
PRAGMATIC UTOPIANISM AND RACE: H. G. WELLS AS SOCIAL SCIENTIST*

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H. G. Wells was one of the most celebrated writers in the world during the first half of the twentieth century. Famed for his innovative fiction, he was also an influential advocate of socialism and the world-state. What is much less well known is that he was a significant contributor to debates about the nature of social science. This article argues that Wells's account of social science in general, and sociology in particular, was shaped by an idiosyncratic philosophical pragmatism. In order to demonstrate how his philosophical arguments inflected his social thought, it explores his attack on prevailing theories of race, while also highlighting the limits of his analysis. The article concludes by tracing the reception of Wells's ideas among social scientists and political thinkers on both sides of the Atlantic. Although his program for utopian sociology attracted few disciples, his arguments about the dynamics of modern societies found a large audience.

INTRODUCTION

H. G. Wells was a writing machine. Between 1895 and 1914, the most intellectually creative period of his life, he published thirty-two books, eight volumes of short stories and dozens of essays and reviews.¹ In this avalanche of words he laid the foundations of modern science fiction and established himself as one of the most celebrated thinkers of the time.² Despite his extraordinary reputation and profile, as well as his extensive body of work on the subject, his

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¹ David Smith, *H. G. Wells: Desperately Mortal* (London, 1986), 58.

² On his influence see Simon James, *Maps of Utopia: H. G. Wells, Modernity and the End of Culture* (Oxford, 2012), ix–x.

contribution to debates in and over social science has attracted little attention.³ During the Edwardian years Wells wrote widely about the possibilities and the limits of social inquiry, developing a ferocious critique of existing approaches—especially those advocating a rigorous science of society—as well as articulating his own utopian alternative.

In what follows I investigate these writings, examining how Wells saw the emerging professional social sciences and how social scientists regarded him and his work. I argue that Wells's account of social science in general, and sociology in particular, was shaped by an idiosyncratic philosophical pragmatism. Although philosophical arguments infused his writings on present and future societies, scholars of Wells, and of the history of pragmatism, have failed to recognize the distinctive character of his vision. I open by outlining his main philosophical commitments, and then turn to a discussion of the role he played in founding the discipline of sociology in Britain, as well as his conception of how the field should develop. To demonstrate the relationship between his philosophy and his social analysis, the following section explores Wells's assault on prevailing theories of race, while also probing the limits of his critique. Finally, I trace the reception of his ideas on both sides of the Atlantic during the opening two decades of the twentieth century. Although his utopian method attracted few disciples, his analysis of the transformation of modern societies found a large audience, and he was a significant presence in both public and scholarly debates. Wells was the highest-profile pragmatist social and political thinker during the opening two decades of the twentieth century.

HERETICAL SCEPTIC: WELLS AS PRAGMATIST

Wells observed once that his was a “Balfourian age” characterized by epistemic doubt about religion, ethics and politics.⁴ It was a time of both trepidation and excitement, and it had, he wrote a few years later, provoked an “intellectual spring unprecedented in the world's history.”⁵ While Darwinism was the pivotal development, opening new vistas on history and human destiny, a philosophical revolution was also unfolding, with potentially transformative consequences.

³ Two important exceptions are Ruth Levitas, “Back to the Future: Wells, Sociology, Utopia and Method,” *Sociological Review* 58/4 (2010), 530–47; Krishan Kumar, “Wells and the So-Called Science of Sociology,” in Patrick Parrinder and Christopher Rolfe, eds., *H. G. Wells under Revision* (Toronto, 1990), 192–217. Neither adopts the interpretative line I pursue.

⁴ H. G. Wells, “The Contemporary Novel” (1912), in Wells, *An Englishman Looks at the World* (London, 1914), 148–70, at 160. Wells wrote to Balfour, praising his skepticism: Wells to Balfour, 26 Aug. 1904, in *The Correspondence of H. G. Wells*, ed. David Smith, 4 vols. (London, 1998), 2: 41.

⁵ Wells, “The Contemporary Novel,” 161–2.

Wells was happy to acknowledge that Athens had witnessed the peak of human intellectual achievement, but he was adamant that late nineteenth-century philosophical work bore comparison.⁶ Its most important expression was the “revival and restatement of nominalism under the name of pragmatism.”⁷ He saw himself as part of the revolutionary vanguard.

During the Edwardian years Wells sought a synthesis of evolutionary theory and pragmatist philosophy. Viewing the world as part of an unfolding evolutionary scheme, he adopted the modified Darwinian framework propagated by his one-time teacher T. H. Huxley in the 1880s and early 1890s. Huxley had argued that it was necessary to distinguish “cosmic” and “ethical” evolutionary processes, while insisting that the latter always constrained and threatened the former.⁸ He challenged both those who invoked the logic of natural selection to explain human development and those who denied that Darwinian competition played a significant role in human history. Wells likewise delineated “artificial” from “natural” evolutionary processes, though he drew more optimistic political conclusions than did Huxley.⁹ While Huxley posited that cosmic constraints precluded radical social transformation, Wells spent much of his career arguing that such change was both possible and necessary.

Most existing scholarship on Wells emphasizes his debt to Huxley. However, this is only half the story. As I have argued in more detail elsewhere, Wells’s thought, perhaps especially during the Edwardian years, cannot be properly understood without recognizing his commitment to pragmatism.¹⁰ Given that Wells was clear about his own philosophical views, and their significance for understanding his writings, it is surprising that students of his social and political theory have paid so little attention to the subject. Discussion of pragmatism punctuates his work. All of his thinking, he announced in a note to the reader

⁶ H. G. Wells, *First and Last Things: A Confession of Faith and Rule of Life* (London, 1908), 7, 10.

⁷ Wells, “The Contemporary Novel,” 163. For his earliest sustained account of nominalism see H. G. Wells, “The Rediscovery of the Unique” (1891), in *H. G. Wells: Early Writings in Science and Science Fiction*, ed. Robert Philmus and David Hughes (Berkeley, 1975), 22–31. On the nature and importance of historical debates over nominalism see Wells, *The Outline of History*, ed. W. Wagar, 2 vols. (New York, 2004; first published 1920), 2: 210–17.

⁸ T. H. Huxley, “Prolegomena” (1894), in *T. H. Huxley’s “Evolution and Ethics”*, ed. James Paradis and George Williams (Princeton, 1989), 59–104, and Huxley, “Evolution and Ethics” (1893), in *ibid.*, 104–45. See also James Paradis, *T. H. Huxley: Man’s Place in Nature* (Lincoln, 1978); Piers Hale, *Political Descent: Malthus, Mutualism, and the Politics of Evolution in Victorian England* (Chicago, 2014), chap. 5.

⁹ H. G. Wells, “Human Evolution, an Artificial Process” (1896), in *H. G. Wells: Early Writings*, 211–19.

¹⁰ Duncan Bell, “Pragmatism and Prophecy: H. G. Wells and the Metaphysics of Socialism,” *American Political Science Review* (forthcoming).

at the start of *A Modern Utopia*, rested on “heretical metaphysical scepticism.”¹¹ In the early Edwardian years he aligned himself with William James and, to a lesser extent, the Oxford philosopher F. C. S. Schiller, the leading European exponent of pragmatism.¹² (He did not engage with Peirce or Dewey.) In the 1930s Wells informed a German correspondent, the philologist Fritz Krog, that during the early twentieth century he had “assimilated Pragmatism,” and in particular the work of James, “completely.”¹³ Wells outlined his position in “Scepticism of the Instrument,” published in *Mind* in 1904 and reprinted the following year as an appendix to *A Modern Utopia*, and he developed it further in *First and Last Things*, his most important philosophical text. The book, he informed Schiller, was written on “sound pragmatic lines.”¹⁴ We need to take these pronouncements seriously in order to grasp the character of his social and political thought.

Wells’s pragmatism had four main components: a nominalist metaphysics, a pragmatist theory of truth (roughly, as verification through experiment), a version of James’s “will to believe” that helped to motivate his fervent advocacy of a future liberal–socialist utopia, and a conception of philosophy as dedicated to elucidating and clarifying problems to facilitate (better) practice. “[M]ost of the troubles of humanity are really misunderstandings,” he claimed, and in “expressing things, rendering things to each other, discussing our differences, clearing up the metaphysical conceptions upon which differences are discussed,” philosophical reflection could eliminate the “confusion of purposes” besetting humanity.¹⁵ For Wells as for James, pragmatism was the most apposite philosophical position to adopt in a Darwinian world. James respected Wells’s philosophical acumen. “Why can Wells,” he once asked his neighbor, “without

¹¹ H. G. Wells, *A Modern Utopia*, ed. Gregory Claeys (London, 2005; first published 1905), xxxi.

¹² For a discussion of Schiller see H. G. Wells, “Scepticism of the Instrument,” *Mind* 13/51 (1904), 379–93, at 381; Wells, *First and Last Things*, 31. On Schiller’s thought see Mark J. Porrovecchio, *F. C. S. Schiller and the Dawn of Pragmatism: The Rhetoric of a Philosophical Rebel* (Boulder, 2011); Admir Skodo, “Eugenics and Pragmatism: F. C. S. Schiller’s Philosophical Politics,” *Modern Intellectual History* 14/3 (2015), 661–87.

¹³ Wells to Krog, 4 May 1936, in Sylvia Hardy, “H. G. Wells and William James: A Pragmatic Approach,” in Steven McLean, ed., *H. G. Wells: Interdisciplinary Essays* (Newcastle, 2008), 130–47, at 142–3. Hardy pioneered the pragmatist reading of Wells’s views on language. See also Wells’s comment from 1942 that at the turn of the century he had laboured “under the influence” of James’s *Will to Believe*: H. G. Wells, *The Conquest of Time* (London, 1942), 1.

¹⁴ Schiller to Wells, 1 March 1908, Folder S-080, Wells Archive, University of Illinois. See also Schiller to James, Aug. 1904, in Ignas Skrupskelis and Elizabeth Berkeley, eds., *The Correspondence of William James*, 12 vols. (Charlottesville, 2002), 10: 622.

¹⁵ Wells, *First and Last Things*, 14.

any philosophical training, write philosophy as well as the best of them?"¹⁶ He was also clear about Wells's philosophical identity: "You're a pragmatist!"¹⁷ Indeed he regarded Wells as a leading expositor of the gospel, blessed with extraordinary powers of persuasion. Like Tolstoy, he had the gift of "contagious speech," speech capable of setting a "similar mood vibrating in the reader." Wells could inspire people, converting them to the creed. James welcomed *First and Last Things* as a "great achievement," declaring that it should be "used as a textbook in all the colleges of the world." Wells, he continued, had put his "finger accurately on the true emphases and (in the main) on what seem to me the true solutions."¹⁸ Given Wells's own proud self-identification as a pragmatist, and his recognition as such by assorted contemporary thinkers, including James and Schiller, he should be seen as the most prominent *fin de siècle* pragmatist political thinker.¹⁹ Doing so involves rewriting the early history of pragmatism, from which he is currently absent.

