

HOMO SAPIENS AND H. G. WELLS

IN a comparative study of modern French and English culture published in a recent number of the *Spectator*,¹ Mr. D. R. Gillie commented on the 'unnatural prolongation of the joint reign of Mr. H. G. Wells and Mr. Bernard Shaw over British reason.'² Whatever explanations may be offered—and Mr. Gillie himself attaches high importance to the success of the Group Movement, despised by the great majority of thinking people—there can surely be no doubting the substantial accuracy of the statement itself. If Mr. Shaw's influence is more that of an individual and peculiar genius whose strength lies in the field of destructive criticism, Mr. Wells has managed to identify himself with the spirit and ethos of his age in a manner altogether remarkable. He is, as he proudly asserts in his latest work, *The Fate of Homo Sapiens*,³ 'a fair sample of the more progressive thought of my time' (p. 99), which, as he candidly confesses elsewhere, 'no doubt owes much more than I realize to the phrases and assumptions of the liberal, protestant, progressive world of half a century ago' (pp. 110-11). This new book is therefore of particular interest and importance in giving us the summarized thought of one who regards himself above all as a 'sample of a generation.'³

As one reader sees it, the strength of Mr. Wells's thought seems to lie in three very positive qualities; its consistency, its clarity and, from one aspect, its rationalism. No one can ever mistake his meaning; it is always abundantly clear.

¹ July 21st, 1939.

² Secker and Warburz, 1939.

³ The phrase is used as the heading of Ch. 9, which treats briefly of Mr. Wells's own works set in the context of his age.

His whole life has been a striving after clarity, and it is this, above all, that gives his thought its unity and long-range consistency. The conceptions of the World-State, and the World-Brain—the culminating products of Mr. Wells's mind—are the logical outcome of that body of ideas which emerges from *The Outline of History*, *The Science of Life*, and *The Wealth, Work and Happiness of Mankind*, drawn up, as their author has explained, as 'a sort of provisional Bible'⁴ for the human race. The rationalism of Mr. Wells is a characteristic only to be expected of one who is conscious of 'the complete freedom of a biologically trained and uncontrolled observer' (p. 287). It is a factor of both strength and weakness in his intellectual make-up. On the one hand, it enables him to direct pungent criticisms against the irrationalisms and taboos of our age; on the other hand, it leads to a sort of mental blindness, and naïve dogmatism in matters which do not admit of direct scientific analysis. This paradox can only be explained by a closer definition of the word 'rationalism.' In Mr. Wells' case, it is closely identified with scientific materialism. That vision of a self-contained, scientific world order which captivated the minds of an *élite* at the close of the last century is Mr. Wells's chief contribution to the thought of our own day. It enables him to expose the follies of exaggerated racialism and nationalism with the deftest assurance; it leads to powerful criticisms of existing political *régimes* and economic systems. But there it stops. On the most fundamental question of all—the nature of man—it has little to say of any significance. Beyond a repetition of the very familiar materialist jargon, it has no explanation of the problem of evil, so pressingly urgent at this present day. Indeed, the whole tendency of this school of thought was to explain evil by explaining it away. Accepting the *a priori* assumptions of the

⁴ *What Are We to do with Our Lives?* (Thinker's Library), p. 108.

eighteenth century philosophers,⁵ it affirmed the goodness and perfectibility of man and categorically denied the fact of original sin, and the reality of the supernatural order.

From this line of thought Mr. Wells has never emancipated himself. It stands out as clearly as ever in his forecast of *The Fate of Homo Sapiens* and is the direct source of a number of superficial judgments on men and movements.

The book falls naturally into three parts. The reader is first regaled with a selection of the 'summarized knowledge' necessary to the survival of his species. Mr. Wells then proceeds to a series of 'cultural summaries' of the world movements of to-day which, he informs us, 'will be much easier to run away from than to disprove' (p. 288). He concludes on the customary Wellsian vein by predicting the future of humanity. This is to be melancholy in the extreme. 'There is no reason whatever to believe that the order of nature has any greater bias in favour of man than it had in favour of the ichthyosaur or the pterodactyl. In spite of all my disposition to a brave-looking optimism, I perceive that now the universe is bored with him, is turning a hard face to him, and I see him being carried less and less intelligently and more and more rapidly, suffering as every ill-adapted creature must suffer in gross and detail, along the stream of fate to degradation, suffering and death' (pp. 311-12).

It will be wiser to pass no judgment on the prophetic sections of this book. Mr. Wells has always excelled in the rôle of prophet, and he displays here all his old incisive vigour. It is his 'cultural summaries' or criticisms of existing world-systems, as they might more truly be called, which invite (and indeed provoke) comment. Jewish

⁵ The brilliant book of Carl L. Becker on *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth Century Philosophers* (Yale University Press, 1932) is, I believe, quite indispensable for an understanding of the historical background of the Wellsian philosophy.

