

Young Mr. Wells Anticipates.

FORTY years ago—in 1901—Mr. H. G. Wells wrote a book which was published under the alluring title, *Anticipations*. It was an engaging attempt to forecast the development of civilisation up to about the year 2000. All the now familiar Wellsian characteristics are displayed in the essay—clarity, pungency and verve, immense gusto, a *penchant* for acute but superficial judgments, and a certain yeasty adolescent mood of assurance, pugnacity and (the schoolboy term is insistent) *cockiness*. For us to-day the interest of the book lies, not only in its really brilliant forecast of modern mechanisation, including military mechanisation and “total war,” but also in its indication and even advocacy of some of those theories of the State which now challenge our civilisation, and which have to-day in Mr. Wells himself (as champion of the Rights of Man) a strenuous opponent. For in some important aspects *Anticipations* may be regarded as a blue-print of modern totalitarianism, and it is possible for us now to appreciate, as young Mr. Wells and his readers could hardly have appreciated at the time, the full significance of those outpourings—inspired oracles as they were, of the half-educated of four decades ago.

In the first place, then, the Mr. Wells of 1901 announced the coming collapse of Democracy. So far, that is to say, from its being the opening phase of a world-wide movement destined to proceed and develop along liberal and humanitarian lines, modern Democracy, according to young Mr. Wells, was no more than the first vague impulse of social and political forces, which presently would swing sharply round into a very different course. And Mr. Wells was in favour of the swing round. “I know of no case,” he cheerfully assured his public, “for the elective-Democratic government of modern States that cannot be knocked to pieces in five minutes.” In 1901 such a judgment must have titillated the youthful mind with a pleasant sensation of novelty—as of something rather daringly “progressive” and “advanced”; to-day the theme is crucial, and it is all the more interesting to observe how Mr. Wells developed it.

Naturally, he saw the genesis of modern democracy as intimately connected with the expansion of mechanical production. In the eighteenth century the traditions of the old aristocratic-monarchy were knocked awry by the intrusion of the new manufacturing and artisan classes, and the incapacity of the governments of the day to control the new factors called for a new theory of society. What actually emerged was the theory of the Rights of Man, liberty, equality and fraternity: or, as young Mr. Wells prefers to state the case—because kings and nobles.

could no longer function effectively, society was presented with the doctrine of "the infallible judgment of humanity in the gross." It was absurd but convenient. But the important consideration was that these formulations proceeded from powers and agitations which were themselves formless and confused; so that it may be said that the democratic formulations were little more than the froth and bubble thrown up through the deliquescence of the old order and the pouring in of new elements not yet settled and defined. Says Mr. Wells:

"I have compared the human beings in society to a great and increasing variety of colour tumultuously smashed up together and giving at present a general and quite illusory effect of grey; and I have attempted to show that there is a process in progress that will amount at last to the segregation of these mingled tints into recognisable, distinct masses again."

Democratic populations, therefore, were "the people of the grey," and the democratic theory was no more than a temporary and illusory social-political pattern worked upon this same temporary and illusory grey—this smudge of various types and classes thrown together by the industrial revolution. Democracy, according to Mr. Wells, was really a negative symbol: it meant no more than that the old régime was no longer competent to manage this new agglomeration. On its positive side it was absurd, particularly in its theory of equality of legal rights: "neither men nor their rights are identically equal, but vary with every individual"; and Mr. Wells expands this postulate, with immense assurance and vigour, into a doctrine of "superior" and "inferior" types and peoples—

"It has become apparent that whole masses of human population are, as a whole, inferior in their claim upon the future to other masses, that they cannot be given opportunities or trusted with power as the superior peoples are trusted, that their characteristic weaknesses are contagious and detrimental in the civilising fabric, and that their range of incapacity tempts and demoralises the strong. To . . . protect and cherish them is to be swamped in their fecundity."

This may have been strong meat for the Liberal stomach in 1901, but young Mr. Wells's doctrine was hardly so novel as to have been entirely unfamiliar to Jefferson Davis and the pro-slavery ideologists, half a century earlier. But then Mr. Wells's point was that the reforming humanitarianism of the nineteenth

century had left the line of true progress to explore a *cul de sac*.

"The confident and optimistic Radicalism of the earlier nineteenth century, and the humanitarian type of Liberalism have bogged themselves beyond hope. . . . Liberalism is a thing of the past, it is no longer a doctrine but a faction."

