OPEN CONSPIRATORS SEEK SIMILAR: THE INSPIRATION OF H. G. WELLS'S UTOPIAN DREAMS

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Abstract. H. G. Wells's correspondence, now at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, reveals the wide-ranging impact of his thought upon individuals in all walks of life throughout several decades, indeed up to his death. This article explores the ways in which individuals and organisations, inspired by his visions of a better society, engaged with Wells and his ideas during the interwar period (when it has been suggested that his influence was waning), and the extent to which individuals were motivated by Wells's writings to become 'Open Conspirators' working together to bring his utopia into existence. The tensions between these enthusiasts and Wells's own ambivalence as regards such projects are examined, along with the tensions between different groups of enthusiasts. Even though it is almost impossible to trace any direct outcomes from the activities of these 'Open Conspirators', we need not assume, however, that their endeavours were entirely ineffectual.

The interwar period saw a continuing interest in the utopian ideas that H. G. Wells put forward throughout his career, both generally and in the notion of the 'Open Conspiracy' he advanced in 1928. Although George Orwell contended in 1941 that after 1914 Wells was a spent force and everything he wrote after the Great War was a 'squandering of his talents',[1] Wells's utopian imaginings of social improvement on a global scale continued to be inspirational between the world wars and after the outbreak of the Second World War.

Wells's fiction from this period has not survived so well as the early scientific romances and the comic realist novels of the early 1900s. However, Wells remained an influential cultural force up to his death in 1946, in particular in formulating a basis for the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Man. Orwell himself conceded, even while arguing that Wells's 'one-sided vision [...] make[s] him a shallow, inadequate thinker now', that

[1] George Orwell, 'Wells, Hitler and the World State' [1941], in *George Orwell: Essays*, intro. Bernard Crick (London: Penguin, 1994), 188-93 (193).

> Thinking people who were born about the beginning of this century are in some sense Wells's own creation. [...] I doubt whether anyone who was writing books between 1900 and 1920, at any rate in the English language, influenced the young so much. The minds of all of us, and therefore the physical world, would be perceptibly different if Wells had never existed.[2]

In his seminal study of Wells, W. Warren Wagar argues that the extent of Wells's influence is almost impossible to measure, since many of his ideas became common currency, to the extent that they seemed trite and obvious rather than prophetically new revelations to later generations of readers.[3] This may explain why Wells underwent an eclipse when he died just as the post-war welfare state was coming into being in the UK and the United Nations was being established.

Several generations of the famous, the great and the good, and the unknown to wider history wrote to Wells over the course of several decades to declare how inspiring his work was to them. The perception of Wells as someone whose writing disclosed the workings of the world to his readers and showed them their place as beings in history, and led them to envision the possibility of being active participants in making history, was very widely articulated by his correspondents.[4] A significant number of thinkers of the interwar era working across the political spectrum and in diverse fields declared themselves profoundly in Wells's debt. The philosopher and broadcaster Cyril Joad wrote of the 'thrill of intellectual excitement that your writings have always been capable of producing in me ever since, at the age of 20, I began to read them'.[5] Ernest Jones, Freud's leading British disciple, assured Wells that 'the psychological insight into the deeper meaning of the social changes now going on evokes the greatest admiration of a psycho-analyst.'[6] The eminent physician Lord Horder declared: 'I have hopes of showing someday how much medicine, – scientific medicine, – owes to the

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[2] Ibid., 192.

[3] W. Warren Wagar, *H. G. Wells and the World State* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961), 270.

[4] This correspondence is now housed in the Rare Books and Manuscripts Collection at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign along with his other papers, where I was fortunate enough to receive a John 'Bud' Velde Fellowship in 2007 to undertake research. I am also grateful to my employers, the Wellcome Trust, for providing me with research leave to take up this opportunity.

[5] Cyril Joad to Wells, 11 Nov. 1926, Wells papers, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign [hereafter UIUC], J-71.

[6] Ernest Jones to Wells, 21 Oct. 1925, Wells papers, UIUC, J-80.

stimulus of your genius, and what huge contributions you have made to the sustenance upon which we doctors constantly rely for our daily work.'[7] Although the political views of the painter, critic and author Wyndham Lewis came to diverge very greatly from those of Wells, Lewis wrote that he 'admire[d] your genius as a storyteller' but also came most particularly to respect 'your outlook on our world'.[8] The famously prickly and difficult left-wing biologist Lancelot Hogben paid tribute to Wells's significance: 'I think that no man living has done more than yourself to promote a broad conception of the place of biology in modern education.'[9] He continued: 'you more than any other writers have influenced my social and intellectual outlook.'[10]

The ideas that Wells advanced in *The Open Conspiracy* (1928) have a considerable similarity to the notions proposed in his other utopian writings. The desideratum was a decentralised loose network of individuals, movements, groups and societies, characterised by Wagar as a 'revolutionary elite', intelligent and competent, performing creative, scientific and managerial work, and dedicated in a quasi-religious sense to bringing forth the kind of peaceful, prosperous and progressive global society that Wells envisaged.[11] The concept resonated with many of Wells's contemporaries across several generations and aroused the desire both to become Open Conspirators and to meet others.