Nominalism lay at the heart of Wells's pragmatism. He combined two claims. First, evolution had produced a human cognitive apparatus that was poorly designed to grasp the complexity of the world. And second, the world itself was composed of "unique," nonidentical particulars. This had deep consequences for the powers of human thought. The nominalist revolution, he proclaimed, "consists in the reassertion of the importance of the individual instance as against the generalization."²⁰ Absolute truth was chimerical. "All propositions," he asserted, "are approximations to an elusive truth."²¹ Generalization, classification, intellectualism, abstraction: all were philosophically suspect. Such provisional truths as were ascertainable were (fallible) products of repeated experimentation and practical verification. Even scientific "laws" were provisional hypotheses. In Schiller's terms, "axioms" were simply "postulates" that had demonstrated their value over time.²² For Wells, pragmatism necessitated the "abandonment of infinite assumptions" and the "extension of the experimental spirit to all human interests."²³

¹⁶ J. Graham Brooks, writing to H. G. Wells (5 Sept. 1920), quoted in Hardy, "H. G. Wells and William James," 131.

¹⁷ James to Wells, 4 Dec. 1906, in *Correspondence of William James*, 11: 290.

¹⁸ James to Wells, 28 Nov. 1906, in *Correspondence of William James*, 12: 126.

¹⁹ I elaborate on this conception of tradition in Duncan Bell, "What Is Liberalism?," *Political Theory* 42/6 (2014), 682–715, and further discuss its application to Wells in "Pragmatism and Prophecy."

²⁰ Wells, "The Contemporary Novel," 163.

²¹ Wells, *First and Last Things*, 35.

²² F. C. S. Schiller, "Axioms as Postulates," in Henry Sturt, ed., *Personal Idealism* (Oxford, 1902), 47–134. Wells praises this essay in "Scepticism of the Instrument," 381, 393.

²³ Wells, *First and Last Things*, 43.

Wells dwelt repeatedly on the implications of his nominalist metaphysics. It shaped his vision of society and politics, the nature of inquiry, and the meaning of the self. He combined (rather awkwardly) a demand for epistemic humility—“Man, thinking Man, suffers from intellectual over-confidence and a vain belief in the universal validity of reasoning”²⁴—with a hugely ambitious vision of what ideas (and intellectuals) could do in moulding human destiny. While absolute truth was inaccessible, he contended that it was essential to develop political and moral ideals, for without them concerted human action was impossible. Human progress required adherence to, and acting on, beliefs that were recognized as “arbitrary,” but which nevertheless served a valuable practical purpose—for Wells, that purpose was to bring about a socialist dawn and the eventual creation of a world-state.²⁵ This was the overriding ambition of his work, the function of his art. “My beliefs, my dogmas, my rules,” he wrote in *First and Last Things*, “are made for my campaigning needs, like the knapsack and water bottle of a Cockney soldier invading some stupendous mountain gorge.”²⁶ Reorienting social science was but one campaign in Wells’s war on social and political complacency.

In *A Modern Utopia*, his elaborate sketch of a post-Darwin ideal society, Wells foregrounded the importance of the pragmatist “insurgent philosophical movement,” suggesting that the Utopians had succeeded in establishing a worldwide community on a pragmatist “science of human association.”²⁷ It likewise structured many of the arguments in *New Worlds for Old*, his popular account of socialism. In the autobiographical novel *The New Machiavelli*, Wells once again flagged the significance of pragmatism. “[My] sympathies,” declared Richard Remington, the chief protagonist, “have always been Pragmatist. I belong almost by nature to that school of Pragmatism that . . . bases itself upon a denial of the reality of classes, and of the validity of general laws.” In contrast, the Baileys—Wells’s parody of Beatrice and Sidney Webb—“classified everything.” As with most people lacking in “metaphysical aptitude” and training, they adhered to the crude “realist” view that “classes were *real* and independent of their individuals.”²⁸ As such, they failed to comprehend the social world and its latent possibilities.

²⁴ Ibid., 44.

²⁵ See Bell, “Pragmatism and Prophecy,” for further discussion of the pragmatist dimensions of his socialism.

²⁶ Wells, *First and Last Things*, 197.

²⁷ Wells, *A Modern Utopia*, 20–21.

²⁸ H. G. Wells, *The New Machiavelli*, ed. Simon James (London, 2005; first published 1911), 174, original emphasis. For an interesting reading of the novel see Mark Somos, “A Century of ‘Hate and Coarse Thinking’: Anti-Machiavellian Machiavellism in H. G. Wells’ *The New Machiavelli* (1911),” *History of European Ideas* 37/2 (2011), 137–52. Pragmatism is mentioned briefly in some of Wells’s other novels, including *Marriage* (New York, 1912), 501.

This unflattering portrait of his Fabian sparring partners staged the intellectual clash that Wells's methodological writings on social science aimed to resolve.

THE DREAMBOOK OF SOCIOLOGY

The late nineteenth century saw the rapid development of social-science disciplines throughout Europe and the United States. Anthropology, geography sociology, psychology, economics, political science: all began the uneven and contested process of professionalization.²⁹ Some were more successful than others. While sociology flourished in France, Germany and the United States, it failed to gain much institutional support or intellectual credibility in Britain during the early twentieth century.³⁰ This was not for want of effort. In 1903 the Sociological Society was founded, chiefly through the logistical efforts of the Scottish businessman-cum-sociologist Victor Branford, a loyal disciple of Patrick Geddes.³¹ Wells was present at the creation. His first book of social prophecy, *Anticipations*, published in 1901, had established his reputation as a penetrating analyst of modernity. It drew the attention of Graham Wallas and the Webbs, leading to invitations to join the Fabian Society and the Co-efficients dining group.³² He was invited to the conference that inaugurated the society in June 1903, and in December he was coopted to serve on its executive committee (later council). Wells was keen to see it thrive. "I hope you are going to help with the new sociological society we are trying to get together," he wrote to the young radical Ralph Mudie-Smith in February 1904, encouraging him to submit material to the planned *Sociological Review*.³³ During 1903–4 Wells agitated for a chair in the

²⁹ For a transnational overview see Theodore Porter and Dorothy Ross, eds., *The Cambridge History of Science*, vol. 7, part 2 (Cambridge, 2003).

³⁰ Reba Soffer, "Why Do Disciplines Fail? The Strange Case of British Sociology," *English Historical Review* 97/385 (1982), 767–802; Stefan Collini, *Liberalism and Sociology: L. T. Hobhouse and Political Argument in England, 1880–1914* (Cambridge, 1983).

³¹ Financial backing was provided by Martin White. Constituted in November 1903, the society held its first meeting in 1904. On Branford see John Scott and Christopher Husbands, "Victor Branford and the Building of British Sociology," *Sociological Review* 55/2 (2007), 460–84; John Scott and Ray Bromley, *Envisioning Sociology: Victor Branford, Patrick Geddes, and the Quest for Social Reconstruction* (Albany, 2014).

³² H. G. Wells, *Anticipations of the Reactions of Mechanical and Scientific Progress upon Human Life and Thought* (Mineola: Dover, 1999; first published 1901). On his role in the Fabians see John Partington, "H. G. Wells: A Political Life," *Utopian Studies* 19/3 (2008), 517–76. On the Co-efficients see Royden Harrison, *The Life and Times of Sidney and Beatrice Webb: 1858–1905, The Formative Years* (Basingstoke, 2000), 327; Duncan Bell, "Imagining the World State: H. G. Wells on Empire and the English-speaking Peoples" (forthcoming).

³³ Wells to Mudie-Smith, 6 Feb. 1904, in *The Correspondence of H. G. Wells*, 2: 8. Initially, the papers of the society were published in three hardbound volumes of *Sociological Papers*

subject, though it is unclear whether he applied for the newly endowed Martin White professorship at the LSE. He once complained to Branford that he felt unable to participate fully in the society “because I have to earn my living,” and as such had to chase writing commissions.³⁴ His brief campaign culminated in a letter to Balfour, then prime minister, appealing for the government to endow a research position for him. “There’s a good deal of activity in the direction of sociology and a certain amount of irregular disorganized endowment & I believe if I could be let loose in this field for a time I could give things a trend.” For example, he would write a “text-book of Sociology” that would be “a seminal sort of work.”³⁵ He was nothing if not confident in his powers of originality. The request was rejected. Wells resigned from the society in February 1907, though not, he insisted, “from any lack of interest” in its work.³⁶ He maintained a close interest in the social sciences for the rest of his life.

Methodologically ecumenical, the society encompassed research on the “whole phenomena of society.”³⁷ Its pluralism was both a shrewd strategy for drawing together disparate types of work and an embodiment of Branford’s Comtean vision of sociology as a synthetic project. But it was not enough. From the outset the society was divided into three competing sects—“civic” sociologists, eugenicists and moral philosophers—who fought for authority over the nebulous field. The civic sociologists, led by Geddes and Branford, thought that sociology should focus on the city as both site and agent of social change. The eugenicists, following the lead of Francis Galton, emphasized the primacy of evolutionary biology, arguing that sociology should identify, and work to eliminate, dysgenic features that undermined social efficiency. The philosophers, led by L. T. Hobhouse, envisaged sociology as a general moral science, dedicated to elucidating the underlying rationality of social progress.³⁸ Claimed by members

(London, 1905–7), published by Macmillan. In 1908 a regular journal, the *Sociological Review*, was founded.

³⁴ Wells to Branford, [May?] 1905, Foundations of British Sociology Archive (FBS), Keele University, GB 172. The Martin Wight chair was initially shared by Hobhouse and Edward Westermarck.

³⁵ Wells to Balfour, 10 May 1905, in *The Correspondence of H. G. Wells*, 2: 72. Wells made a case for the state endowment of “talent” in *Mankind in the Making* (London, 1903), chap. 10.

³⁶ See [Lewis Mumford?], “H. G. Wells,” memo, FBS papers, GB 172 LP/11/1/2. In January 1905 Wells became an associate of the Institut international de sociologie.

³⁷ *Sociological Papers*, 1: 284.

³⁸ R. J. Halliday, “The Sociological Movement, the Sociological Society, and the Genesis of Academic Sociology in Britain,” *Sociological Review* 16/3 (1968), 377–98. For a sympathetic account of Hobhouse see John Scott, “Leonard Hobhouse as a Social Theorist,” *Journal of Classical Sociology* 16/4 (2016), 349–68.

of each, Wells never fitted neatly into any of them. Although a eugenicist, he was critical of Galton's program, believing it scientifically untenable and socially iniquitous.³⁹ According to Branford, Wells, "more than anyone else, perhaps, in the English-speaking world," had mapped "the incipient changes in city development which are being effected by [the] new secular orders of applied physical science."⁴⁰ Yet Wells did not think that cities should be the primary unit of sociological analysis—he painted on a far broader canvas. And although Wells accepted the importance of philosophy, he rejected the neo-Hegelian idealism that dominated British social thought.⁴¹

Wells first articulated his vision of sociology in "The So-Called Science of Sociology," an article published in the *Independent Review* in May 1906. Branford, who had previously attempted to recruit Wells to speak at the society, tried to persuade him to refine his published views for a new talk. Praising Wells's intervention as "strikingly original," he suggested that it would be a service to the scholarly world if he elaborated the argument in more detail.⁴² Reluctant to write something without payment, Wells first asked Branford to republish his existing essay in the *Sociological Papers*—a request Branford politely declined—before finally agreeing to present a reworked version.⁴³ He presented it, under the same name, at a meeting of the society chaired by Geddes at the LSE in January 1906. Although there were some differences between the texts—in particular, the first was framed more explicitly as a reflection on the methodological arguments of Durkheim and Branford published in volume 1 of *Sociological Papers*—the substance of the argument was identical. The expanded paper was published in volume 3 of *Sociological Papers* and reprinted in *An Englishman Looks at the World*. Drawing on his pragmatism, Wells argued that sociology could *never* be a true science, except in the "same loose sense that modern history is a science."⁴⁴ Sociologists had to recalibrate their ambitions.