The resemblance of all this to the war-cries of modern Fascism and Nazism is not to be denied; but forty years ago young and impetuous Mr. Wells, shaking a free lance, was no doubt a more diverting and gallant spectacle than the mobs of black-shirts and brown-shirts of our own time.

But having now disposed of liberalism, humanitarianism and democracy, young Mr. Wells turns to the new order which was to take their place. He had indeed already prepared his readers to some extent, for the new revelation. For if there were whole masses and peoples who ought not to be entrusted with the responsibilities of power "as the superior peoples are trusted," and if, moreover, these masses, the People of the Abyss, must be regarded as pariahs and untouchables, their weaknesses being contagious and their fecundity dangerous (except under conditions of strict surveillance and repression), then it reasonably follows that the new order must be the order of the strong and superior people. These—the scientists, engineers, captains of industry, writers and organisers—would presently, then, emerge from the grey confusion of democracy, form themselves into a new Party, seize control of the entire apparatus of power and become—the State. It is interesting to have this in Mr. Wells's own terms, written twenty years before the Fascist "march on Rome," and thirty-two years before the burning of the Reichstag. The new Party, as a dominant colour emerging out of the grey, would, he says,

" . . . take its shape as a scientifically-trained middle class of an unprecedented sort. . . . This class will become, I believe, at last consciously *the* State, controlling and restricting very greatly the . . . non-functional masses. . . ."

This seizure of the political and administrative machine by a specially-trained and capable body of strong and superior people, "inspired by the belief in a common theory of social order," was, said Mr. Wells, inevitable; and naturally, since liberalism and humanitarianism had been dismissed as obsolete superstitions, Mr. Wells's disciples were prepared for the announcement that the new order would exhibit a certain quality of scientific ruthlessness. For obviously the new Party of the strong and superior people would have no humanitarian compunctions; it would stand no nonsense from the inferior classes,

the People of the Abyss. On the contrary, it would judge the masses by such standards of fitness as conformed to the new theory of the State, insist upon a régime of mechanised efficiency, and mercilessly sterilise, transport or destroy the rejects. Nothing could excel the lucidity of Mr. Wells on this point :

“ The law that dominates the future is glaringly clear. A people must develop and consolidate its educated efficient classes or be beaten in war. . . . It must foster and accelerate that natural segregation which has been discussed . . . or perish. . . . The nation that produces in the near future the largest proportional development of educated and intelligent engineers and agriculturists, of doctors, schoolmasters, professional soldiers, and intellectually active people of all sorts; the nation that most resolutely picks over, educates, sterilises, exports, or poisons its People of the Abyss; the nation that succeeds most subtly in checking gambling and the moral decay of women and homes. . . . The nation, in a word, that turns the greatest proportion of its irresponsible adiposity into social muscle, will certainly be the nation that will be the most powerful in warfare as in peace, will certainly be the ascendant or dominant nation before the year 2000.”

What is not discussed—and the omission is significant—is how a nation which has been appropriated by, and is identical with, a ruling Party of “ intelligent engineers and agriculturists, doctors, schoolmasters and professional soldiers,” and which claims the right to “ pick over, educate, sterilise, export or poison ” the members of the inferior classes—how a nation which is deliberately organised into a strong, superior and all-powerful ruling class on one side and the “ non-functional ” People of the Abyss on the other—can achieve that tough and flexible unity and that invincible *morale* which are necessary to enduring power. For there is no effort to conceal the contempt in which the inferior classes are held.

“ Recruiting among the working classes—or, more properly speaking, among the People of the Abyss—will have dwindled to the vanishing point; people who are no good for peace purposes are not likely to be any good in such a grave and complicated business as modern war.”

And so young Mr. Wells hurries forward to present his public (it was at the time of the Boer War) with a brilliant forecast of modern warfare with its aerial navies, its parachute descents, its deadly collaboration of air and ground attack, its forward-sweeping columns of mechanised units. It would be

all-in, total war, in which, "as the recording telephones click into every house the news that war has come," the State would be found to have "organised as a whole to fight as a whole." "Everything will have been pre-arranged—we are dealing with an ideal State. Quietly and tremendously that State will have gripped its adversary and tightened its muscles—that is all."