However, Wells did not give an encouraging response to enquirers wanting to know how to join up. This was partly because, as Wagar pointed out, Wells had

> the habit of spending a few years emphasizing one problem or project, supporting one or more movements which attracted his attention and sympathy, and then turning a few years later to some other aspect of his campaign, withdrawing support, rewording and reworking his own position, allowing himself to be attracted by other movements. His fundamental ideas and his basic approach to the problem of world order never changed appreciably down to 1944, but he sowed confusion among his followers.

Although, Wagar contends, there was an internal 'almost rigidly consistent vision of an integrated world society' in Wells's thought, his 'repeated shifts

[7] Lord Horder to Wells, 9 Nov. 1927, Wells papers, UIUC, H-198.
[8] Wyndham Lewis to Wells, 3 Oct. 1928, Wells papers, UIUC, L-183.
[9] Lancelot Hogben to Wells, 12 Aug. 1930, Wells papers, UIUC, H-338.
[10] Hogben to Wells, 5 Aug. [n.y.], Wells papers, UIUC, H-338.
[11] Wagar, 166-7.

of emphasis and allegiance diminished his effectiveness', and his failure to achieve a deep and lasting influence was due to an 'unwillingness or inability to concentrate his energies'.[12] This was put perhaps more succinctly in a letter to Wells from George Bernard Shaw in 1917: 'Morris used to say of Ruskin that he said splendid things and forgot all about them ten minutes after. Are you sure you have not the same want of tenacity? [...] You must not become famous as a writer of palimpsests.'[13] *The Open Conspiracy* was itself a palimpsest: the first version was published in 1928, but Wells, finding himself dissatisfied with it, published a revised version in 1930, and another, further revised and expanded, in 1933. The history of these changes is documented by Wagar in his critical edition, which uses the 1933 text as representing Wells's more finished and developed thinking on the subject.[14]

Wells envisaged the 'Open Conspiracy' as a mind-set, or a movement 'diversified in its traditions and elements and various in its methods', attacking the problems at hand 'upon several fronts and with many sorts of equipment'.[15] He did not wish to embody his vision in any specific organisation: 'Collective action had better for a time [...] be undertaken not through the merging of groups but through the formation of *ad hoc* associations for definitely specialized ends, all making for the new world civilization.'[16] He later felt it necessary to expand upon this caution, possibly because of the copious correspondence he received from hopeful Open Conspirators. He expressed his antipathy to the notion of a monolithic organisation because it would

> rest upon and promote one prevalent pattern of activity and hamper or estrange the more interesting forms. It would develop a premature orthodoxy, it would cease almost at once to be creative, and it would begin to form a crust of tradition. [...] With the dreadful examples of Christianity and Communism before us, we must insist that the idea of the Open Conspiracy

[12] Ibid., 266-7.
[13] G. B. Shaw to Wells, 17 May 1917, Wells papers, UIUC, S-193.
[14] *The Open Conspiracy: H. G. Wells on World Revolution*, ed. W. Warren Wagar (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2002), 11.
[15] H. G. Wells, *The Open Conspiracy: Blue Prints for a World Revolution* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1928), 60.
[16] Ibid., 110.

> ever becoming a single organisation must be dismissed from the mind. It is a movement [...,] a system of purposes.[17]

Nonetheless, Wells did not expressly forbid his acolytes to form such organisations, while vigorously resisting pleas to invoke his name directly or to take up leadership.