Zionism, Catholicism, Protestantism, and the leading political systems of East and West fall successively under his review; all are tried and all are found wanting. The reader cannot help feeling that in writing these summaries Mr. Wells has exposed himself to a similar form of trial with a like result. There is shown here none of that imaginative sympathy with rival forms of thought which gives such exceptional interest to a work like Mr. Aldous Huxley's *Ends and Means*. Each system is measured against the yard-stick of biological materialism, and history is made subservient to that philosophy. The result is much loose-thinking and superficiality of judgment.

Thus, the historical roots and essential aims of Jewish Zionism receive most inadequate treatment. The Jews are told that their only hope of survival lies in their abandonment of belief in a Chosen People. They must cooperate in 'that enormous effort to reconstruct human mentality for which I have been pleading'⁶ (p. 149).

The chapter on Catholicism contains historical blunders of the most elementary kind. As the Church is, in Mr. Wells's eyes, 'the most formidable single antagonist in the way of human readjustment to the dangers and frustration that now close in upon us all' (p. 169), it is not to be expected that this section of his work should do other than exhibit the rationalising tendencies of our author's mind. It is time, however, that someone assured Mr. Wells that Christianity did not 'pick up the Holy Trinity in the second century, and very manifestly from Alexandria' (p. 154). Once glance at the documentation of Jules Lebreton's classic work, *Les origines du dogme de la Trinité* (1927), should cure him of this conceit. Again, to write of 'the taking over of Isis and the Infant Horus as the Virgin and Child' (p. 152), without any indication of date and circumstance, and in defiance of the over-

⁶ The campaign for the World Encyclopaedia and World Brain.

whelming evidence of Scripture and Apostolic Tradition, is merely to indulge in advanced special pleading of the most noxious kind. Indeed, although Mr. Wells claims that his 'cultural summaries' have been 'sustained when necessary by citation' (p. 288), the only 'authority' on church history which he ventures to cite is the *History of the Popes* of Mr. Joseph McCabe (p. 157). This work, he tells us, will 'trouble the mind' of the catholic reader, 'but it will purge it'! (pp. 157-8).

In his judgments on political systems Mr. Wells is on surer ground. He is quick to see that political democracy without economic controls and efficient education is an idle sham, and criticizes the liberal statesmen of the nineteenth century for failing to perceive this fact (p. 65). His view of the League of Nations as 'an extremely naïve attempt to stop the current of history and to preserve for ever just those national separatisms and strangulating boundaries against which the stars in their courses are fighting' (p. 51) is, of course, partisan, but challenging and not too easy to refute.

In his survey of the British political system under the heading of 'The British Oligarchy' old prejudices leap once more to the front. In his boyhood Mr. Wells was taught that 'there were upper classes one respected and lower classes that one didn't' (p. 5). It is not unnatural, therefore, that an intense dislike of the British ruling class has always been a prominent factor in his political thinking. He betrays no appreciation of the aristocratic tradition in British politics (as exemplified in such a family as the Russells) and says nothing of the administrative integrity of the British Civil Service. It appears to him that 'the mentality now ruling is one in which "Bolshies" are the enemies of God and man, men who go east are "pukka sahibs," royalties, beloved mascots whose very pet dogs are adorable, and workers honest drudges so long as they are not 'spoilt with only one weakness, susceptibility to foreign agitators' (p. 206). Surely a rather old-fashioned estimate?

The British Labour Party receives short shrift. Mr. Wells tells us that it 'acknowledges the class inferiority of the workers and haggles by means of strikes and votes for a more tolerable but admittedly inferior way of living' (p. 199). 'Never once in the proud island story does the will of the common people matter a rap' (p. 198)—a statement on which the resignation of Sir Samuel Hoare during the Abyssinian crisis is a most instructive commentary. In his general estimate of the British political system Mr. Wells takes up a position not far removed from that of Mr. Belloc in *The Servile State*. In both writers trenchant criticism of the ruling classes is weakened by an inability to appreciate the elements of good in that tradition which have contributed to the democratic development of this country.

The study of Communism is—with the possible exception of the chapter on Catholicism—the weakest of all Mr. Wells's 'cultural summaries.' He makes no attempt to come to grips with the political philosophy of Karl Marx, whom he regards as 'lazy-minded' and 'obviously disposed to put himself in competition' with Darwin (p. 251). In describing the Communist Party as 'dogmatic ignorance' and 'a giant with the head of a newt' (p. 262), he gives himself over to that mood of reckless unproved assertion which is all too common among a certain school of Catholic writers when Marxist doctrine is at issue. One might have expected a critical discussion of the materialist conception of history and the theory of class-warfare from the pen of Mr. Wells, who must be admirably equipped for such a scientific analysis. The educated Marxist would consider Mr. Wells small beer on the strength of reading this chapter, and would probably be tempted to look upon its author in the same light as Mr. Wells himself views Mussolini, as 'a bit of an ass.'

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