

WORLD BRAIN

H. G. WELLS

FOREWORD BY BRUCE STERLING

INTRODUCTION BY JOSEPH REAGLE

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INTRODUCTION
THINKING ABOUT THE FUTURE

JOSEPH REAGLE

In 2100, an ordinary Londoner by the name of Graham awakens to three extraordinary facts. First, disturbingly, the experimental drug he had taken for his insomnia had been horribly effective, putting him to sleep for two centuries. Also, remarkably, he was now the richest man in the world because as he slept he received an inheritance that was deftly managed by a council of trustees. Finally, rather than a future utopia, Graham awakens to a world with the same “ancient antithesis of luxury, waste, and sensuality on the one hand and abject poverty on the other.” In fact, his trustees were now the rulers of the world, purportedly acting on his behalf. Once he comprehends the awesome magnitude of this, Graham exclaims, “We were making the future, and hardly any of us troubled to think what future we were making. And here it is!”

As an author of speculative fiction, nonfiction, and polemic, Herbert George Wells (1866–1946) thought about the future. In *The Sleeper Awakes* (1899), Wells was chiding his contemporaries for not doing the same. And like Wells did with many of his motifs, he returned to this concern over the decades, illustrating futures he feared and urging a response.

The present book, *World Brain* (1938), is a collection of secular sermons warning his audience of an impending apocalypse and his solution for its avoidance. Four of the five chapters are speeches given in Great Britain, the United States,

and France during a fifteen-month period around 1937. Like many, Wells still felt the pain of the First World War, and because “Versailles was no settlement,” he believed a future historian would call this period “the Frightened Thirties.”² He declaimed that only the foolish would ignore “the urgency we are under to establish some effective World Pax, before gathering disaster overwhelms us.”³

Wells rightly feared that the institutions of his day were not up to the task of averting another war. Humanity’s ability to transform the world had outgrown its ability to do so wisely. Wells marveled that he could circle the globe in the time it used to take travel from New York City to Washington, DC. Faster than that, even, was the ability to “speak to anyone anywhere” via wireless and cable. The problem was that the human “has become a new animal incredibly swift and strong except in his head.”⁴

Wells’s response to this danger was the promulgation of an encyclopedia by a world government. Because each individual lives in a society in which “fundamental instincts are altogether inadequate, he has to be educated systematically for his social role.”⁵ A World Encyclopedia “would hold the world together mentally” and become the means by which science would “enlighten and animate our politics and rule the world.”⁶ Wells was not the only internationalist of the time to foresee information networks—others include Belgian documentalist Paul Otlet (1868–1944)—but he was the most ardent and well-known.⁷

Today, Wells’s proscription for world rule sounds a bit Orwellian. At the time, Wells was desperate that an *Open Conspiracy* (1928) establish a *New World Order* (1940) of enlightened scientific socialism.⁸ Whereas these notions were sources of hope for Wells, who died in 1946, they frightened George

Orwell (1903–1950), who was a generation younger. Orwell wrote *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) knowing that the war had not been averted, socialism had fallen to Stalinism, and the world was being split into perpetually antagonistic spheres.⁹ It wouldn't be until the ending of the Cold War when another George, George Herbert Bush, again spoke optimistically of a “new world order.” Disappointment followed there as well, and now the phrase is used only by conspiracy theorists—Wells's term carrying Orwell's connotation.

Wells's World Brain was to be a central institution of his World State, leading to a World Pax. The present book collects a number of speeches on the need for and shape of this institution. Of the numbered chapters, the only one that is not a speech is a contribution to the *Encyclopédie Française*. This French compendium of easily updated monographs, bound in loose-leaf binders with a frequently revised index, inspired Wells to believe that, in time, it could become the basis of his encyclopedia.¹⁰ Though he conceded he might be dismissed as utopian, he thought his idea was also “a perfectly sane, sound and practicable proposal.”¹¹

Wells waived away specifics, such as who would acquire the work, fund its continued development, and create the global institution to tend it.¹² These issues could be resolved if he could rouse sufficient will toward an encyclopedia that “would bring together into close juxtaposition and under critical scrutiny many apparently conflicting systems of statement.”¹³

Clearly, Wells was proposing more than a reference work. The World Brain would “act not merely as an assembly of fact and statement, but as an organ of adjustment and adjudication, a clearing house of misunderstandings” such that “it would compel men to come to terms with one another.”¹⁴ It would not supplant or compete with existing institutions, but

act as a “clearing house” for them, “a supplementary and coordinating addition to their educational activities on a planetary scale.”¹⁵ In a few score years, “thousands of workers [would be] at this business of ordering and digesting knowledge.” And once in the hands of teachers and students, “there will not be an illiterate left in the world. There will hardly be an uninformed or misinformed person.”¹⁶ I’ll return to this claim later.