In spite of the cavils so clearly expressed in the text of *The Open Conspiracy*, many wanted to know whether such an organisation had already been established, or at least thought it ought to be. They were also eager to know how to join up: 'Must there not be some coherent, designed scheme – some method of bringing together these strange Samurai of the Open Conspiracy?';[18] 'I am one of those people mentioned in your Open Conspiracy. [...] I would willingly throw myself with enthusiasm into any practicable programme of advance.'[19] Another enthusiast wrote: 'The first essential is that all the Open Conspirators should know that they are Open Conspirators and be made aware of all the other thousands of minds working in the Conspiracy.'[20] Another was 'very much in favour of getting together as many people as possible and trying to construct a common credo for them'.[21]

One correspondent 'had an idea that you might put me in touch with some ad hoc society or group of Open Conspirators'.[22] Two young research chemists in Edinburgh noted that 'We are writing to you because, as you say, it is necessary for those who think on similar lines to get in touch with each other. Possibly you may hear from others in this part of the country who are interested in your views and, if so, this letter may facilitate the organisation of some group here and so help to further the ideals which you have so eloquently embodied in your writings.'[23] A woman wrote in 1935: 'I wonder

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[17] H. G. Wells, *The Open Conspiracy and Other Writings* (N.p.: Waterlow and Sons, 1933), 72. No publisher is named on the title page, but Wagar indicates that Waterlow and Sons were the publishers.

[18] J. R. Milnes to Wells on paper of the National Alliance of the Employers and Employed East Midlands Federation, 5 Nov. 1927, Wells papers, UIUC, M-366.

[19] Harold C. Cowen to Wells, 1 Mar. 1933, Wells papers, UIUC, C-477.

[20] B. B. Mager to Wells, 2 Oct. 1933, Wells papers, UIUC, 'Cosmopolis' file C/433/2.

[21] Henry Mond, 2nd Baron Melchett to Wells, 3 Nov. 1932, Wells papers, UIUC, M-285.

[22] E. M. Carty of Portsmouth to Wells, 29 Jun. 1933, Wells papers, UIUC, C-114.

[23] William McCartney (and W. O. Kermack – 'is blind'), Edinburgh University, to Wells, Sep. 1932, Wells papers, UIUC, M-15.

if you would tell me whether the society called the Open Conspiracy, which I remember reading you were going to form, ever came into existence? [...] If it is in existence I and a friend would be very interested to know more about it.'[24]

Most of these letters appear to have been written by very young individuals, demonstrating Wells's continuing appeal to later generations than his own. W. J. Brown wrote in 1934: 'A gathering of young men and women drawn from all kinds of progressive societies met recently to see if some basis could not be worked out for a big movement amongst the younger generation.'[25] However, one man describing himself as 'an old man with some leisure' wrote in 1933: 'I should be deeply grateful if you would put me into touch with any London group who are endeavouring to make your thought & plan more generally known and appreciated so that I might volunteer my services.'[26]

There was a widespread feeling that bringing together those who wanted to be part of the Open Conspiracy so that they might recognise one another and organise together was the first problem to be addressed. The founders of the Hornsey Open Conspiracy Group wrote to Wells late in 1928 that 'Two or three people who have been interested in your ideas for some twenty years decided, when the "Open Conspiracy" appeared this spring, that it might be worthwhile to attempt the formation of a group on the lines therein suggested.' Their early discussions had concluded that

> a piece of practical work that badly needed doing, and that nobody seemed to have taken up, was the provision of some means for placing in touch with one another the probably numerous individuals who are interested in your schemes, but are too isolated and scattered to do any effective work at present.

They therefore hoped that Wells 'would agree to make some simple and convenient arrangement whereby enquiries of this kind could either be forwarded to this Group to be dealt with, or the writers of them could be notified of the existence of this Group, and their enquiries referred to it'.[27]

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[24] Flora Grierson to Wells, 31 Jan. 1935, Wells papers, UIUC, G-280X.
[25] W. J. Brown to Wells, 23 Nov. 1934, Wells papers, UIUC, B-537.
[26] Noel F. Graham to Wells, 23 Jun. 1933, Wells papers, UIUC, G-209X.
[27] Einar O'Duffy, Chairman, and Cyril H. Rock, Secretary, Hornsey Open Conspiracy Group, to Wells, 15 Nov. 1928, Wells papers, UIUC, 'Cosmopolis' file, C-443/2.

Some were already keenly beginning to set up their own small local groups of fellow Open Conspirators, which was perhaps more in line with Wells's own vision than the more ambitious and wide-reaching schemes. 'I am starting a group of picked persons to work out your ideas and get them acted on. It is to be a disciplined and militant group, as different as I can make it from all these talking societies', wrote one enthusiast around 1932.[28] A young man of eighteen living in Southend wrote in 1933: 'I saw an advertisement in one or other of the weeklies to the effect that a Z society was publishing a journal. [...] I have therefore written to you, Mr Wells, in the expectation of being able to learn from you of such Z societies as have already been constituted. [...] I am anticipating the formation among my friends of a local "cell" as the first step in my contribution.'[29] Unlike many hopefuls, he did succeed in establishing 'the New Radical Society of this Town, which adopts as its Manifesto the Basis in your "After Democracy"'. That same man went on to pepper Wells with questions of how this group of nearly twenty young people should go about matters.[30] Another wrote to Wells about his own plan: 'Essentially it is an Open Conspiracy Group but I have chosen the method of working, at least at the beginning, through the remnants of the Liberal following.'[31]

