

## WISHING WELLS

*The longings of a contemporary thinker*

MR. Wells's latest book, *The Fate of Homo Sapiens*, is a pedestrian effort, and to those who revel in his peculiar vein of imaginative prophecy it must come as a distinct anti-climax. Nevertheless, it is an important book, for it is based on the distilled essence of Mr. Wells's thought during the whole of his career; one feels that it is the final revised edition of his opinions. Here is the bare skeleton of Wellsianism, stripped of everything that its author considered superfluous. *The Fate of Homo Sapiens* is probably the most topical of Mr. Wells's books. He has ceased to look for the laws that govern the course of human history and to map prodigious cities of the future. The period of analysis is over, criteria have become fixed, and he now looks out on the world of to-day fully confident that he can both diagnose and cure.

The book is primarily an essay in sociology, an attempt by Mr. Wells to sum up the present state of man in the light of his own principles. It is as such that it must be judged. Some of the reviews in the Catholic press gave the impression that it was merely an attack on the Church; this overlooks the more positive elements of the book, which will probably come to be regarded as the official handbook of Wellsian thought.

Briefly, *The Fate of Homo Sapiens* is an outline of Mr. Wells's social philosophy, together with a series of sketches showing how the modern world helps or hinders (usually hinders) the dawn of greater happiness for all.

Mr. Wells is not a philosopher, a sociologist, or any more of a scientist than the average teacher of science in the average secondary school. He very honourably admits that in his popular outlines of science he had to fall back on

the help of experts. But he has something that very few modern thinkers still have intact, namely a mind dominated by the nineteenth century scientific outlook, with its complete materialism and its rather naive faith in the golden key of science which unlocks every door. Mr. Wells studied under the great Huxley and has remained his faithful disciple ever since, as is clear from the pages of *The Experiment in Autobiography*.

Clad in the armour of science, especially biology, Mr. Wells has wandered through the wilds of space, time, and history, interpreting the meaning of the past, and planning his golden aeons of the future. Evolution and imagination are strange equipment for social thought; indeed, it is odd that one of the Huxley school should ever have taken it up as Mr. Wells has done. It was usually enough for such men to rely on the essential goodness of man if only he was left in peace with science, after the best liberal manner. However, it seems that his career as a social planner has disabused Mr. Wells altogether. Thus to-day we see him with his faith in science untouched, but with none left in man. The position for a Huxleyan materialist is curious.

He now sees evolution as the dominating force in history, but homo sapiens is its victim to a large extent. History is simply the story of the rise of man from the primeval slime and of his adaptation to his environment. Now the human race is being much less successful in this process of adaptation than formerly, and it is in grave danger of passing away like the dinosaur. The universe has no more essential preference for one type of life than for another. This is the core of Mr. Wells's biological approach to sociology; and several facts are apparent from it. In the first place simply this: in spite of its Darwinian covering it is simply the common sense view of life as a continual battle against circumstances, in which man has failure of success in the degree in which he consults his own best interests. Mr. Wells has tried to apply biology

to social life and has failed simply because one cannot treat collections of people with any possible biological technique any more than one can weigh the beauty of the *Moonlight Sonata*. How would Mr. Wells dissect a class?

The result is simply words. Mr. Wells tries to alter history by calling it *evolution*—his pet word is 'ecology.' In the same way Marx tried to alter it by calling it a dialectic. There seems to be a likeness between the method of approach of Marx and that of Mr. Wells, but it is clear that the latter is not, at bottom, trying to give such a fundamental re-statement to history as was Marx. The Marxian man is wholly caught up in a universal process, though if he happens to be a worker it is ultimately a benevolent process. Mr. Wells's man is evolving, and he seems to be heading for the biological inferno. But he could be the master of his fate if he were not such an almighty fool. *Homo Sapiens* annoys Mr. Wells because of his stupidity, not his helplessness. Mr. Wells is still on speaking terms with common sense.

Stripped of its semi-scientific jargon the Wellsian thesis is simply that man's past has been a battle with his environment, and that the future is in his own hands if he will only obey the fundamental laws of his own nature which at the moment he does not appreciate. The future is 'a race between education and catastrophe.'

Mr Wells thinks that the conditions on which survival depends are the growth of a world-state and of a world-brain. There must be one 'single, progressive and creative world community,' in which everyone has the best education that science can give without social and philosophical bias.