The "ideal State!" This was young Mr. Wells's adjective for the State in which apparently scientists, "intelligent engineers" and professional soldiers rule, pick over, educate, sterilise, export or poison the People of the Abyss and drive forward with mechanised armies and aerial fleets to impose their New Order upon the world. But in 1901 this was a diverting dream.

And so, having brought his readers thus far, young Mr. Wells goes on to indicate, but without enthusiasm, possible vistas of an era of Caesarism—of Napoleonic war-lords and dictators; and if his telescope fails to focus upon Mussolini and Hitler there are some near misses. One hastens to foretell, he says (but dismisses the forecast with some impatience):

" . . . that either with the pressure of coming war, or in the hour of defeat, there will arise the Man. He will be strong in action, epigrammatic in manner, personally handsome and continually victorious. He will sweep aside parliaments and demagogues, carry the nation to glory, reconstruct it as an empire, and hold it together by circulating his profile and organising further successes. . . . The grateful nations will once more deify a lucky and aggressive egotism."

But this, at all events, did not agree with the Wellsian scheme, and the vision was dismissed as improbable or parenthetical. Even if it happened it would be no more than an interlude, for (a bad miss this) it is "improbable that ever again will any flushed, undignified man with a vast voice, a muscular face in incessant operation . . . talking, talking, talking, talking . . . tireless and undamnable," rise to power; for "the day of individual leaders is past." Hitler, then, it is evident, somehow eluded the Wellsian telescope. But this was not due to Mr. Wells's predisposition to turn a blind eye to orators, and to admire instead the equally tireless and undamnable writers who go on writing, writing, writing, writing; rather it was due to his eagerness to focus upon the coming World State. For it must be remarked that with all his Fascist anticipations, young Mr. Wells stood very much outside the vicious circle of racial and national egoism which the actual totalitarians of our own day have described for themselves. What he desired was not a triumph for this or that empire, but "a Republic that must ultimately

become a World State of capable rational men developing amidst the fading contours and colours of our existing nations." Nevertheless, we have noted enough to recognise that this Wellsian New Order, whether under the title "Republic" or any other, was to be an order imposed by a master-class whose devotion to scientific and mechanical efficiency went with a repudiation of the equality of human rights and of liberal or humanitarian sentiment and a general contempt for the inferior "non-functional" classes as the People of the Abyss.

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Now what, it may well be asked, is the point of calling attention to this perhaps forgotten little book, long since heaped over and buried out of sight by its author's immense and varied output? The point is that though the little book may be largely forgotten, its author continues, through the intervening decades, to warn, counsel and exhort the English-speaking public with undiminished vigour; and this little book, as well, perhaps, as any other, helps us to estimate his claim upon our confidence. For to read *Anticipations* after an interval of forty years is to admire again the astonishing nimbleness and fertility of Mr. Wells's mind and the accuracy of his superficial foresights, but it is also to see the fatal defect which disqualifies him as a teacher. For his jejune philosophy, spiced with scientific anthropology, fails him when he deals, as he is eager to deal, with the fundamental problems of the world and of Man. He sees mankind as an engaging biological experiment, and he has been ridden for the greater part of his active life by the cheerful obsession that modern scientists, "intelligent engineers," and secularist propagandists like himself, are the only competent persons to conduct the experiment to a successful conclusion. It is simply a matter of putting these gentlemen in control of the machinery of government, and the effect will be a civilisation speeding forward to a mechanised, diagrammatic paradise. This is still about as far as Mr. Wells's insight and foresight carry him in the matter of human nature, human society, and their ultimate needs, even though his confidence in *homo sapiens* has sagged in recent years. Man was made for the mechanised, scientific State, and the State is—the strong, superior, scientific, engineering, military and managing class. It is true that when he is faced with the approximate actualisation of this kind of State—when faced with Fascism and National Socialism—Mr. Wells dislikes it intensely, and returns hurriedly to the Rights of Man; nevertheless we are left with the uncomfortable feeling that somehow the Wellsian oracle has failed us. We have been let down. It would no doubt arouse the ire of Mr. Wells in his latest phase to suggest that the reason why his judgments, penetrating