Opposed to these grass-roots initiatives were those who believed, like the man who wrote 'To Mr Wells for the Committee dealing with Questions re "The Open Conspiracy"' (1928), that 'the O.C. must start from the top' and become more or less a religious crusade (which was a view sustained by the text).[32] Wells's arguments were capable of generating interest and enthusiasm over a very wide spectrum and contradictory positions: one correspondent urged him to 'consider Rudolf Steiner's Threefold Commonwealth idea as a possibly hopeful line of advance towards your World Commonwealth'.[33]

A series of organisations with progressive aims rooted in, or at least influenced by, Wells's ideas – the Promethean Society, the Z Society, the

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[28] Jonathan Griffin (and Robert Donington) to Wells, [n.d. c. 1932], Wells papers, UIUC, G-287.
[29] S. Cradick to Wells, 19 Mar. 1933, Wells papers, UIUC, C-492.
[30] Cradick to Wells, 24 Aug. [n.y.], Wells papers, UIUC, C-492.
[31] Harold C. Cowen to Wells, 21 Jun 1933, Wells papers, UIU, C-477.
[32] Arthur W. Dickinson, 'To Mr Wells for the Committee dealing with Questions re "The Open Conspiracy"', 30 Sep. 1928, Wells papers, UIUC, D-157X.
[33] Arnold Freeman, from the Sheffield Educational Settlement, to Wells, 20 Aug. 1929, Wells papers, UIUC, F-175.

Hornsey Open Conspiracy Group, the Utopians, the Engineers' Study Group on Economics, the Association for the Promotion of World Unity – were passingly mentioned in Wells's correspondence and occasionally appear in other contemporary sources. However, little information survives on most of them. The Promethean Society 'consist[ed] of a number of enthusiastic people, most young, who are determined to do all that is in them to work for a better and more rational world', a mission statement that could probably have applied to all of these organisations. The Prometheans had their own Sexology Group as well as an Active Peace Group, and produced a journal, *The Twentieth Century*, which suggests that they had greater resources than many of these bodies.[34] The Association for the Promotion of World Unity was described as a 'loosely knit organisation', with the bulk of its membership in London and the Home Counties. It held meetings, discussion groups and socials but was having difficulties concerning contact with provincial members, regional organisers, and the establishment of a central office.[35] These were common problems for these well-meaning groups of enthusiasts. There were other less formally organised small groups: 'I started forming a group along the lines suggested by your admirable book. It was at once exciting and disheartening work but I have succeeded in gathering a nucleus of eight enthusiasts.'[36]

There were two bodies among the several generated by the enthusiasm for Wells's notion of an Open Conspiracy 'against the fragmentary and insufficient governments and the widespread greed, appropriation, clumsiness and waste that are now going on',[37] for which some documentary record survives beyond fleeting references, both in the Wells correspondence and elsewhere. These were the Federation of Progressive Societies and Individuals (FPSI), and Cosmopolis.

The FPSI was established in 1932. It published a journal, *Plan: for World Order and Progress, A Constructive Review*, and in 1934 produced a volume of essays *Manifesto: Being the Book of the Federation of Progressive Societies and Individuals*. It constituted an attempt to induce advanced intellectuals to come together and make common cause to 'influence the

[34] Alec Craig of the Promethean Society to the British Sexological Society, 19 Sep. 1932, archives of the British Sexological Society in the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin, BSS Misc Pi-Q; Craig to Wells, 15 Jun. 1931, 19 Sep. 1931, Wells papers, UIUC, 'Promethean Society' file, P-289.
[35] *Cosmopolis Weekly Bulletin*, 16 March 1936.
[36] F. Hay Raeburn to Wells, 1 Apr. 1935, Wells papers, UIUC, H-168X.
[37] Wells, *The Open Conspiracy* (1933), 14.

trend of public policy', and provide 'unity and cohesion' in pursuing the programmes of the 'various scattered societies whose aims it incorporates'.[38] It was very strongly influenced by Wells's writings, though it seems probable that the dire position of the Labour Party in the early 1930s also had some impact.