³⁹ Wells, *Mankind in the Making*, 37–40; *Sociological Papers*, 1: 58–60.

⁴⁰ Victor Branford, "Science and Citizenship," *American Journal of Sociology* 11/6 (1906), 721–61, at 756; Wells, *Anticipations*, chap. 2.

⁴¹ On the role of idealism see Collini, *Liberalism and Sociology*; Jose Harris, "Political Thought and the Welfare State 1870–1940," *Past and Present* 135/1 (1992), 116–41; Sandra Den Otter, *British Idealism and Social Explanation: A Study in Late Victorian Thought* (Oxford, 1996). For an attack on "absolute idealism" see Wells, "Scepticism of the Instrument," 386–88.

⁴² Branford to Wells, 6 May 1905, FBS papers.

⁴³ Wells to Branford, 25 March, 9 May, 17 Oct., ? Oct., 1905; Branford to Wells, 9 Nov. 1905, FBS papers.

⁴⁴ H. G. Wells, "The So-Called Science of Sociology," in Wells, *An Englishman Looks at the World*, 192–207, at 192.

Perusing the first volume of *Sociological Papers*, Wells mused, was enough to highlight the intellectual confusion hobbling the field. The term “sociology” was applied to scholars engaged in very different types of inquiry. Benjamin Kidd, Beattie Crozier, Sebald Steinmetz, Vicomte Combes de Lestrade, Franklin Giddings: all offered conflicting visions of sociological investigation. It also encompassed work that was “not primarily sociological at all,” including that of Sidney Webb, Moisey Ostrogorski and Gustave Le Bon.⁴⁵ One response—articulated by Durkheim—was to create a synthetic science, unifying these disparate strands.⁴⁶ However, the synthesizing ambition was based on a misunderstanding of science. Wells was (and is) often seen as an avatar of scientific rationality, convinced of the need to bring science to bear on all social problems. For his friend and critic G. K. Chesterton, Wells was a man who believed most fervently that “science would take charge of the future.”⁴⁷ Yet this popular assessment misses how Wells wielded his pragmatist skepticism against inflated claims of scientific certainty. Conflating truth with utility, scientists were prone to believe that the abstractions they employed were real, rather than useful fictions. “The man trained solely in science falls easily into a superstitious attitude; he is overdone with classification.” Consequently, scientists mistakenly thought that “exact knowledge” was possible “everywhere,” and dismissed the validity of beliefs that were incapable of scientific proof.⁴⁸ In good Jamesian fashion, Wells rejected both of these claims.

The sciences could be classified according to how they dealt with the “gradation in the importance of the instance.” It was least significant in physics and chemistry, more salient in biology, and acute in the study of human society. This point, Wells asserted, had received insufficient attention from social scientists, despite its profound implications for the credibility of their work—here was his claim to methodological innovation. It was now widely accepted, Wells continued, that there were “no identically similar objective experiences,” and instead the “disposition is to conceive all real objective being as individual and unique.” The human mind had a powerful “labour-saving” tendency to equate individuals under a given classification “as though they were true to sample”—“a thousand bricks or a thousand sheep or a thousand sociologists”—but this was an error. Even scientists fell prey to it. Thus chemists routinely assumed that all atoms or ions were identical.⁴⁹ Such classificatory assumptions made little practical

⁴⁵ Ibid., 194.

⁴⁶ Émile Durkheim, “On the Relation of Sociology to the Social Sciences and to Philosophy,” in *Sociological Papers*, 1: 195–204.

⁴⁷ G. K. Chesterton, *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* (London, 1904), 15.

⁴⁸ Wells, *First and Last Things*, 36.

⁴⁹ Wells, “The So-Called Science,” 195, 196.

difference to chemists and physicists, as the impressive results of the physical sciences demonstrated. However, they were the exception, not the rule.

If we quite boldly face the fact that hard positive methods are less and less successful just in proportion as our “ologies” deal with larger and less numerous individuals; if we admit that we become less “scientific” as we ascend the scale of the sciences, and that we do and must change our method, then, it is humbly submitted, we shall be in a much better position to consider the question of “approaching” sociology.⁵⁰

The magnificent results of physics and chemistry misled people into believing that classification and generalization were reliable means of producing objective truth. But the success of a given generalization “was no proof whatever of its final truth.”⁵¹ The work of Darwin, Wells averred, had dissolved rigid classifications, demonstrating the “element of inexactness running through all things.” The pragmatists had further unpicked the fallacies grounding folk views of science and truth. Wells proclaimed confidently that the “uniqueness of individuals is the objective truth,” while “counting, classification, measurement, the whole fabric of mathematics, is subjective and deceitful.”⁵²

The key problem in sociology, he argued, was that there was only one unit of analysis—*human society*. Yet the smaller the sample size, “the amount of variety and inexactness of generalisation increases, because individuality tells more and more.”⁵³ Accuracy became increasingly difficult to attain. It was feasible, for example, to make felicitous generalizations about billions of people, just as it was about atoms, but social inquiry did not have that luxury.

And we are forced to conclude that not only is the method of observation, experiment, and verification left far down the scale, but that the method of classification under types, which has served so useful a purpose in . . . the subjects involving numerous but a finite number of units, has also to be abandoned in social science. We cannot put humanity into a museum or dry it for examination; our one single still living specimen is all history, all anthropology, and the fluctuating world of men. There is no satisfactory means of dividing it, and nothing else in the real world with which to compare it.⁵⁴

It was impossible to fully isolate groups of people, or trace anything but “rude general resemblances” between them. “The alleged units have as much

⁵⁰ Ibid., 199.

⁵¹ Ibid., 198. Wells suggested that Darwin did not follow the scientific method, as conventionally understood (ibid., 198). On this intriguing claim see Kumar, “Wells and the So-Called Science,” 214–15 n.

⁵² Wells, “The So-Called Science,” 197.

⁵³ Ibid., 197.

⁵⁴ Wells, *First and Last Things*, 41; Wells, “The So-Called Science,” 200. See also the summary in H. G. Wells, *An Experiment in Autobiography*, vol. 2 (London, 2008; first published 1934), 657–8.

individuality as pieces of cloud; they come, they go, they fuse, they separate.” Various attempts had been made to circumvent this problem. Herbert Spencer, for example, disaggregated humanity into self-contained societies that “competed one with another and died and reproduced just like animals,” while political economists, following Friedrich List, had “for the purposes of fiscal controversy discovered economic types.” Wells expressed surprise that serious thinkers were persuaded by such blatantly deceptive strategies. Human societies were *not* rigidly bounded, nor were they sufficiently alike to render them equivalent.⁵⁵ Uniqueness ruled.

While keen to make his mark on sociology, Wells’s critique applied to all forms of social investigation. In particular, his writings during the Edwardian era were studded with attacks on political economy, the history of which, he wrote disdainfully, was “one of the most striking instances of the mischief wrought by intellectual minds devoid of vision in the entire history of human thought.”⁵⁶ In *A Modern Utopia* he dismissed contemporary political economy—obsessed with “tortuous abstraction”—as comprising little more than “a hopeless muddle of social assumptions and preposterous psychology, and a few geographical and physical generalizations.” Upon such “quicksands” rose an intellectual edifice that aped the authority of natural science, relied on an opaque technical jargon and falsely proclaimed the discovery of immutable “laws.”⁵⁷ He returned to the theme in *New Worlds for Old*. Political economists, he mocked, sought to provide the subject with “precision and conviction such a subject will not stand.” They employed “such words as ‘value,’ an incurably and necessarily vague word, ‘rent,’ the name of the specific relation of landlord and tenant, and ‘capital,’” and attempted to define them “with relentless exactness and use them with inevitable effect.” In doing so, they “departed more and more from reality.”⁵⁸ They had failed to absorb the teachings of pragmatism. Wells’s attack worked on two levels. First, he argued that the cloud of abstractions employed by economists failed to capture a world of uniques, and second, that the “immutable” laws of economics—whether liberal or Marxist—were (if they existed at all) little more than “plastic human conventions.”⁵⁹ Wells’s Utopians eliminated the discipline of economics:

⁵⁵ Wells, “The So-Called Science,” 199–201, 201.

⁵⁶ Wells, *New Worlds*, 221–2.

⁵⁷ Wells, *A Modern Utopia*, 61, 62. Conversely, he attacked (unnamed) contemporary economists who refused to generalize and were left “wallowing in a mud of statistics” (63). He cited Giddings’s *Principles of Sociology* and Bagehot’s *Economic Studies* as valuable correctives. For further criticisms of political economy, see H. G. Wells, *The Future in America: A Search after Realities* (London, 1906), 18.

⁵⁸ Wells, *New Worlds*, 222. He argued that Marx inherited many of their conceptual problems (224–5, 229–30).

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 223.

most of its subject matter had either been abolished (through the dissolution of nation-states) or incorporated into psychology. Psychology in turn formed part of a “general science of Sociology” dedicated to “an exhaustive study of the reaction of people upon each other and of all possible relationships.”⁶⁰ Subsuming all other domains of knowledge about human relations and institutions, sociology had the potential to serve as the *ur*-social science.

In an early address to the Sociological Society, Durkheim credited Comte with the idea of “extending natural law to societies,” although he concluded that his compatriot, like Spencer, was more of a philosophical speculator than a real (social) scientist.⁶¹ Most sociologists followed the “Comte–Spencer tradition” of seeking to discover “general laws” by evolutionary speculation rather than rigorous scientific observation. Wells agreed with Durkheim’s diagnosis, but rejected his proposed cure. The purpose of “The So-Called Science of Sociology,” Wells proclaimed, was to expose Comte and Spencer as “pseudoscientific interlopers.”⁶² Believing his work to be “as exact and universally valid as mathematics,” Comte’s intricate system was based on a fallacious “arbitrary assumption”: that the “whole universe of being” was measurable, calculable and predictable.⁶³ However, Wells argued, the universe was characterized by eternal “becoming,” not static “being.” It was not legible in the way Comte imagined.⁶⁴ Spencer’s continuing influence likewise frustrated Wells. A walking taxonomer, “His mind was invaded by the idea of classification, by memories of specimens and museums.”⁶⁵ Moreover, he was committed to an outdated (Lamarckian) view of evolution, in which the “universe, and every sort of thing in it, moves from the simple and homogeneous to the complex and heterogeneous.”⁶⁶ Spencer

⁶⁰ Wells, *A Modern Utopia*, 61.

⁶¹ Durkheim, “On the Relation,” 197–8.

⁶² Wells, “The So-Called Science,” 192, 202. For further critiques of Spencer see Wells, *A Modern Utopia*, 38; Wells, *New Worlds*, 112.

⁶³ Wells, “The So-Called Science,” 193. See also Wells, *A Modern Utopia*, 184, 213; Wells, *First and Last Things*, 40. Frederic Harrison, the leading British positivist, declared that Wells (and Shaw and Chesterton), could “hardly be accepted as ‘the sources’ of scientific sociology.” Frederic Harrison, review of C. Masterman, *The Condition of England*, *Sociological Review* 2/3 (1909), 396. Wells would have concurred.

