *Newsletter* (spring 2001) raises more questions than it answers.

There is little I can add without looking overly defensive. It is a bad form to rebut reviews; either one stands by one's work, lapses and all, or one does not. I certainly do. But this more may be said.

The early H.G. Wells contributed much to the now-established classics of *Weltliteratur*. Something that wonderful has real substance to it beyond empty fantasizing. So with *Gulliver's Travels*, *Robinson Crusoe*, and *Alice in Wonderland*, given to children and reread by adults turned philosophical.

My annotated series attempts to get at that gritty substance by tracing the history of ideas Wells dissolves in his fabulation.

Intellectual history is my dominant interest, inspired by John W. Draper's *History of the Intellectual Development of Europe* (1876). In the past century we saw develop the Age of Ideology, which the young H.G. Wells anticipated with remarkable clarity, especially in *The Sea Lady* (vol. 7).

But even when this particular is forgotten, Wells will be remembered for his literary greatness. Such is the Martian detachment I take. It were foolish to be for or against the passing ideas Wells made himself the bearer of. What counts is the artistic ingenuity by which he novelized them. No, not passing ideas. They rather reaffirm the utopian temptation, a permanent strain in western literature ever since Plato. Wells enriched it with cosmic vision, derived from the viewpoint of Darwinian evolution.

The series concludes with the 1936 film story, *Man Who Could Work Miracles* (vol. 8), my personal favorite. Although considerably older at the time, Wells here