The FPSI's aims were far-reaching: what they stood for fell under three headings, most of which could be found either explicitly or implicitly in Wells's utopian writings, fictional and non-fictional:

> 1. ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL.
> (a) REGIONAL AND WORLD PLANNING with a view to the progressive Replacement Of Production For Profit By Production For Use, and the provision of the highest standard of life for the whole species.
> (b) The progressive abrogation of national sovereignty in favour of a WORLD GOVERNMENT AS THE ONLY WAY TO PEACE.
> 2. EDUCATIONAL.
> The establishment of a universal system of Elementary, Secondary and Higher Education, NEITHER MILITARIST NOR NATIONALIST, BUT HUMANISTIC AND SCIENTIFIC.
> 3. SOCIAL.
> (a) THE RELEASE OF PERSONAL CONDUCT from all taboos and restrictions, except those with a directly utilitarian justification.
> (b) ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL EQUALITY of the sexes.
> (c) THE REPLACEMENT OF OUR MEDIAEVAL CRIMINAL AND CIVIL LAW BY A HUMANISED AND MODERN REMEDIAL SYSTEM.
> (d) TOWN AND COUNTRY PLANNING with a view to the health and enjoyment of all.
> (e) ABOLITION OF RESTRICTIONS ON FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION: e.g. blasphemy laws and censorship.[39]

These aims underwent some modification and expansion over the lifespan of the organisation but the basic principles remained the same.

Bodies which affiliated to the FPSI included the Promethean Society, the World League for Sexual Reform, the Hampstead Ethical Society, the Society for the Constructive Application of Scientific Research, the Gymnic (i.e. naturist) Association of Great Britain, the Woodcraft Folk, the Fabian

[38] C. E. M. Joad, 'The F.P.S.I.: What It Is; What It Wants; and How It Hopes to Obtain It', in *Manifesto: Being the Book of the Federation of Progressive Societies and Individuals* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1934), 30-62.

[39] 'What the F.P.S.I. Stands for', *Plan: for World Order and Progress, A Constructive Review* 2.6 (1935), inside back cover. Emphasis in the original.

Nursery, Youth House, the Anti-Fascist Council, the Bristol Council for the Defence of Civil Liberties, the Modern Culture Institute, the Association for the Promotion of World Unity, the Architects' and Technicians' Organisation, the Artists' International Association and the Society for the Prevention of Venereal Disease. The FPSI also cooperated and exchanged publicity with a number of other organisations which were not formally affiliated.

The activities of the FPSI as delineated in the pages of its journal *Plan* were indeed diverse. There were a number of special interest groups – Education, Sex Reform, Philosophy, Political and Economics, Law Reform, Peace, Arts, Town and Country Planning, plus a World Airways Committee – and several local branches. Initially there was also a Civil Liberties Group, but this found that 'the matters falling within its scope have largely been dealt with in a most admirable manner by the National Council for Civil Liberties', founded in 1934, with which there was not surprisingly a significant crossover of membership: Wells was one of its founding members. The groups held regular meetings and gave talks, and there were general public lectures on matters of interest, conferences, summer schools, monthly rambles, dances and other social events.

This very diverse set of interests might seem a problematic basis for agreement, let alone action. However, in his review of *Manifesto*, Aldous Huxley argued that

> It is the great merit of the spokesmen of the FPSI that they do not believe that all the phenomena of human life can be explained in terms of one simple principle, or that all evils can be remedied by one specific action or series of actions. [...] They are prepared to admit that, while many of our troubles are mainly or partly due to the defects in our economic system, others have mainly internal, psychological (or even physiological) origins. In a word, they resist the temptation to take a short cut to significance which consists of attributing everything to one cause.[40]

While finding this a meritorious course, Huxley admitted that it could not be expected to 'evoke in people that religious fervour which is aroused by [...] a relatively simple and single-purposed document'.[41] Nevertheless, letters to Wells invoke a vision of the Open Conspiracy as a new religious ideal for

[40] Aldous Huxley, '*Manifesto*', *Plan: for World Word and Progress, A Constructive Review* 1.4 (1934), 6-7.
[41] Ibid., 15.

the modern age: 'The desire to give oneself to greater ends than everyday life affords' had considerable resonance.[42]

Although, in the public mind, Wells was the embodiment of the ideals promoted by the FPSI, as a supporter, he does not seem to have taken a very active part. His 1939 novel *The Holy Terror* indeed contains a scathing portrayal of a very similar organisation called the New World Society:

> [It] was pledged to progress in any direction, to anywhere, and to any idea about a New World its members chose to entertain. It was of all ages above fourteen and it included everything from barely cryptic nudists to extremely woolly vegetarians, and from single-taxers to Douglasites; there were Swedenborgians, Spenglerites, modern spiritualists, aberrant Fabians, seers and great thinkers, teachers of all grades, sex-reformers, thoughtful people who listened intently and never said anything, professional and genuine refugees from Nazi tyranny, Indian nationalists and one Chinaman of incomprehensible speech and consequently unknown attribution, who bowed very politely.[43]