The preface and five main chapters of *World Brain* are complemented by five appendices, including two op-eds defending a controversial speech on educational reform and brief essays on the potential for American leadership, American and British relations, and the merits of English as a world language. These appendices shouldn’t be ignored; whereas the preface and first four chapters overlap, each appendix evinces sentiments that are important to understanding Wells and his ideas.

Wells’s view on education is seen in the fifth chapter, an address to science educators. As a young man, Wells had been a school teacher himself, and he wrote popular science (especially biology), history, and social science books throughout his life. He estimated that in his “particular allotment of vitality,” he had “spent a few score thousand hours” on these topics and their implications for the “future of mankind.”¹⁷ With respect to research, Wells alternated between wanting to work with universities while also distancing himself from their hidebound ways. While the *World Brain* would be a “cerebral cortex to these essential ganglia,” it would also stand apart. And when it came to schooling, he complained that primary school was rote and higher education was archaic—the medieval robes still worn on campus “were in the highest degree symptomatic.”¹⁸ Wells laments the “shocking illiteracy and ignorance” of many teachers and the time wasted on frivolous

topics, such as “the exaggerated importance attached to the national history and to Bible history in western countries.”¹⁹

The first two appendices, then, are his responses to the controversy following his call for educational reform. To the teachers he upset, he unapologetically reiterates: “We want more and better teachers. We want them urgently. Elementary education lags throughout the world. I stick to that.”²⁰ In the second, he again doubles down on his call to deprecate nationalist and religious topics from curricula. The latter, especially, gives “a false conception of man’s place in this universe.”²¹

Just as the numbered chapters evince Wells’s humanistic, cosmopolitan, and socialistic disposition, the final appendices reveal an Englishman smitten and disappointed with America. He was thrilled with Henry Ford’s foresight and ability to make a car for the common man—even if Ford was against unionism, was “prejudiced against Jewish particularism,” and was pessimistic about world peace.²² Wells was also fond of President Roosevelt—though the New Deal came up short. And Wells believed in a potential concord of English-speaking countries—hampered by Americans’ mythology about their War of Independence. English was spoken by three hundred million people. “Are we growing into one mighty community of ideas and sympathies and help and peace as rapidly as we might do? I do not think we are,” he wrote.²³ Wells suggested a system by which English speakers would circulate high-quality but inexpensive books at cost, and, of course, develop a global encyclopedia. He concluded, “We want a Henry Ford today to modernize the distribution of knowledge, make good knowledge cheap and easy in this still very ignorant, ill-educated, ill-served English-speaking world of ours. Which might be the greatest power on earth for the consolidation

of humanity and the establishment of an enduring Pax for all mankind.”²⁴

*

Wells thought, wrote, and spoke about the future across every genre. So, one cannot help but want to look back, reflect on Wells in his moment, and then ask if his future is really here?

With respect to the past, Wells was a man of his time. Having grown up in the Victorian era, he remained an Anglophile throughout his life. And in his early writing, he expressed common prejudicial beliefs. Wells was also a man ahead of his time. Even if English was to be the global language, he sought the advancement of all people. And he was willing to stand apart, casting off Christianity and many of his earlier, commonly held bigotries.

With respect to the future, Wells was prescient and was lauded as such with the advent of computer networking. In a 1994 edition of *World Brain*, Alan Mayne provided a seventy-page introduction connecting Wells’s vision to the technologies and organizations of the past two decades. Wells’s belief that a student could and should be able to access every important work in the world was technically possible. However, though there were “no decisive technical obstacles,” Mayne concluded that “the human obstacles are much more formidable” and “the bad trends in the human situation are racing ahead considerably faster than the good trends.” Much like Wells, Mayne continued to hope that the global situation “could be first recovered, then reversed into progress towards an optimistic scenario.”²⁵