The next task is to show how these needs are to be realised in practice. The results are meagre, for Mr. Wells is no longer the expansive prophet of the old days. He has no creed, but his very inadequate science which he is bound to fall back on as the last resort for the ills of the world. 'The scientific vision of life and no other

must be his (man's) vision of the universe.' He is a democrat, but he knows that without a great change of heart among the people and their rulers there can be no democracy worth the name. Unhappily for Mr. Wells, change of heart means no more than a higher standard of scientific training. He knows that there is no 'inherent magic successfulness' in democracy, but there is not the same wholesome scepticism about biology. Justice must come before theoretical democracy; and the basis of modern democracy must be not so much political as economic. 'It must set itself against all abuses of the advantages of ownership.' The full possibilities of human life in this free, enlightened community of Mr. Wells are enormous, but man must be educated for the brave new world.

Much of this is sheer common sense, which is very much lacking in modern thinking. Mr. Wells realises that the latter must be rescued from prejudice and abstraction and linked up with the real life of man as the source of its data. The rationalist of the nineteenth century prided himself on his realism answering to the real needs of man and to a limited extent this was justified. Mr. Wells is refreshingly free from purely social prejudice, unlike the majority of the leftist intellectuals. But he is so dominated by his scientific outlook that often he cannot see the problem before him because the mere method looms so large. He thinks that science and scientific education are the only keys to social progress. This is simply false to experience. Civilization must take account of religion, art and love, which are fundamental to the nature of homo sapiens. Mr. Wells dismisses them as useless accretions. But since on his own principles they have evolved, they must have done so to some useful purpose; they cannot, scientifically, be ignored, or human nature will be stunted. Education on the lines of Mr. Wells would turn out merely unbelieving technicians with no faith even in their own world community. Fully co-ordinated and free research is needed for the smooth working of highly organised society; but

this is not education, and it could never produce rational moral beings with any consciousness of social duty. Mr. Wells ignores the human factor; regrettably, man is not all intellect.

Briefly, Mr. Wells knows the right destination, but he has lost the way. He has nothing to guide him but his own confidence and a little flimsy science. Outside this sphere he is lost, for he has not the necessary scholarly equipment to go on. This is clear when he is discussing the forces which hold in check the realization of a new social order. When he is discussing the common facts of our everyday life, such as Nazism, Communism, and the British governing classes, he is often penetratingly accurate. Thus he can put his finger at once on the basic weakness and arbitrariness of Marxism. Yet when he steps into history and theology he is in the dark, and the pity is that he does not know it. Why should science, which is the essence of human rationality, befog so many first-class minds that turn to other spheres after making its acquaintance? The chapters on Christianity and Judaism are full of exploded nonsense. Mr. Wells, however, honestly believes that Frazer, Legge and McCabe are the last word on the study of the history of religion. He is no more competent here than I am on relativity. It is just his rationalist creed to insist that Christianity holds up progress, and he has learnt his catechism after a fashion. Christianity is simply an emotional distraction from the stern business of setting the world to rights. Mr. Wells has apparently never heard of Christian philosophy and social ethics. It is a pity that so much radical ignorance should clog a great deal of acute thought; in fact, it is so gross that it has led to some reviews being definitely unfair to Mr. Wells.

Finally, where does Mr. Wells stand? Apart from a quixotic devotion to science and a few ignorant outbursts, due to glaring prejudice, this is basically a sane book and an honest one, too, for as G. K. Chesterton says of him, the

author has had in some sense 'an advance from unconventional opinions to conventional opinions.' This without doubt needs honesty in an ex-prophet. Mr. Wells sees as clearly as any of us that if society is to survive in its present form it must provide for the essential dignity of man both physical and spiritual. Very likely this will not happen. He comes to this problem with an open mind as far as present social realities are concerned. With politics and economics he is fairly successful. But when he comes to science the force of his early environment is too strong for him and the lessons of his old master Huxley almost wreck the whole of his vigorous thought. It is too late for him to change now; but what a pity it is that M.r Wells did not become either a genuine scientist or else sociologist. His contributions to modern thought might have been enormous. Beware of the amateur, especially when he is a genius.

JOHN F. FAGAN