This description almost echoes Orwell's notorious diatribe in *The Road to Wigan Pier* about 'The dreary tribe of high-minded women and sandal-wearers and bearded fruit-juice drinkers who come flocking towards the smell of "progress" like bluebottles to a dead cat'.[44]

The summer school of the New World Society bears a vivid resemblance to those run by the FPSI:

> The school led a hardy, healthy and extremely inexpensive life, sleeping crowdedly in austerely simplified dormitories at night, and eating in tumultuous refectories on trestle-tables covered with marbled white American cloth by day. There was much walking, and swimming, table-tennis, medicine-ball and Badminton, and a series of conferences that it was bad form to cut altogether.[45]

The general impression conveyed above is one of resentment at the failure to match Wells's austere vision of a 'Liberal Fascism', which would place the efficiency and dedication that he had admired in the Italian Fascisti at the service of a new internationalist community run along rational and scientific

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[42] Wells, *The Open Conspiracy* (1928), 18.
[43] H. G. Wells, *The Holy Terror* (London: Michael Joseph, 1939), viewed on 13 July 2017 on Project Gutenberg Australia, http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks06/0608211.txt.
[44] George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier* [1937] (London: Penguin, 1989), 169.
[45] Wells, *The Holy Terror*.

principles.[46] By contrast, the New World Society is depicted as inefficient and ineffective:

> There was a secretary, an anxious-looking spectacled lady of the head mistress type [...] who stood up and made proclamations and stuck up notices, and there was an omnipresent white-bearded old gentleman in a state of earnest inactivity, who may have been her husband. And there was something that met somewhere called the Committee.

While this body as a whole is satirised and disparaged, it is also conceded to include 'a score of nuclear individuals, who did seem to be trying to shape out some sort of ideas about the current world drama and the roles they might have to play in it'.[47]

However, in spite of Wells's misgivings about the FPSI, it was only in 1943 that there was any overt breach between him and what had been renamed the Progressive League. This happened after the publication in *Plan* of a letter critical of Wells's manifesto on 'The Rights of Man' (which became the basis for the UN Declaration of Human Rights). Leslie Minchin, for the League, wrote to him:

> It seems hardly credible that such a trivial affair could be a reason for your complete breakaway from an organisation which, with all its faults, exists primarily to advocate the very rational, humanitarian, internationalist philosophy which you have expounded in your works. [...] We should be sad indeed if the prophet we follow should so unexpectedly turn against his followers.[48]

Another very similar organisation, eventually known as Cosmopolis, was the brainchild of B. B. Mager, a young man who entered into an extensive correspondence with Wells in 1933, voicing his desire to form 'an organization to maintain and enforce the spirit of your works and to apply it to the righting of the present world muddle'.[49] Shortly afterwards, Mager joined the FPSI, but considered that 'its appeal is not nearly wide enough; it is a group of very intelligent Londoners. The very name of an H. G. Wells

[46] Philip M. Coupland, 'H. G. Wells's "Liberal Fascism"', *Journal of Contemporary History* 35 (2000): 541-58.
[47] Wells, *The Holy Terror*.
[48] Leslie Minchin, The Progressive League, to Wells, [n.d. ca. 1943], Wells papers, UIUC, 'The Rights of Man' file R-139/6.
[49] Mager to Wells, 29 Sep. 1933, Wells papers, UIUC, 'Cosmopolis' file C/433/2.

Society would be far more powerful in bringing together people of the right type.' At first he took advantage of the enthusiastic support he found within the FPSI, and reported that 'a sort of sub-committee has been formed for the purpose' of starting an H. G. Wells Society.[50] However, within a month, he had dropped the idea of working within the FPSI 'because it would take too long to effect anything definite through the F.P.S.I., although there is no reason why the H. G. Wells Society should not co-operate with that organisation.'[51] Within a few months, his society had sixty members including several who were already active in the FPSI.[52] Because of Wells's objections to calling it after himself, it was renamed The Open Conspiracy and in 1936 changed its name to Cosmopolis (reflecting a later version of Wells's thoughts on world government).[53]

Given the significant overlap in membership and interests with the FPSI, its ties with similar organisations (Cosmopolis merged with the Utopians and made approaches to the Association for Promoting World Unity),[54] and the meetings addressed by the same speakers, why was it necessary to generate a new organisation? In a 1937 introduction to Cosmopolis, its members described themselves as 'youngish – average age 24 – middle class sort of people, work for our livings – technical and administrative types of work, are sufficiently well off not to be under direct influence of economic want. Sufficiently educated to realise how little we know outside our special fields.'[55] This suggests the possibility of generational, social and cultural differences between the constituencies of Cosmopolis and the FPSI, in spite of the apparent overlaps of personnel and programmes.