⁶⁴ As Martha Vogeler notes, here Wells mischaracterized Comte. Martha Vogeler, “Wells and Positivism” in Parrinder and Rolfe, *Wells under Revision*, 181–91, at 185.

⁶⁵ Wells, “The So-Called Science,” 194. Steven McLean, *The Early Fiction of H. G. Wells: Fantasies of Science* (Basingstoke, 2009), 190–92, argues that Wells’s ideas about competition were influenced by Spencer. However, such ideas were common in Victorian evolutionary debate, whilst Wells’s critiques of Spencer’s philosophy, biology and politics were frequent and scathing.

⁶⁶ H. G. Wells, “The Age of Specialisation,” in Wells, *An Englishman Looks at the World*, 240–45, at 244.

embodied the obsession with classification, generalization and abstraction that Wells rejected on pragmatist grounds.

For Wells, human history was the history of ideas crystallized into institutions, laws and values. Yet the ideational foundations of society were frequently taken for granted. In *The Future in America* he complained,

It is curious how little we, who live in the dawning light of a new time, question the intellectual assumptions of the social order about us. We find ourselves in a life of huge confusions and many cruelties, we plan this and that to remedy and improve, but very few of us go down to the ideas that begot these ugly conditions, the laws, the usages and liberties that are now in their detailed expansion so perplexing, intricate, and overwhelming. Yet the life of man is altogether made up of will cast into the mould of idea, and only by correcting ideas, changing ideas and replacing ideas are any ameliorations and advances to be achieved in human destiny.⁶⁷

Wells's social and political writing was intended to expose the contingency of existing institutions (such as property) and values (such as capitalist hypercompetitiveness), and to fabulate more attractive alternatives to help guide human action.⁶⁸ James read Wells's work in a similar vein. He celebrated *A Modern Utopia* as giving a "shove to the practical thought of the next generation that will be amongst the greatest of its influences of good," and predicted that *New Worlds for Old*—which provoked his "loud and prolonged applause"—would be seen as an "epoch-making' and tremendously influential document."⁶⁹ For James, Wells's unrivaled capacity to communicate the tenets of (Jamesian) pragmatism to a wide audience, combined with his extraordinary ability to imagine future societies, was a powerful weapon in the fight for social reform.

Sociology, Wells argued, must acknowledge both the severe epistemological limits of inquiry and the ontological character of its subject matter—it must, that is, eschew the search for a science of society and adapt itself to a world of uniques. The "subjective element, which is beauty, must coalesce with the objective, which is truth," and the field "must be neither art simply nor science in the narrow meaning of the word at all, but knowledge rendered imaginatively, and with an element of personality." It was, in other words, a form of literature, "in the highest sense of the term."⁷⁰ It should encompass two distinct, though complementary,

⁶⁷ Wells, *The Future in America*, 101–2.

⁶⁸ For a discussion of Wells's shifting views on the prophetic mission ("the anticipatory habit") see Wells, *The Future in America*, chap. 1; Patrick Parrinder, *Shadows of the Future: H. G. Wells, Science Fiction and Prophecy* (Liverpool, 1995), chap. 2.

⁶⁹ James to Wells, 6 June 1905, in *Correspondence of William James*, 11: 56; James to Wells, 15 April 1908, in *ibid.*, 12: 8.

⁷⁰ Wells, "The So-Called Science," 201.

enterprises: social history and utopian speculation. The former was subdivided into a “descriptive” variant, harvesting factual knowledge about past societies, and a more synthetic project that developed perspicacious interpretations from such material. Examples of this latter genre included Crozier’s *History of Intellectual Development*, Buckle’s *History of Civilisation*, and Lecky’s *History of European Morals*—all were “essentially sociology.”⁷¹ History was important to sociological investigation because it traced how human will was cast into idea and institutional form, and exposed the multiple paths not taken, the ideas forgotten or repressed. Pulsing through history, Wells insisted, was a human striving for a better world, a future devoid of suffering, pain and sorrow—this “very complex, imperfect, elusive idea” was “the Social Idea,” which could be discerned “struggling to exist and realise itself in a world of egotisms, animalisms, and brute matter,” sometimes successful, sometimes not, but ultimately acting as the motor of human progress. Historical research would furnish an account of the multitude of “suggestions in circumstance and experience of [the] Idea of Society,” as well as teaching valuable lessons about past failures to fully realize it.⁷²

The other element of Wells’s vision centered on human desire. Sociology could never be an ethically neutral enterprise, dedicated to ascertaining objective truths about the world—it was necessarily value-laden. Instead, the sociologist should elaborate compelling utopian visions and engage in relentless, constructive criticism of visions of the future.⁷³ This demanded a remapping of the sociological canon. Plato’s *Republic* and *Laws*—both exerting a deep impression on Wells—were “frankly Utopian,” while Aristotle engaged in the sustained criticism of utopia. Thomas More and Francis Bacon should be read as sociologists. Even Comte warranted a place: his “intensely personal Utopia of a Western Republic” was “his one meritorious gift to the world.”⁷⁴ *A Modern Utopia*, Wells’s attempt to revitalize the genre, was a case study for the new discipline. He envisaged a vast compendium of utopian texts, a palimpsest of visions of a better society that would educate people about possible worlds and motivate them to act—this was the “dream book” of sociology. Drawing from this virtual archive, sociologists could compare and contrast past historical patterns with future possibilities, in a dialectical dance of the imagination.

⁷¹ Ibid., 203. So too were Atkinson’s *Primal Law*, Andrew Lang’s *Social Origins*, even Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall* and Carlyle’s *The French Revolution*, though the latter two displayed a “greater insistence upon the dramatic and picturesque elements in history” (203).

⁷² Wells, “The So-Called Science,” 206.

⁷³ Ibid., 204.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 205. See also Wells, *A Modern Utopia*, 217.

DELIRIUM: THE PSEUDOSCIENCE OF RACE

Wells was horrified by the *fin de siècle* obsession with racial science. “[J]ust now,” he warned in *A Modern Utopia*, “the world is in a sort of delirium about race and the racial struggle,” a delirium legitimated by a “vast edifice of sham science.”⁷⁵ Two years later, in a letter to *Nature*, he castigated “the nonsense people will talk under the influence of race mania.”⁷⁶ This mania had to be confronted, for it underwrote some of the worst problems facing humanity. “I am convinced myself,” he wrote in *The Independent*, in 1907,

that there is no more evil thing in this present world than Race Prejudice; none at all. I write deliberately—it is the worst single thing in life now. It justifies and holds together more baseness, cruelty and abomination than any other sort of error in the world. Thru its body runs the black blood of coarse lust, suspicion, jealousy and persecution and all the darkest passions of the human soul.⁷⁷

While Wells often employed national and ethnic stereotypes, and occasionally utilized racist language, he consistently rejected the authority of racial science, and he was unusually vehement in denouncing bigotry.⁷⁸ His scepticism about contemporary accounts of race was derived, in large part, from his pragmatism.

Wells’s most sustained discussion of racial theory is in chapter 10 of *A Modern Utopia*. Devotees of a pragmatist “philosophy of the unique,” the inhabitants of Utopia adhered to a “science of human association” that was profoundly skeptical about the truth-value of classification and generalization. While philosophers were trained “to regard all such generalizations with suspicion,” the Utopian and the statesman were taught “to mingle something very like animosity with that suspicion,” because “crude classification and false generalizations” were the “curse of all organized human life.” This was, of course, intended as a critique of his contemporaries, obsessed with the search for essences and “stupid generalizations” about human collectives. Three main “aggregator ideas” shaped British public debate: nationality, religion and imperialism. Despite their manifold differences, these “aggregators” all defined themselves in opposition to that which lay outside them. This ubiquitous othering process had recently assumed a racialized

⁷⁵ Wells, *A Modern Utopia*, 218, 224. On *fin de siècle* racial discourses see Douglas Lorimer, *Science, Race Relations and Resistance: Britain, 1870–1914* (Manchester, 2013).

⁷⁶ Wells, *Nature*, 19 Dec. 1907, 149.

⁷⁷ Wells, “Race Prejudice,” *The Independent* 62 (14 Feb. 1907), 381–4, at 382. Wells was reviewing Jean Finot’s *Race Prejudice* and Sydney Olivier’s *White Capital and Colored Labour*. *The Independent* had been founded in New York by Congregationalists.

⁷⁸ For examples see Wells, *Anticipations*, 54, 63, 137; Wells, *Mankind in the Making* 127; Wells, *A Modern Utopia*, 32, 138. David Smith claims in *The Correspondence of H. G. Wells*, 2: 202, “There is less racism in the writings of Wells than virtually anyone in public life at that time.”

form—we are witnessing, Wells complained, “extraordinary intensifications of racial definition,” meaning that the “vileness, the inhumanity, the incompatibility of alien races is being steadily exaggerated.”⁷⁹ The epistemic vacuum of the Balfourian age was filled by pseudoscience, as naive (and malign) thinkers donned the scientific mantle of Darwin. Race prejudices were “shaping policies and modifying laws,” and they would cause a “large proportion of the wars, hardships and cruelties the immediate future holds in store for our earth.”⁸⁰ Racial bigotry underwrote such dangerous ideologies as Anglo-Saxonism and pan-Germanism. Philosophy, then, was no cloistered pursuit, devoid of social significance; the fate of the world depended in part on the spread of pragmatist ideas that would counter the fetish for generalizing about racial difference and competition.⁸¹

Contemporary racial theory had two main sources: philology and biology. Wells had first criticized philology in *Anticipations*, dismissing the “[u]nobservant, over-scholarly people” who “talk or write in the profoundest manner about a Teutonic race and a Keltic race.” Since those races had never existed, such claims were little more than “oil-lamp anthropology,” possessing the same scientific credibility as Lombroso’s absurd studies of skulls.⁸² In *A Modern Utopia* Wells blamed the influential Oxford philologist Max Müller for initiating the fruitless search for a “new political synthesis in adaptable sympathies based on linguistic affinities,” a search that had spawned endless celebratory accounts of English Teutonism, including J. R. Green’s popular *History of the English People*.⁸³ Wells had picked an appropriate target. Müller’s work informed the “comparative method” propagated by Henry Maine, Edward Augustus Freeman and J. R. Seeley, among others, and it played a fundamental role in shaping late Victorian political science and history writing on both sides of the Atlantic.⁸⁴ Yet for Wells it was based on the “unaccountable assumption” that

⁷⁹ Wells, *A Modern Utopia*, 215, 216–17, 219.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 219.

⁸¹ For a later reiteration of this point, in the context of the rise of Fascism, see H. G. Wells, *The Work, Wealth and Happiness of Mankind* (London, 1932), 68–9.

⁸² Wells, *Anticipations*, 124, 123.

⁸³ Wells, *A Modern Utopia*, 218. For further criticism of this “pretentious rubbish” see Wells, “Race Prejudice,” 383. On Müller see Stefan Arvidsson, *Indo-European Mythology as Ideology and Science* (Chicago, 2006).