and brilliant in all matters that pertain to the *mechanics* of society, and effective in critical analysis, are hopelessly superficial and liable to the exposure of events when they attempt to grapple the deeper problems of human life—it would rouse his ire to suggest that the reason for this is that they lack the realism and inwardness of that Christian view of Man and of the world, the very mention of which, these days, seems to irritate him beyond measure. Nevertheless, the crucial issue to-day lies between the belief, on the one hand, in the supreme sovereignty of the scientific, mechanised modern State over individual man as a *person*, and over collective man as a society of persons, and the belief, on the other hand, in the supreme sovereignty of a universal moral law which protects the spiritual values alike of the individual and of mankind as superior to all the machinery of government and of material progress. Faced with this issue in the form of Totalitarianism *versus* Democracy, Mr. Wells returns instinctively to the side of Democracy: but his defence of it is an embarrassed defence, for it has no inner lines, no base. He cannot fall back upon the naturalistic optimism of the French Revolution, and he is right in believing that there is no valid sanction either for liberalism or democracy in the fiction (who ever believed it?) of the infallibility of human judgment in the gross, nor even in the milder myth of the competence of the collective will and intelligence as something that functions mystically through the ballot-box to achieve a perfect civilisation. These things he knows, and, rejecting the categories of holiness and sin, of soul and conscience, of divine law and divine grace, he takes his stand with agnostic science, materialistic anthropology and the Biological Experiment. He detests Hitler and Mussolini as leaders in the rebellion of clumsy louts against all that is fine in civilisation, but he is only less disturbed to reflect that in China the resistance against Axis aggression is directed by a leader who professes the Christian faith, and that in this country we have “praying Generals.” Meanwhile, as he draws up his new charter of human rights, the Biological Experiment view of Man for which he stands, calls loudly for the laboratory methods of the strong and ruthless scientific State, with its vivisectional or lethal interest in “the people of the grey,” the children of the Abyss; and Democracy and the Rights of Man cannot be defended from this position—Blake’s “dark Satanic mills” cannot be loop-holed for the defence of the human spirit. No doubt it is true that up to now the case for popular liberty and representative government has rested upon a too easy and superficial view of human nature as upon the competency of the average man to reach right conclusions upon any question under the moon. But this cannot be corrected by any attempt to re-state

the case in terms of an agnostic scientific anthropology. Such an attempt is more likely to point, in the end, to an order of regimented and mechanised efficiency in which men in the mass are picked over, educated, sterilised, exported or exterminated in the interests of the Super-State. The issue seems to lie between some approximation to the Christian doctrine of Man, which, with all its tragic realism, guards the central dignity of the human spirit, and the doctrine of the Biological Experiment which entrusts civilisation to a hierarchy of scientists, "intelligent engineers" and technological and military experts.

Of course exception may be taken to any suggestion that the issue may be expressed in terms of "doctrine" at all. If we are fighting a fixed, schematised, doctrinaire, ideological Totalitarianism, if we contend that insistence upon a rigorously planned and patterned civilisation inevitably leads to intolerance and tyranny, how can we escape from it by exalting another doctrine, another pattern, another scheme? The spirit of freedom, says Rauschnig, is fighting its way to-day out of the egg-shell of the doctrinaire. But here we are forced, as in any serious discussion about life we are always being forced, into the region of paradox. We cannot escape from the moral nihilism of Totalitarianism by seeking refuge in the stultifying nihilism which exists in a doctrinal vacuum. If what we desire is a régime of sane toleration, an "organised equilibrium," a condition in which man's mind and soul can breathe without being imprisoned in the iron lung of Totalitarian or ecclesiastical authoritarianism, then we must have a serious conception of man and of the State in which this freedom can be developed under recognised moral sanctions. This is the tension in which we live, and it involves what Rauschnig expresses as "the eternal call to Sinai." Mr. Wells would echo Rauschnig's interrogatory: "Is there not an end of blessedness in the order in which a crowd of toughs manoeuvre themselves into power and then use the people simply as the material, and the social order as the instrument, of their domination?" What Rauschnig, after his experience of Nazi Germany, also sees, but Mr. Wells does not, is that there is no less certain an "end of blessedness" in an order in which the people are used simply as the material for biological, sociological and utopistic experimentation. He does not see that his world of scientific "free-thinking" and mechanised beatitude is as out of date as the optimistic, naturalistic humanism of the nineteenth century. He does not see, what Rauschnig sees and affirms, that "enlightened atheism has long ceased to be a stage in the liberation of the human spirit. . . . It is being transformed by the force of its own logic into the deepest subjection of thought and conscience."

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