Whereas the internet and nascent web received only a single mention by Mayne, subsequent scholars took them as an even closer approximation of what Wells envisioned. In 1999, Boyd Rayward wrote a more concise and critical “reassessment,”

highlighting Wells's utopianism, his inspirations (including microfilm and index cards), his parallels with the World Wide Web, and his problematic notions about social control and knowledge.²⁶ With respect to the last point, for example, Wells's earlier portrayal of *A Modern Utopia* (1905) is shocking in its ambition. Wells happily imagined a state in which every citizen is tracked by way of index cards: "From sub-stations constantly engaged in checking back thumb-marks and numbers, an incessant stream of information would come, of births, of deaths, of arrivals at inns, of applications to post-offices for letters, of tickets taken for long journeys, of criminal convictions, marriages, applications for public doles and the like."²⁷

Then in the next decade and the new millennium, I claimed Wikipedia was the fullest realization of the World Brain yet. Wells wrote that his World Encyclopedia would be "the means whereby we can solve the problem of that jigsaw puzzle and bring all the scattered and ineffective mental wealth of our world into something like a common understanding."²⁸ In *Good Faith Collaboration: The Culture of Wikipedia* (2010), I highlighted how Wikipedians adopt a "Neutral Point of View" (NPOV) so as to represent such a common understanding. Two Wikipedians, opposite in their beliefs, can nonetheless work together to document what those beliefs are, their origins, histories, and relative standing in reputable sources. This works at Wikipedia because the task is to describe things rather than decide what is right or what should be done. This epistemic stance is complemented by a guideline that asks contributors to "Assume Good Faith" in their interactions with others. Though I conceded there's much conflict at Wikipedia and the reference work would not bring about world peace, goodwill was necessary to its production and an occasional consequence of participation.²⁹

I concluded *Good Faith Collaboration* with a reflection on Wells and a small gift I received at Wikimania 2007, a gathering of Wikipedians. The bauble was Wikipedia's logo—an incomplete globe of puzzle pieces representing different languages—manifested as an actual three-dimensional jigsaw. I argued NPOV enabled different points of view to be fitted together and good faith facilitated the process of doing so with others. The logo, made real, was a perfect emblem of Wikipedia. And the parallels with Wells were striking.

Wells and others pursuing the vision of a universal encyclopedia had hoped that new technologies, be they index cards and microfilm or computer networks, might somehow address the difficult puzzle of the world's troubles. Even if more recent visionaries aren't quite as utopian—or perhaps naive—as Wells and Otlet were, there is a hopeful and global aspiration nonetheless. In fact, the motto of the Wikimania conference was “a Globe in Accord”—and I was struck by the multilingual participants wearing “I speak” badges enumerating the languages in which they could converse and help.³⁰

When I wrote this in 2010, the similarities between Wells's vision and Wikipedia were striking. Wells imagined that “The whole human memory can be, and probably in a short time will be, made accessible to every individual.”³¹ How? He predicted, “In a few score years there will be thousands of workers at this business of ordering and digesting knowledge.”³² At Wikipedia, that is now true, and when co-founder Jimmy Wales was asked what the early volunteers were up to, he explained: “Imagine a world in which every single person on the planet is given free access to the sum of all human knowledge. That's what we're doing.”³³ A variation of this statement would become the formal mission of the Wikipedia movement—all without any apparent knowledge of Wells and his words.

In 2020, however, as we face the emergence of mass surveillance in a “post-truth” world, it’s Wells’s naiveté that seems most salient. Wells imagined his “Modern Utopia” as being able to track every citizen’s life for the purpose of effective governance; China’s social credit system seeks to do the same.³⁴ Wells was unable to see the likely authoritarian consequences of such a system, and we seem unable to prevent them.

Wells was also too sanguine about “how manageable well-ordered facts can be made.” Even if there might be a time when “there will not be an illiterate left in the world,” the belief that “there will hardly be an uninformed or misinformed person” is wrenching.³⁵ Today, misinformation is rife even among those with access to a wealth of high-quality information.

Though we are fortunate Wikipedia has managed to become a community within which “many apparently conflicting systems of statement” can be represented, the world has no “organ of adjustment and adjudication” that can “compel men to come to terms with one another.”³⁶ Wikipedia’s success is limited to describing the world; governing the world is another much more difficult problem. To that end, Wells offered a vision of human rights and progress, driven by technology and science, under the omnipresent hand of the state. He did not appreciate the latter could exist without the former.