⁸⁴ John Burrow, Stefan Collini and Donald Winch, *That Noble Science of Politics* (Cambridge, 1983), chap. 7; Robert Adcock, *Liberalism and the Emergence of American Political Science* (Oxford, 2014), chap. 5; Duncan Bell, *Reordering the World: Essays on Liberalism and Empire* (Princeton, 2016), chap. 13; Sandra Den Otter, “The Origins of a Historical Political Science in Late Victorian and Edwardian Britain,” in Robert Adcock, Mark Bevir and Shannon Stimson, ed.s, *Modern Political Science: Anglo-American Exchanges since 1880* (Princeton, 2007), 37–65.

language “indicated kindred”—that the (purported) common language of the Indo-Europeans connoted a shared “Teutonic” descent. There was no evidence for this dangerous “speculative ethnology.”⁸⁵ A framework that exerted a deep influence on contemporary social science was based on fundamental mistakes about classification and generalization.

More dangerous still, Darwin’s ideas were being misappropriated. “The natural tendency of every human being towards a stupid conceit in himself and his kind, a stupid depreciation of all unlikeness, is traded upon by this bastard science.”⁸⁶ Instead, Wells cited Joseph Deniker’s *The Races of Man* as an authoritative view of the best available science. Deniker, a French anthropologist, had created an intricate cartography of the peoples of Europe, concluding that “race” was an unhelpful term.⁸⁷ Wells agreed, arguing that there were “probably” no distinct “pure” races in the world. Metaphysics reinforced the latest biological findings. The philosophy of uniques demonstrated that the “mania” for race was fundamentally misguided. Races, he had written in the introduction to *A Modern Utopia*, “are no hard and fast things, no crowd of identically similar persons,” but instead “massed sub-races and tribes and families each after its kind unique, and these again are clusterings of still smaller uniques and so down to each several person.”⁸⁸ Humanity was composed of a fluid mosaic of peoples, not homogeneous groups that could be ranked and compared. The fetish for classification was a serious impediment to comprehension. “The natural tendency,” he wrote, “is to forget all this range directly ‘race’ comes under discussion, to take either an average or some quite arbitrary ideal as the type, and think only of that.” Yet it was essential to “bear the range in mind”—“It is not averages that exist, but individuals.” Since all persons were “individualized,” Wells rejected claims that racial difference was inherent and “insurmountable.”⁸⁹ Produced by a toxic mixture of ignorance and poorly digested science, it was a social construct, not an ineliminable biological fact. In order to combat prejudice, he stressed the value of photographic collections such as *The Living Races of Mankind*, visual records demonstrating that people from around the world looked familiar. “There are differences, no doubt, but fundamental incompatibilities—no!”⁹⁰

⁸⁵ Wells, *A Modern Utopia*, 218. On the “mania for Teutonism” see Peter Mander, *The English National Character* (London, 2006), 86–105.

⁸⁶ Wells, *A Modern Utopia*, 219.

⁸⁷ Joseph Deniker, *The Races of Man: An Outline of Anthropology and Ethnography* (London, 1900).

⁸⁸ Wells, *A Modern Utopia*, 220, 23. See also *First and Last Things*, 67.

⁸⁹ Wells, *A Modern Utopia*, 220, 221, 222.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 223, 222; H. Hutchinson, J. Gregory and R. Lydekker, *The Living Races of Mankind* (New York, 1902). On the context of the book, and Wells’s use of empathy, see Jane Lydon,

Wells had a chance to test his views on race when he visited the United States in 1905. He wrote about his impressions in *The Future in America*, a book that generated significant attention. In chapter 12, “The Tragedy of Color,” he turned to the fate of African Americans. Horrified by what he found, Wells lamented the violence and injustice meted out by the white population, especially in the southern states. He was impressed by Booker T. Washington, who managed, Wells reported in a sympathetic portrait, to communicate the “monstrous injustice” of American racial bigotry, while arguing that “in our time and conditions it is not to be fought about.” In contrast, he noted that W. E. B. Du Bois, “the other great spokesman color has found in our time,” loudly denounced injustice, demanding that African Americans be treated as equal citizens.⁹¹ Thus Wells waded into a fierce debate about the nature of resistance to white supremacism. Du Bois had attacked Washington’s meliorative program in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), which Wells cited in his discussion.⁹² Wells was not an uncritical admirer of Washington. He praised him as a “statesman,” capable of grasping “the situation and destinies of a people,” and suggested that his approach to racial injustice—prioritizing black economic self-sufficiency over social equality and full political participation—had a greater chance of success than Du Bois’s otherwise justified anger, but he criticized Washington’s vision of racial coexistence on the ground that it presupposed much higher levels of education than were evident among the white population.⁹³ Ignorance bred injustice. The likely result of this lamentable state of affairs was the continued persecution of racial minorities.

For Wells the key to creating a tolerant society was a combination of socioeconomic reform and better education. Such education—informed by a healthy dose of philosophical pragmatism—would immunize people against the dangers of racial othering. “Ignorant people can think only in types and

“H. G. Wells and a Shared Humanity: Photography, Humanitarianism and Empire,” *History Australia* 12/1 (2015), 75–94. For the complexity of encounters with difference see Sadiya Qureshi, *Peoples on Parade: Exhibitions, Empire and Anthropology in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago, 2016).

⁹¹ Wells, *The Future in America*, 176. The chapter was originally published as “The Tragedy of Color,” *Harper’s Weekly*, 15 Sept. 1906.

⁹² W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches* (Chicago, 1903), chap. 3. In *Darkwater: Voices from within the Veil* (New York, 1920), 59, Du Bois invoked Wells as a sympathetic anti-imperialist. In an obituary in the *Chicago Defender*, 1 Dec. 1945, quoted in *Correspondence of W. E. B. Du Bois*, vol. 3, ed. Herbert Aptheker (Amherst, 1997), 93 n., he called Wells a “great genius.”

⁹³ Wells, *The Future in America*, 176. For a sympathetic portrait of Washington see Robert J. Norrell, *Up from History: The Life of Booker T. Washington* (Cambridge, MA, 2011). On Du Bois as a founding figure of sociology see Aldon Morris, *The Scholar Denied: W. E. B. Du Bois and the Birth of Modern Sociology* (Berkeley, 2015).

abstractions, can achieve only emphatic absolute decisions.” But enlightenment was a distant prospect. Most white Americans were incapable of thinking rationally about race, preferring to trade in crude stereotypes. “Uneducated men are as bad as cattle in persecuting all that is different among themselves.”⁹⁴ The British were little better. Settlers in the Cape, for example, displayed the same attitude: “the dull prejudice; the readiness to take advantage of the ‘boy’; the utter disrespect for colored womankind; the savage, intolerant resentment, dashed dangerously with fear, which the native arouses in him.”⁹⁵ Although Wells’s discussion was peppered with derogatory essentializing comments—African Americans were presented as vain, innocent and romantic, while Jews were characterized as greedy, self-serving and dishonest—his anger at racial injustice was palpable.⁹⁶

Cornel West once observed that American pragmatist philosophers tended, like most of their fellow citizens, to evade wrestling with questions of race. “If a Martian were to come down to America and look at the American pragmatist tradition, they would never know that there was slavery, Jim Crow, lynching, discrimination, segregation in the history of America.”⁹⁷ Peirce and James had little to say on the subject, while Schiller was a zealous advocate of the British Empire and racial hierarchy.⁹⁸ Although a critic of biological accounts of race, Dewey, in his writings about education before the First World War, defended an account of civilizational development and genetic psychology that, in combination, produced an ethnocentric vision of the backwardness of non-white peoples.⁹⁹ Some African American scholars, influenced by the swirling pragmatist current, elaborated arguments about the sociology and politics of race. The most sophisticated were produced by Du Bois and, a decade or so later, the philosopher Alain Locke, though it is only in recent years that they

⁹⁴ Wells, *The Future in America*, 177. Thirty years later Wells argued that nominalism should be taught in schools. Wells, *Work, Wealth and Happiness*, 68–69.

⁹⁵ Wells, *The Future in America*, 169, 170.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 169, 171, 177.

⁹⁷ “Afterword: A Conversation between Cornel West and Bill E. Lawson,” in Donald Koch and Bill Lawson, eds., *Pragmatism and the Problem of Race* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 225–31, at 225. For reaffirmation of the claim see Shannon Sullivan, “Race,” in Sami Pihlström, ed., *The Bloomsbury Companion to Pragmatism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011), 183–91.

⁹⁸ On Schiller see Skodo, “Eugenics and Pragmatism.” For an account of James’s scattered writings see Harvey Cormier, “William James on Nation and Race,” in Chad Kautzer and Eduardo Mendieta, eds., *Pragmatism, Nation, and Race: Community in the Age of Empire* (Bloomington, 2009), 142–62.

⁹⁹ For Dewey’s early views see Thomas Fallace, *Dewey and the Dilemma of Race: An Intellectual History, 1895–1922* (New York, 2011).

have become canonical.¹⁰⁰ Wells's writings on racial "science" and prejudice—especially those found in the best-selling *A Modern Utopia*—were among the most widely circulated early pragmatist accounts of the subject.

Wells's account of race attracted considerable interest. Horace Kallen's famous essay "Democracy versus the Melting Pot" invoked Wells as an authority on Jewish immigrants in the United States, as did Stanton Coit, the American-born founder of the Ethical Union movement, in his work on the sociology of religion.¹⁰¹ His account of racial bigotry also found an audience.¹⁰² He even provoked a book-length rebuttal, *Through Afro-America: An English Reading of the Race Problem*, from the journalist and critic William Archer, who dedicated it to Wells, "with whom I so rarely disagree that, when I do, I must needs write a book about it."¹⁰³ Combining travelogue across the southern states, Cuba and Jamaica with potted sociopolitical analysis, Archer addressed the "problem of the color line" to shed light on racial conflict in the British Empire. He assessed various plans for resolving the "race problem"—including those of Du Bois, Washington, Josiah Royce and Sydney Olivier—but focused much of his fire on Wells.¹⁰⁴ Rejecting Wells's suggestion that improving education was essential for a flourishing multiracial society, Archer argued that racial hostility was grounded in human nature—white animosity towards black people was "an unalterable fact of white psychology"—and could not be overcome. Consequently, he advocated

¹⁰⁰ For Du Bois's changing account of race see Joel Olson, "W. E. B. Du Bois and the Race Concept," *Souls* 7 (2005), 118–28. For some of Locke's early views see Alain Locke, *Race Contacts and Interracial Relations: Lectures of the Theory and Practice of Race* (Washington, 1916). Locke (like Du Bois) was a reader of Wells, though whether he knew of his views about race is unclear. Leonard Harris (ed.), *The Philosophy of Alain Locke: Harlem Renaissance and Beyond* (Philadelphia, 1989), 129, 131; Leonard Harris and Charles Molesworth, *Alain L. Locke: The Biography of a Philosopher* (Chicago, 2009), 36, 102.

¹⁰¹ Horace Kallen, "Democracy versus the Melting Pot," *The Nation* 100/2590 (Feb. 1915), 190–94, 217–20; Stanton Coit, *The Soul of America: A Constructive Essay in the Sociology of Religion* (New York, 1914), 50–2, 64. On Wells's anti-Semitism see Bryan Cheyette, *Constructions of "the Jew" in English Literature and Society: Racial Representations, 1875–1945* (Cambridge, 1995), chap. 4.

¹⁰² For example E. A. Ross, *The Principles of Sociology* (New York, 1922), 66; M. S. Evans, *Black and White in the Southern States: A Study of the Race Problem in the United States from a South African Point of View* (London, 1915), which draws on "The Tragedy of Color" (at 76–7, 144); Wilson Wallis, "Moral and Racial Prejudice," *Journal of Race Development* 5/2 (1914), 212–29, at 223.