By the late 1930s, the FPSI was having trouble. In spite of amalgamation with Cosmopolis, with the FPSI constituting itself the British Isles Section of Cosmopolis (it is not known whether there were any other sections), membership had significantly declined. Local branches had largely failed to get off the ground. The organisation was considered to be failing in

[50] Mager to Wells, 19 Oct. 1933, Wells papers, UIUC, 'Cosmopolis' file C/433/2.
[51] Mager to Wells, 11 Nov. 1933, Wells papers, UIUC, 'Cosmopolis' file C/433/2.
[52] Mager to Wells, 4 Apr. 1934, Wells papers, UIUC, 'Cosmopolis' file C/433/2.
[53] Mager to Wells, 11 Oct. 1934, 11 Jan. 1936, Wells papers, UIUC, 'Cosmopolis' file C/433/2.
[54] *Cosmopolis Weekly Bulletin*, 16 Mar. 1936.
[55] 'Cosmopolis: An Introduction' [n.d. after 31 Jul. 1937], Wells papers, UIUC, 'Cosmopolis' file C/433/2.

its stated intention of being a federation of progressive bodies, leading to its rebranding as the Progressive League.[56]

Neither the FPSI nor Cosmopolis seems to have become particularly widely known. In 1936 a young man of twenty-three wrote to Wells, urging a 'Crusade of Commonsense': 'Form a sort of club where the new system can be discussed and built up.' One of the individuals he suggested would be a good idea to involve was Olaf Stapledon, already active in both organisations.[57] Even when these organisations were known of, individuals might write as follows: 'I am eager to get a movement on foot to expedite things. [...] Existing movements (the rationalist and ethical societies, the F.P.S.I. and so on) do not fill this particular need. There are signs that there is plenty of interest and support waiting to be enlisted.'[58]

The hopes of some movement based on Wells's vision persisted even into the turmoil of the Second World War. Wells continued to receive correspondence to that end: 'perhaps you could advise me as to which organisation I could join to add my small voice in support of the many things that you advocate for the building of a new world order';[59] 'the world will be pulled together by a group of devoted men who have made a very careful study of social conditions. [...] I realise there's not much sign of such a movement starting now, but I feel that in trying to start it I am following in your tradition, & should like to know that I have your support.'[60] The poet and member of the W. H. Auden circle Stephen Spender wrote: 'I have been an Open Conspirator for some years now. [...] In the Fire Service, two other Firemen and myself have started Discussion groups, which are now spreading to Civil Defence. They will probably spread to the whole country. Their aim is simply to make people think, acquire information, & learn that they are citizens of the world.'[61] While Spender would later categorise Wells among the 'contemporaries' who failed to be, 'from an aesthetic or literary

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[56] Federation of Progressive Societies and Individuals (British Isles Section of Cosmopolis), Executive of the Council Committee Minutes, 1936-1947, Archives of the Progressive League, British Library of Political and Economic Science, PROGRESSIVE LEAGUE/1/1.

[57] W. T. Temple to Wells, 11 Jan. 1936, Wells papers, UIUC, T-45.

[58] E. C. Francis of Norbury to Wells, 16 Mar. 1937, Wells papers, UIUC, F-150.

[59] A. J. C. Fowler, RN Commissioned Gunner, to Wells, 28 Sep. 1943, Wells papers, UIUC, 'The Rights of Man' file R-139/2.

[60] Reg Freeson to Wells, 13 Dec. 1943, Wells papers, UIUC, 'The Rights of Man' file R-139/2.

[61] Stephen Spender to Wells, 12 Jul. [n.y. post 1939], Wells papers, UIUC, S-412.

point of view, modern', this letter suggests that he, like so many others of his generation, had nonetheless been susceptible to the 'rationalist, sociological, political and responsible' influence of this 'writer-prophet'.[62]

Some of the problems in engendering anything in the way of action by bringing together self-identified Open Conspirators and would-be samurai were to be found in Cyril Joad's complaint in his essay in *Manifesto* that 'intellectuals are singularly little given to co-operation. The over-developed individualities of progressive persons make them singularly averse from common action.'[63] These were people who had an antipathy to authority, and the very range of interests falling under the heading of 'progressive' meant that there were already sources for conflict, if only over what particular desiderata should be prioritised. Wells in his introduction to the FPSI's *Manifesto* recognised some of the problems in the agenda they proposed:

> The aim to make the world anew and nearer the heart's desire of mankind is universal, but the methods are generally local, sectarian, partisan, hysterical and confused. The forces of protest and reconstruction are in the aggregate enormous, but they go largely to waste in a sort of civil war among themselves.[64]

It may appear that attempts at creating an Open Conspiracy failed to achieve its ends, and certainly in terms of Wells's wider vision, they appear to have been a gesture of hope rather than a means of accomplishing anything. However, it is very difficult to tell whether 'the self-education and personal propaganda' of individual would-be conspirators and small groups led anywhere (micro-studies on an individual and local level might be revelatory), and therefore even more difficult to assert that they came to nothing at all. Their efforts may have been 'incalculably diffusive' through the 'unhistoric acts' invoked by George Eliot in the epilogue to *Middlemarch* (1872). Wells himself suggested various initiatives which might move forward the aims of the Open Conspiracy: influencing the acquisition policies of local libraries, contesting censorship, pressing for changes in the teaching of history and biology, establishing birth control clinics, setting up League of Nations Union branches.[65] The longer-term impact of small niche

[62] Stephen Spender, *The Struggle of the Modern* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1963), 71-2.
[63] Joad, 35-6.
[64] H. G. Wells, 'Introduction: There Should Be a Common Creed for Left Parties Throughout All the World', in *Manifesto*, 12-19 (13).
[65] Wells, *The Open Conspiracy* (1928), 107.

organisations and campaigns apparently representing a tiny minority within a hostile or indifferent population at large may be contextualised in the history of the struggles for abortion law reform and decriminalisation of homosexuality.[66]

Although Wells did consider that the Open Conspiracy, like any collective endeavour of humanity, would suffer from 'rivalries, heartburnings, distrust, touchy suspicions, mutual interference and disingenuous negligences',[67] he seems to hold an underlying supposition that eventually reason and harmony, and a spirit of non-competitiveness would simply *evolve*, or spread by some osmotic or viral process, among well-intentioned individuals. Wells seems to have placed considerable trust in the development of 'collective psychology'. He found himself obliged to be 'vague and provisional about the way in which the collective mind may best define its will for the purpose of administrative action', putting his hopes in what would happen once 'the reasonableness of a thing is made plain'.[68] Wells conceded that, within the 'common spirit' of an Open Conspiracy, it was conceivable that there would be 'very wide gaps in understanding and sympathy' between its many 'contributory factors'.[69]

Wells was a man of ideas and vision but had a history of significant difficulties in working effectively with groups of like-minded individuals and an intolerance of formal procedures. George Bernard Shaw, accustomed to the demands of collaborative work through writing for the theatre, had written to Wells about differences arising within the Fabian Society: 'I believe you are so spoiled by living in a world of your own invention, that you have become incapable of tolerating the activity or opinions or even the phrases of independent individuals.'[70] This was a recurrent theme in Shaw's letters to Wells: 'You must study people's corns when you go clog-dancing. [...] You haven't discovered the real difficulties of democratic work; and you assume that our own folly and ill will account for their results.'[71] Shaw

[66] Lesley A. Hall, 'Articulating Abortion in Interwar Britain', *Women's History Magazine* 70 (2012): 13-21; Lesley A. Hall, 'The British Society of the Study of Sex Psychology: "Advocating the Culture of Unnatural and Criminal Practices"?', in *Sex, Time and Place: Queer Histories of London, c. 1850 to the Present*, ed. Simon Avery and Katherine M. Graham (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 133-48.
[67] Wells, *The Open Conspiracy* (1928), 100.
[68] Wells, *The Open Conspiracy* (1933), 31-2.
[69] Ibid., 47.
[70] Shaw to Wells, 29 Mar. 1904, Wells papers, UIUC, S-193.
[71] Shaw to Wells, 24 Mar. 1906, Wells papers, UIUC, S-193.

pleaded: 'We must proceed in proper form [...]. There is an art of public life which you have not mastered.'[72]

This was a limitation in Wells's vision. In addition, Orwell suggested that Wells was simply 'quite incapable of understanding that nationalism, religious bigotry and feudal loyalty are far more powerful forces than what he himself would describe as sanity', and thus unable to grasp the attractions of Fascism.[73] However, Wells's vision of a society evolving virally through the spread of reason and enlightenment was nonetheless, and even in the face of the rise of Fascism, something that many of his contemporaries found seductive, an Open Conspiracy that they wanted to sign up for.

[72] Shaw to Wells, 22 Mar. 1908, Wells papers, UIUC, S-193.
[73] Orwell, 193.