I don’t mean to imply that Wells was unfamiliar with the challenges of popular ignorance and political self-interest. He spent many words across the decades inveighing against them. However, as seen in *World Brain*, his mechanism of how a regime of facts, of compelled comprehension, would come into being was lacking. He seemed to believe that modern science and facts would, simply, erode away at the structures of parochial foolishness.

And the World Encyclopaedia's creation is a way to world peace that can be followed without any very grave risk of collision with the warring political forces and the vested institutional interests of today. Quietly and sanely this new encyclopaedia will, not so much overcome these archaic discords, as deprive them, steadily but imperceptibly, of their present reality. A common ideology based on this Permanent World Encyclopaedia is a possible means, to some it seems the only means, of dissolving human conflict into unity.³⁷

For Wells, scientists had dramatically expanded our knowledge of the world. Because of this, we had been freed from the limits of earth-bound muscle; we had even been able to take flight. Similarly, information had been freed from the binding of books—it had found a new home in microfilm with extraordinary fidelity and density; it could be distilled on index cards; and it could take flight over cable and air. Wells hoped for similar progress in individual and collective thinking—“quietly and sanely.” More than that, though, Wells *wanted* to believe it was possible.

Yet George Orwell argued this belief was dangerous in his 1941 essay, “Wells, Hitler and the World State”—three years before he conceived *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and three years after *World Brain*. Orwell had grown frustrated with Wells's obsession with a World Pax of science and reason. What was the point of flogging the idea, decade after decade, when none of the military powers of the day would accede?

All sensible men for decades past have been substantially in agreement with what Mr. Wells says; but the sensible men have no power and, in too many cases, no disposition to sacrifice themselves. Hitler is a criminal lunatic, and Hitler has an army of millions of men, aeroplanes in thousands, tanks in tens of thousands.³⁸

Orwell believed that the only thing that had sustained Britain in the face of Hitler was the “atavistic emotion of patriotism, the ingrained feeling of the English-speaking peoples that they are superior to foreigners.” Wells campaigned against such parochial passions, but without them, Orwell believed “we might be watching the S.S. men patrolling the London streets at this moment.”³⁹

Additionally, Orwell believed Wells was out of touch: stuck in the past and deluded about the future. As Bruce Sterling puts it in the forward of this edition, Wells had a tendency to fixate on “Utopia and Catastrophe,” rather than the pragmatics of the present. Orwell conceded that at the turn of the century, Wells had been right to champion reason and science against the aligned forces of “traditionalism, stupidity, snob-bishness, patriotism, superstition and love of war. . . . There was need of someone who could state the opposite point of view.” Encountering this point of view as a boy had been a wonderful experience for Orwell. In a world of dull-witted pedants, clergy, and parents, “here was this wonderful man who could tell you about the inhabitants of the planets and the bottom of the sea, and who knew that the future was not going to be what respectable people imagined.” Yet, “the singleness of mind, the one-sided imagination that made him seem like an inspired prophet in the Edwardian age, make him a shallow, inadequate thinker now.”⁴⁰

It was obvious to Orwell that new technology would not be a “civilizing” force as Wells and others hoped. Some envisioned an international cohort of aeronauts dropping pacifist leaflets on battlefields and extinguishing all hostilities. “Air globes” were distributed to classrooms, showing only the Earth’s cities in the belief that national boundaries were rendered irrelevant.⁴¹ In

reality, Orwell ruefully noted that the airplane “has hardly been used except for dropping bombs.”

Modern Germany is far more scientific than England, and far more barbarous. Much of what Wells has imagined and worked for is physically there in Nazi Germany. The order, the planning, the State encouragement of science, the steel, the concrete, the aeroplanes, are all there, but all in the service of ideas appropriate to the Stone Age. Science is fighting on the side of superstition.⁴²

Orwell believe Wells could not accept this and that “nationalism, religious bigotry and feudal loyalty are far more powerful forces than what he himself would describe as sanity.” In short, “Wells is too sane to understand the modern world.”⁴³

If Wells was too sane to understand the modern world, he did foresee elements of a future one. As few others could, he anticipated the probable course of information technology and its positive potential. It’s thrilling to look back and witness his discernment and to marvel at his optimism—despite any present-day disappointment and cynicism. Even his naiveté, in its way, is compelling and provides a lesson: we ought never assume that technological is necessarily progressive, that facts are easily arrived at or agreed to, and that “archaic discords” can be overcome “quietly and sanely” by way of a Permanent World Encyclopedia. Wells anticipated Wikipedia, yet we are still without a World Brain.

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