¹⁰³ William Archer, *Through Afro-America: An English Reading of the Race Problem* (London, 1910). The book was reviewed positively in the *American Political Science Review* 4/4 (1910), 607–9, and less flatteringly in the *Sociological Review* 3 (1910), 250–51. On Archer's views see Paul Rich, *Race and Empire in British Politics* (Cambridge, 1986), 52–3; Lorimer, *Science, Race Relations, and Resistance*, 189, 225–7.

¹⁰⁴ Archer, *Through Afro-America*, 198 ff.

the creation of a new state within the Union to house the black population. Since “race problems” only arise when different races “are found occupying the same territory,” the best solution was to separate them. Wells, by contrast, had praised Olivier’s proposal to grant the “colored man a share in legislature and judicature under special conditions,” though he didn’t discuss what this would entail, or how it might be brought about.¹⁰⁵

Despite his disavowal of racial science, Wells ended up painting a racialized picture of world order. In part, this was because he lacked a coherent account of equality. He argued that assumptions about the equality of humans had been discredited by Darwin—people were more or less equal along different dimensions.¹⁰⁶ Some people were strong, some were weak; some were intelligent, others were not. Moreover, blanket claims about equality were incompatible with adherence to a nominalist metaphysics of the unique. Equality, then, was not an “objective fact” but “purely a convention of conduct and intercourse,” and valorizing the “false generalization” of equality hindered the “treatment of the individual upon his merits.”¹⁰⁷ It was better, Wells suggested, to acknowledge empirical inequality but uphold an ideal of equality before the law. “In a really civilized community equality and mutual respect must be the primary assumption of all social intercourse.” Such a view, he continued, “must not blind one to the real differences of personal quality,” including “such a fact as that a negro is usually simpler, kinder and stupider than a Beacon street Bostonian.”¹⁰⁸ Wells’s critique of equality thus acknowledged empirical differences between individuals—fitting his nominalist metaphysics and underwriting his account of the role of technocratic elites in shaping progress—while defending the social value of the rule of law. However, he did not specify how these divergent accounts of equality could be reconciled.

In addition, Wells’s eugenic commitments undercut his putative antiracism. The clash was at its most stark in *Anticipations*. While clear that there were no distinct races, his proposed treatment of the “inefficient” people of “the abyss” disproportionately affected non-white populations. “It has become apparent,” he warned,

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

¹⁰⁵ Wells, “Race Prejudice,” 384. On Olivier see George Mariz, “Sydney Olivier: Empire and Utopia,” *Utopian Studies* 1 (1987), 61–78; Francis Lee, *Fabianism and Colonialism: The Life and Political Thought of Lord Sydney Olivier* (London, 1988).

¹⁰⁶ Wells, *Anticipations*, 163.

¹⁰⁷ Wells, “Race Prejudice,” 383. See also Wells, *Mankind in the Making*, 26.

¹⁰⁸ Wells, “Race Prejudice,” 383

and detrimental in the civilising fabric, and that their range of incapacity tempts and demoralises the strong. To give them equality is to sink to their level, to protect and cherish them is to be swamped in their fecundity.¹⁰⁹

The “efficients” of the future would have to devise policies to accommodate these facts, aiming to “check the procreation of base and servile types,” even engaging in the “merciless obliteration of the weak.” For example, those with transmissible diseases would not be allowed to procreate, while the death penalty would be enforced for grave crimes. All of this necessitated a recoded understanding of death. The extermination of the “unfit” should be seen as a form of social hygiene, good for both society and those killed. The hard-headed citizens of the New Republic would “have little pity and less benevolence” for the swarming masses of humanity, “helpless and useless, unhappy or hatefully happy in the midst of squalid dishonour, feeble, ugly, inefficient, born of unrestrained lusts.”¹¹⁰ How, he asked, would the New Republicans “treat the inferior races”—the “black,” the “yellow,” and “that alleged termite in the woodwork, the Jew?”

Certainly not as races at all. It will aim to establish, and it will at last, though probably only after a second century has passed, establish a world-state with a common language and a common rule . . . It will, I have said, make the multiplication of those who fall behind a certain standard of social efficiency unpleasant and difficult, and it will have cast aside by coddling laws to save adult men from themselves. It will tolerate no dark corners where the people of the abyss may fester, no vast diffused slums of peasant proprietors, no stagnant plague-preservers. Whatever men may come into its efficient citizenship. It will let come—white, black, red, or brown; the efficiency will be the test.¹¹¹

Eugenic annihilation was not distributed equally. A *minority* of “white and yellow” peoples would be joined, he predicted, by a *majority* “of the black and brown races.”¹¹²

In subsequent writings Wells dropped some of his most radical eugenic proposals. Indeed he was often seen as a hostile critic of the “positive” eugenic programs advocated by many members of the Sociological Society.¹¹³ He promoted an alternative “negative” scheme. “It is in the sterilisation of failures, and not in the selection of successes for breeding,” Wells wrote in *A Modern Utopia*, “that the possibility of an improvement of the human stock

¹⁰⁹ Wells, *Anticipations*, 163.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 168.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 177.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 158.

¹¹³ For a high-profile example see Caleb Saleeby, *Parenthood and Race Culture: An Outline of Eugenics* (New York, 1910), 15–16, 48–50, 55. Schiller, an ardent eugenicist, also criticized Wells’s skepticism: Schiller to Wells, 23 Nov. 1903, Wells papers.

lies.”¹¹⁴ Such improvement would be achieved through careful legal regulation and financial inducements, not violence. Although he had dropped his earlier exterminationism, the interlacing of race and eugenics remained. Questioning whether there were “inferior” races, he was adamant, contra Aristotle, that “there is no such thing as a race superior enough to have tutelage over others.” But *if* there were “inferior” races, what role could they play in a utopia bound by Malthusian population constraints? The answer: they had to be “exterminated.” Recent history offered several models. They could be killed in the “old Hebrew fashion,” with “fire and sword,” or they could be enslaved and worked to death, as the Spanish did to the Caribs. Alternatively, they could be deliberately exposed to disease, a strategy that missionaries had employed in Polynesia. Another option was “honest simple murder,” as the English had employed against the Tasmanians. Finally, one might adopt a more enlightened form of annihilation, establishing conditions that conduced to “race suicide,” as British imperial administrators had done in Fiji. Wells concluded that the Fijian option was the least cruel, although he doubted that there was such a thing as an inferior race: even the Australian “‘blackface’ isn’t such.” Utopia nevertheless required a strategy to deal with the unfit. Public policies would be designed “without any clumsiness or race distinction.” Fitness, not group identity, was the key.¹¹⁵ However, Wells said little about whether fitness was equally distributed across populations, or whether he still believed that it was concentrated (though not exclusively) in certain groups. His updated utopian picture was ambiguous at best. While disavowing racial discrimination, and presenting a picture of a world characterized by harmony and peace, he left open the question of how different populations would be affected by the eugenic order that was necessary to govern social life.

Moreover, despite Wells’s skepticism about racial theorizing, he believed in the cultural and political superiority of the “English-speaking peoples.”¹¹⁶ They were united by a shared history, institutions and, above all, a language, not biological inheritance. In *Anticipations* he predicted that by the end of the twentieth century the United States and Great Britain would constitute a single political community, set to govern much of the world. In *Mankind in the Making* he was clear that this emergent polity was the true home of his New Republicans—the very “ideal of the Republic” was, he confirmed, “addressed to, and could by adopted by,

¹¹⁴ Wells, *A Modern Utopia*, 50. On the notable shift in his views on eugenics see John Partington, *Building Cosmopolis: The Political Thought of H. G. Wells* (Farnham, 2003), 54–63; Partington, “Revising *Anticipations*: Wells on *Race* and *Class*, 1901 to 1905,” *Undying Fire* 4 (2005), 31–44.

¹¹⁵ Wells, *A Modern Utopia*, 224–5.

¹¹⁶ For further discussion, see Bell, “Imagining the World State.”

any English-reading and English-speaking man.”¹¹⁷ Wells clearly regarded this as desirable, envisaging the English-speaking peoples acting as the precursor for a future world-state. He reiterated the argument in *Mankind in the Making*. *The Future of America*, meanwhile, contains extended passages criticizing European immigrants arriving in the United States as a threat to American stability and progress. Here, and elsewhere, he offered stark warnings about the “vast torrent of strangers, speaking alien tongues, inspired by alien traditions, for the most part illiterate peasants and working-people,” who were flooding American cities.¹¹⁸ Although such claims were not grounded in racial “science,” they aligned neatly with the wave of xenophobic fears about immigration pulsing through the United States and the British settler colonies.¹¹⁹ When *Anticipations* was reissued in 1914, Wells wrote in a new preface that the chapter predicting this future geopolitical constellation held up remarkably well. “For the most part it might have been written yesterday.”¹²⁰ He insisted that this community was grounded in a shared language, not in race, and he was scathing about the pervasive ideology of “Anglo-Saxonism,” viewing it as a fundamentally misleading classification. Yet the political entailments of his argument were often hard to disentangle from the dominant racial discourse. It is thus unsurprising that he was sometimes interpreted as an Anglo-Saxon supremacist. In a review in *Nature*, Frederick Headley charged Wells with endorsing the view that “Anglo-Saxonism will eventually triumph,” to which Wells responded furiously that he had said no such thing. “I repudiated this balderdash with some asperity.” Headley apologized for using the term “Anglo-Saxon,” while reiterating his point about the basic structure of Wells’s geopolitical forecasting.¹²¹ He had a point. While arguments grounded in language and the “Anglo-Saxon race” were conceptually distinct, the political upshot was not always easy to distinguish.

WELLS AMONG THE SOCIAL SCIENTISTS

Wells’s methodological writings on social science attracted little attention at the time, though they did not sink without trace. John Beattie Crozier was

¹¹⁷ Wells, *Anticipations*, chap. 8; Wells, *Mankind in the Making*, vii.

¹¹⁸ Wells, *The Future in America*, 123; H. G. Wells, “The American Population,” in Wells, *An Englishman Looks at the World*, 275–329.

¹¹⁹ See, for example, Marilyn Lake and Henry Reynolds, *Drawing the Global Color Line: White Men’s Countries and the International Challenge of Racial Equality* (Cambridge, 2008).

¹²⁰ Wells, *Anticipations*, x. Wells reversed this judgement in the *Experiment in Autobiography*.

¹²¹ Frederick Headley, “The Future of the Human Race” (29 Dec. 1904), in John Partington, ed., *H. G. Wells in “Nature,” 1893–1946: A Reception Reader* (Frankfurt am Main, 2008), 203; Headley, “Fact in Sociology” (16 Feb. 1905), in *ibid.*, 206–7; H. G. Wells, letter to the Editor, ? Jan. 1905, in *The Correspondence of H. G. Wells*, 2: 63–4.

unimpressed by his foray into sociology. Author of the eccentric two-volume *History of Intellectual Development*, and a firm believer in racial hierarchy and British imperial virtue, Crozier was aggrieved by Wells's assault on the scientific aspirations of the Sociological Society, and on his own work. He responded with a vitriolic article, "Mr H. G. Wells as a Sociologist," published in the *Fortnightly Review* in September 1905. While professing to have enjoyed *A Modern Utopia*, Crozier denied that it exemplified a new way of doing sociology. Instead, he argued, Wells's account was fatally flawed. Its critical edge was blunted by a misguided view of classification. Sociology, Crozier lectured, "deals entirely with the laws of *men in the mass*, who can be predicted not to fly off at a tangent from each other, but to follow their chosen leaders as surely, if not quite as regularly, as sheep, whether it be in matters of taste, of fashion, of art, of politics, or of religion." Rejecting the significance of Wells's nominalism, Crozier asserted that classification and generalization were essential methods of inquiry. He was equally scathing about Wells's utopian alternative. According to Wells, Crozier argued, "All you have to do" is "hoist your Utopia on high . . . and get men to gaze at it until they become thoroughly hypnotised and possessed by it." Wells did not posit any criteria for adjudicating between utopias, nor did he provide a transition theory to explain how his own preferred utopia could be realized. Crozier finished by lambasting Wells's "immeasurable complacency," and admonishing the "tone" of his remarks about Comte, Spencer, Kidd, Westermarck, Steinmetz and himself.¹²² Wells fired off a response to the *Fortnightly Review*, reaffirming his "aggression upon the scientific claims of sociology," and damning the efforts of Kidd, Spencer, Comte and Crozier as "interesting intellectual experiments of extraordinarily little permanent value."¹²³

Wells's lecture at the LSE also provoked a hostile reaction from the gathered members of the Sociological Society. This was unsurprising, for, as George Bernard Shaw observed waspishly, Wells was ultimately demanding that existing approaches should be replaced with the kind of speculative literary work that had made him famous.¹²⁴ Admitting that it was still in a "very nebulous condition," Benjamin Kidd defended the potential scientific validity of sociology against

¹²² John Beattie Crozier, "Mr Wells as a Sociologist" (1905), repr. in Crozier, *Sociology Applied to Practical Politics* (London, 1911), 98–112, at 105, original emphasis, 103, 106, 107–8. He was also critical of Wells's socialism ("The Fabians and Parliamentarians," in *ibid.*, 40–57, at 46–54). For Crozier's political views see his autobiography, *My Inner Life, Being a Chapter in Personal Evolution and Autobiography*, 2 vols. (London, 1898). Wells praised Crozier in *Mankind in the Making*, 358.

¹²³ Wells, letter to *Fortnightly Review*, ? September 1905, in *The Correspondence of H. G. Wells*, 2: 81, 79.

¹²⁴ *Sociological Papers*, 3: 373–4.

Wells's "drastic" attack.¹²⁵ Pointing to the success of the natural sciences, the eminent neurosurgeon and social psychologist Wilfred Trotter asserted the value of generalization and classification, while the Comtean economist S. H. Swinny castigated Wells for misunderstanding his hero. Geddes, chairing the session, lamented the "scarifying form" of Wells's critique, but thanked him for introducing discussion of the "Platonic ideal and method," and wondered, predictably enough, whether it might be adapted for urban planning.¹²⁶ Only Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson, the Cambridge philosopher—another favourite of William James—came to his defence, endorsing both Wells's critique of objectivity in social analysis and his utopian program. Once again, Wells gave no ground, reiterating his argument about the impossibility of prediction. "I do not think you are ever going to foretell in sociological science." Trotter and Edward Urwick later criticized Wells's position in the pages of the *Sociological Review*.¹²⁷ In 1918 the philosophers H. J. W Hetherington and J. H. Muirhead returned to it, challenging Wells's account of the "social idea." A decade earlier Muirhead had anointed Wells "the latest and most brilliant recruit . . . to philosophy as well as to Pragmatism."¹²⁸ Now, in their attempt to restate neo-Hegelian idealism, he and his coauthor insisted that Wells had been wrong to disregard the possibility of a science of society dedicated to tracing the "reality and direction of social purpose."¹²⁹ But such an engagement was unusual, and Wells's arguments faded from view. This is not quite the the end of the story, however. In recent years the social theorist Ruth Levitas has sought to rehabilitate the Wellsian vision, arguing that during the twentieth century sociology embarked on an unfortunate detour in seeking to establish itself as a science. It would be much better, she suggests, to follow Wells's demand for a sociological mission dedicated to the pursuit of utopia. The early years of the field contain the seeds of its future development.¹³⁰ Wells would have been delighted that he still has a place in the dreambook.

¹²⁵ *Sociological Papers*, 3: 371–2

¹²⁶ *Sociological Papers*, 3: 371–2, 375, 370–71, 374–5, 376. For a later response, acknowledging the diversity of sociology but, contra Wells, insisting that it could be scientific, see W. H. R. Rivers, "Sociology and Psychology," *Sociological Review* 9 (1916), 1–13, at 2.

¹²⁷ Wilfred Trotter, "Herd Instinct and Its Bearing on the Psychology of Civilised Man," *Sociological Review* 1/3 (1908), 227–48; Edward Urwick, "Sociology and Social Progress," *Sociological Review* 3 (1910), 139–49, at 143–4.

¹²⁸ J. H. Muirhead, "Why Pluralism?," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 9/1 (1909), 183–225, at 183.

¹²⁹ H. J. W Hetherington and J. H. Muirhead, *Social Purpose: A Contribution to a Philosophy of Civic Society* (London, 1918), 30–31

¹³⁰ Levitas, "Back to the Future"; Ruth Levitas, *Utopia as Method: The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society* (Basingstoke, 2013), chap. 5. Drawing on Levitas, Marcus Morgan, *Pragmatic*

In contrast to his methodological intervention, Wells's substantive political and sociological writings garnered wide interest. Indeed he was a prominent fixture in early twentieth-century social science throughout the "New Republic." His books were reviewed in the leading social-science journals, and he was routinely cited in public debates. He made a particular impression in the United States. Acclaim was far from universal—while some hailed him as a sage, others dismissed him as a superficial amateur.¹³¹ Charles Ellwood, one of the most prominent sociologists of the day, pinpointed Wells's "individualistic pragmatism" in his review of Wells's "delightful book," *First and Last Things*, but he concluded that "it is no unkindness to say that Mr. Wells is a literary rather than a scientific man."¹³² Most social scientists fell somewhere between excited celebration and complete dismissal, mining Wells's ever-expanding body of work for inspiration, concepts and hypotheses.

Wells was frequently cast as an authority on particular subjects, notably eugenics, the family and socialism. His work made several appearances in Robert Park and Ernest Burgess's monumental *Introduction to the Science of Sociology* (1921), a compendium of Chicago school insights, and the standard textbook during the interwar period. The authors referred to Wells as "our present major prophet" and listed his books as key bibliographical sources for a range of subjects, including "Social Forces" and "Social Disorganization."¹³³ He was a regular reference point in the work of the eminent Minnesota sociologist Arthur James Todd, who drew on Wellsian ideas about a plethora of subjects, including socialism, the family, education, utopianism and the nature of social inquiry.¹³⁴ Writing in 1919, the Columbia sociologist David Snedden, one of the most influential educationalists of the era, wrote that "H. G. Wells, perhaps more successfully than any other recent writer," had contributed to the "quest of

Humanism: On the Nature and Value of Sociological Knowledge (Abingdon, 2016), 79, 103, praises Wells's "humanism." Neither discusses his pragmatism.

¹³¹ Compare, for example, H. R. Mussey's review of *New Worlds for Old*, in *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 32 (1908), 32–4, with Albion Small's review of *A Modern Utopia*, in *American Journal of Sociology* 11/3 (1905), 430–31.

¹³² Charles Ellwood, review of Wells, *First and Last Things*, in *American Journal of Sociology* 14/4 (1909), 550–51, at 550. Ellwood recommended *New Worlds for Old* in his *Sociology and Modern Social Problems* (New York, 1910), 310. In *Sociology in its Psychological Aspects* (New York, 1912), 334, he criticized the thinness of Wells's definition of socialism in *First and Last Things*.

¹³³ Robert Park and Ernest Burgess, *Introduction to the Science of Sociology* (Chicago, 1921), 496, 498, 935. On Wells as prophet see also Edwin Slosson, *Six Major Prophets* (New York, 1917).

¹³⁴ Arthur James Todd, "Sentimentality and Social Reform," *American Journal of Sociology* 22/2 (1916), 159–76, at 162–3; Todd, *Theories of Social Progress* (New York, 1918), 5, 61, 67, 199, 460; Todd, *The Scientific Spirit and Social Work* (New York, 1919), 36, 74, 90, 93, 161.

the thoughtful man of to-day in his attempts to reach the goal of constructive good citizenship amidst the complexities of the social order now evolving.”¹³⁵ Wells appeared repeatedly in Snedden’s *Educational Sociology* (1922), his books listed as essential reading on “Family Groups,” “Social Efficiency,” and “Social Education,” as well as under “essential Sociological References.”¹³⁶ Other scholars cited his work on the nature of the family, and in particular his support for the “endowment of motherhood.”¹³⁷

It is unclear how much Wells knew (or cared) about the intricacies of professional American sociology. He read widely but unsystematically across many fields, without developing deep expertise in any, and he rarely identified his sources. In his discussion of race, he praised a paper on the social and psychological roots of bigotry by W. I. Thomas, the doyen of the Chicago school.¹³⁸ He was an admirer of Jane Addams and Du Bois. Intriguingly, Franklin Giddings made a number of appearances in his work.¹³⁹ In *A Modern Utopia* he described Giddings’s *Principles of Sociology*—probably the most widely read American text among European sociologists—as a “modern and richly suggestive American work, imperfectly appreciated by the British student,” and during his trip to the US he visited Giddings, “whose sociological works are world-famous,” in his office at Columbia, finding him “driven and busy.”¹⁴⁰ The respect was reciprocated. After reading Wells’s *The Future in America*, Giddings wrote him a strikingly effusive letter. “It is a wonderfully true book, and I am deeply thankful that you have said to the American people all the things which it contains. As a

¹³⁵ David Snedden, “Some New Problems in Education for Citizenship,” *International Journal of Ethics* 30/1 (1919), 1–15, at 11. Snedden taught at Columbia.

¹³⁶ David Snedden, *Educational Sociology* (New York, 1922), 291, 415, 681. See also Edward Ross, *The Principles of Sociology* (New York, 1920), 642–3; Ross, “The Principle of Anticipation,” *American Journal of Sociology* 21/5 (1916), 577–600, at 589; James Dealey, *Sociology: Its Development and Applications* (New York, 1920), 524.

¹³⁷ See, for example, C. Zueblin, “The Effect on Woman of Economic Dependence,” *American Journal of Sociology* 14/5 (1909) 606–21, at 611; J. E. Hagerty, “How Far Should Members of the Family Be Individualized?” *American Journal of Sociology* 14/6 (1909), 797–822, at 818; G. E. Howard, “Social Control of the Domestic Relations,” *American Journal of Sociology* 16/6 (1911), 805–17, at 813.

¹³⁸ Wells, *A Modern Utopia*, 220; W. I. Thomas, “The Psychology of Race-Prejudice,” *American Journal of Sociology* 9/5 (1904), 593–611.

¹³⁹ Wells, *The Future in America*, 187, 188. On Giddings see Daniel Breslau, “The American Spencerians: Theorizing a New Science,” in Craig Calhoun, ed., *Sociology in America: A History* (Chicago, 2007), 39–63; Robert Vitalis, *White World Order, Black Power Politics* (Ithaca, 2016).

¹⁴⁰ Wells, *A Modern Utopia*, 63. For the claim about influence see Albion Small, “Fifty Years of Sociology in the United States, 1865–1915,” *American Journal of Sociology* 21/6 (1916), 721–864, at 790.

general sociological description of the essentials of a big national society this study is immeasurably the best thing that has ever been done by anybody.”¹⁴¹ However, Giddings’s sociological work did not leave a lasting impression on Wells (or vice versa). This is unsurprising, given that Giddings made his name defending a Spencerian evolutionary account of social development, and proselytized the importance of quantification and the scientific method in sociological research.

Wells found an especially receptive audience among Progressive reformers. Charles Merriam, the ambitious Chicago political theorist, was a case in point. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Merriam observed in his seminal *American Political Ideas*, British writers, Wells included, exerted a substantial influence on the shape of American political thinking.¹⁴² “Often in the course of these essays,” he acknowledged, “I have quoted from H. G. Wells.” And indeed he had, drawing on Wells’s views about the nature of authority and the pathologies of the Gilded Age.¹⁴³

Wellsian ideas were partly channeled through the work of his friend and interlocutor Graham Wallas. The two men worked closely together in the first decade of the century.¹⁴⁴ They shared a skeptical view of contemporary democratic theory and practice, as well as of abstract and idealizing methods for analyzing society, believing instead that the application of psychology (especially of the Jamesian functional variety) offered a more realistic approach. Wallas was a huge admirer of Wells’s work. *New World for Old* was, he wrote, “far and away the best presentation of Socialism that exists,” and (like James) he predicted that it would be of “very great political importance.”¹⁴⁵ Wallas’s classic *Human Nature and Politics* bore the imprint of their collaboration. He endorsed the nominalism defended by Wells in “Scepticism of the Instrument,” followed him in stressing the significance of educating citizens about the state, critically discussed the Platonic aspirations of *A Modern Utopia*, and invoked Wells’s concept of “de-localisation” to emphasize how new transport technologies were transforming society.¹⁴⁶ Reviewing the book in the *Political Science Quarterly*, Charles Williamson was struck by the “general similarity” between Wallas’s ideas and *A Modern Utopia*, and noted that Wells was cited more than any other author

¹⁴¹ Giddings to Wells, 6 Feb. 1906, Wells papers, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.

¹⁴² Charles Merriam, *American Political Ideas: Studies in the Development of American Political Thought, 1865–1917* (London, 1920), 467–8.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 280, 28, 30.

¹⁴⁴ Martin Wiener, *Between Two Worlds: The Political Thought of Graham Wallas* (Oxford, 1971), 77–8, 107–8. He appears as Willersley in *The New Machiavelli*.

¹⁴⁵ Wallas to Wells, 10 Nov. 1907, Wells papers.

¹⁴⁶ Graham Wallas, *Human Nature and Politics* (London, 1908), 130, 192–3, 200–1, 272.

in the volume.¹⁴⁷ Much more successful in the United States than in Britain, *Human Nature and Politics* came to be seen as a key contribution both to the emerging field of political science and to wider public debate. The young Walter Lippmann was an ardent disciple, writing *A Preface to Politics* in part to spread Wallas's views.¹⁴⁸ The transatlantic reception of Wallas's work helped to propagate Wellsian ideas.

But Wells was also read on his own terms. William James's most famous political tract, "The Moral Equivalent of War," concluded by adopting a Wellsian argument about the value of military institutions in instilling social discipline.¹⁴⁹ Two texts in particular made a mark on social scientists and political thinkers. *New Worlds for Old* was regarded as a seminal contribution to the rumbling debates over the meaning of socialism.¹⁵⁰ *The Future in America*, moreover, was routinely cited as a source of productive insight about the social and political conditions of the United States. It should generate, James told him, "a lot of thinking in brains capable of it," and it could be counted as "good a service as a foreigner has ever performed."¹⁵¹ While it never reached these lofty heights, it did inspire much reflection. Wells's warning about immigration attracted considerable support.¹⁵² His account of American attitudes to the state also drew much comment. Wells had divined a pathological "state-blindness"—a lack of a "sense of the state"—as a defining characteristic of American society. Despite their proud patriotism, the typical American (male) citizen failed to recognize that "his business activities, his private employments, are constituents in a large collective process; that they affect other people and the world forever, and cannot, as he imagines, begin and end with him."¹⁵³ This myopic individualism simultaneously

¹⁴⁷ Charles Williamson, review of Wells, *A Modern Utopia*, in *Political Science Quarterly* 24/4 (1909), 696–701, at 700–1.

¹⁴⁸ Lippmann, *A Preface to Politics* (New York, 1913). On Wallas's role in the early years of the discipline see John Gunnell, *Imagining the American Polity: Political Science and the Discourse of Democracy* (Philadelphia, 2004), 114–16; Dorothy Ross, *The Origins of American Social Science* (Cambridge, 1991), 452–3.

¹⁴⁹ William James, "The Moral Equivalent of War" (1910), in *William James: Essays and Lectures*, ed. Richard Kamber (London, 2016), 274–86, at 284.

¹⁵⁰ Francis Coker, *Recent Political Thought* (New York, 1934), 101–2, 121, 145, 333, 352. While often critical of Wells, William Walling, the prominent American socialist, nevertheless drew on him when comparing British socialism and American progressivism. William Walling, *Progressivism—and After* (New York, 1914), xxv–vii, 28–9, 241. See also his *Socialism as It Is* (New York, 1912), xi–xii, 3, 62–3, 155–60, 296, 325.

¹⁵¹ James to Wells, 4 Dec. 1906, in *Correspondence of William James*, 11: 290.

¹⁵² For a particularly positive example see the review by Jeffrey Auerbach in *North American Review* 184/608 (1907), 292–301.

¹⁵³ Wells, *The Future in America*, 140. He reiterated the argument in *New Worlds for Old*, 111, 245.

fueled the hypercompetitive capitalist economy driving American growth and created the conditions—radical inequality and social dislocation—that were threatening its stability. The concept was utilized frequently by scholars and public intellectuals.¹⁵⁴ The young political theorist Francis Coker praised Wells for illuminating the lack of political imagination in American public life.¹⁵⁵ Wells had, wrote Garrett Droppers, an economist at the University of Chicago, “in a very acute way pointed out this characteristic quality of the American mind.”¹⁵⁶ In his 1911 presidential address at the University of Minnesota, the sociologist George Vincent acknowledged the force of Wells’s charge, but countered that American attitudes to the state were changing.¹⁵⁷ The young intellectuals who founded the *New Republic*, many of them steeped in pragmatism, were admirers of Wells. He was one of Randolph Bourne’s early idols.¹⁵⁸ In the *Promise of American Life*, arguably the most influential political treatise of the Progressive era, Herbert Croly borrowed one of Wells’s key concepts from *The Future in America* to complain that America lacked a national “purpose.”¹⁵⁹ Lippmann too drew freely on Wells, noting, among other things, that “Scepticism of the Instrument” was the best popular account of the critique of classification adduced by James and Bergson. Elsewhere he suggested that Wells and James “come nearer to having a vocabulary fit for political uses than any other writers of English,” as they had the rare ability to “convey some of the curiosity and formlessness of modern life.”¹⁶⁰ The critic Van Wyck Brooks viewed James’s influence more critically. In the first comprehensive study of Wells’s thought, he argued that the United State desperately needed such towering intellectuals to guide public debate, but he regretted that Wells’s pragmatism undermined his socialist credentials, driving

¹⁵⁴ Merriam, *American Political Ideas*, 386–7; Herman Finer, *Foreign Governments at Work* (Oxford, 1921), 16; G. E. Vincent, “The State University in America,” *Sociological Review* 9/1 (1916), 40–44, at 44; J. M. Mecklin, *An Introduction to Social Ethics: The Social Conscience in a Democracy* (New York, 1920), 9, 429; William Hocking, *Morale and Its Enemies* (New York, 1918), 80–82; Wallas, *Human Nature and Politics*, 192.

¹⁵⁵ Francis Coker, *Readings in Political Philosophy* (New York, 1914), xiii.

¹⁵⁶ Garrett Droppers, “Sense of the State,” *Journal of Political Economy* 15/2 (1907), 109–12, at 112.

¹⁵⁷ Vincent, “Inaugural Address,” *Science* 34/883 (1911), 733–42, at 734.

¹⁵⁸ Bruce Clayton, *Forgotten Prophet: The Life of Randolph Bourne* (Columbia, 1984), 70, 75, 101, 137–8, 238.

¹⁵⁹ Herbert Croly, *The Promise of American Life* (Princeton, 2014), 4; Wells, *The Future in America*, 21.

¹⁶⁰ Lippmann, *A Preface to Politics*, 118–20 (see also 10, 53, 111, 179–80); Walter Lippmann, “Taking a Chance” (1915), in Lippmann, *Force and Ideas: The Early Writings* (London, 2000), 97–100, at 97. Wells is also discussed in Lippmann’s *Drift and Mastery: An Attempt to Diagnose the Current Unrest* (New York, 1914), 286–7, 289–90, 318, and *Public Opinion* (New York, 1921), 140–41, 232.

him to overemphasize psychology at the expense of material economic factors.¹⁶¹ But Brooks, like many of his contemporaries, recognized the significance of Wells as a thinker and acknowledged his influence on social and political thought.

CONCLUSION

In an article published in the *Sociological Review* in 1910 the critic S. K. Radcliff observed that Wells was widely regarded as a “sociologist first and novelist afterwards.”¹⁶² While mischievous, this characterization contains an important truth: Wells made notable intellectual contributions to sociology on both sides of the Atlantic. His vision of social science encompassed critical and constructive elements. Both were infused with his pragmatist philosophical commitments. The critical project involved a rejection of the very possibility of social *science*. It drew heavily on his nominalist metaphysics, his skepticism about the fact–value distinction, and his view of the profound limits of human cognitive capacity and the signifying power of language. The constructive program insisted on the role of imagination in social thought and political action, and called for a “dream book” of utopian societies to stand at the beating heart of a newly constituted discipline. Wells was a *pragmatic utopian*: he viewed sociology as a fertile imaginarium, a source of ideas about how to radically improve society through understanding the historical development of a sense of collective consciousness, envisioning alternative futures, and motivating people to act on such visions.

Although Wells’s utopian method attracted little support, his wider body of social and political analysis found a receptive audience, within and outside the rapidly expanding university system of the anglophone world. But as academic disciplines professionalized, and as Wells embarked on endless new pursuits, his influence on scholarly discourses waned, although it never disappeared entirely. In the interwar years, both *The Outline of History* and *The Work, Wealth and Happiness of Mankind* provoked the interest of social scientists, and arguably he exerted a significant influence on mid-century thinking about international politics.¹⁶³ But when disciplinary histories of the social sciences began to appear in the closing decades of the twentieth century, Wells usually warranted only a footnote, if he was mentioned at all. This would have surprised him and many of his contemporaries.

¹⁶¹ Van Wyck Brooks, *The World of H. G. Wells* (New York, 1915), 178.

¹⁶² S. K. Radcliffe, “Sociology in the English Novel,” *Sociological Review* 3 (1910), 126–36, at 134.

¹⁶³ Partington, *Building Cosmopolis*. See also Or Rosenboim, *The Emergence of Globalism: Visions of World Order in Britain and the United States, 1939–1950* (Princeton, 2016), chap. 7; Bell, “Imagining the World State.”