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Back to the future: Wells, sociology, utopia and method

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Abstract

This article explores the involvement of H.G. Wells in the early institutional development of sociology in Britain. It addresses Wells's aspiration to a Chair of Sociology as the context for his claim that that 'the creation of utopias – and their exhaustive criticism – is the proper and distinctive method of sociology', and the implications of a hundred years of suppression of utopianism and normativity within the discipline. It argues that Wells was substantially right, and that if sociology embraced the more utopian method of the Imaginary Reconstitution of Society, it would inform a greater range of social alternatives for confronting ecological and economic crises.

Introduction

H.G. Wells is not a name that figures prominently in the history of sociology. His principal intervention in the development of the discipline fell on deaf ears. It was a plea for sociologists to take utopia more seriously, and indeed an assertion that 'the creation of utopias – and their exhaustive criticism – is the proper and distinctive method of sociology' (Wells, 1907: 367). This article begins by outlining the historical context of Wells's intervention in relation to his involvement with the Fabian circle and the institutional development of sociology. The second part reconsiders Wells's argument and concludes that the central claim is right, if not precisely in the way Wells intended. It suggests that the institutional development of sociology, its defensive claims to scientificity, and its hostility to normativity in general and utopia in particular, have rendered the discipline both less interesting and less useful than it might be in addressing the combined social, economic and ecological crises that confront us at the start of the twenty-first century. We would be better served both as sociologists and as citizens by a more utopian method, one which embraces the Imaginary Reconstitution of Society (IROS) as an active device in reflexive and collective deliberations about possible and desirable futures.

Wells and the Fabians

Wells's claim about the relationship between sociology and utopia appears in 'The So-called Science of Sociology'. This was first given as a lecture to the

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Sociological Society at the London School of Economics on 26 February 1906, chaired by Patrick Geddes. It was published in *Sociological Papers* in 1907, and reprinted in a volume of essays by Wells, *An Englishman Looks at the World*, in 1914 (Wells, 1914). A preliminary version appeared in 1905, the year in which Wells published *A Modern Utopia*. A letter from Wells, published in October 1905 in the *Fortnightly Review*, defends the earlier article against criticism and summarises the same case (Wells, 1998 (**2**): 78–81). During this period, Wells was briefly but intensely involved with the Fabian circle. His first major literary success was *The Time Machine* in 1895. The following six years saw a spate of publications including *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, *The War of the Worlds*, *When the Sleeper Wakes* and *Love and Mr. Lewisham*. In 1901 Wells wrote a series of articles in the *Fortnightly Review*, subsequently published in book form as *Anticipations*, which predicted the course of social development in the twentieth century and looked to the emergence of a New Republic. As a result, he was sought out by Beatrice and Sidney Webb.

In September 1902 he was invited by Sidney Webb to join a new dining club and discussion group, a small group of politically motivated men known as the Co-Efficients (Harrison, 2000: 327). Its declared purpose was to convene 'a group of men of diverse temperaments and varied talents, imbued with a common faith and a common purpose, and eager to work out, and severally to expound, how each department of national life can be raised to its highest possible efficiency' (Mackenzie and Mackenzie, 1977: 290; Wells, 1984: 761). The twelve members of the Co-Efficients included both Halford Mackinder, an early member of the Sociological Society and Director of the London School of Economics from 1903, and William Pember Reeves, who succeeded Mackinder at LSE in 1908. In February 1903 Wells also joined the Fabian Society whose inner circle included, besides the Webbs and George Bernard Shaw, Reeves and his wife Maud – later author of *Round About a Pound a Week* (Reeves, 1913) – and Hubert Bland and Edith Nesbit. The Blands' somewhat unconventional household, and their circle of friends, was recently fictionalised by A. S. Byatt in *The Children's Book* (Byatt, 2009).

By the time 'The So-called Science of Sociology' was presented to the Sociological Society, Wells was openly critical of the Fabians. 'The Faults of the Fabians', which launched his abortive attempt at the radical reform of the Fabian Society was read to a closed meeting on 9 February 1906 (Cole, 1945: 5). Around the same time, Wells was involved with Eric Gill and the calligrapher Edward Johnston's Housemakers' Society which was concerned with the inefficiency of domestic architecture, and seems to have reflected concerns shared by Charlotte Perkins Gilman (MacCarthy, 1989). In the same year, Wells read a paper on 'Socialism and the Middle Classes', published as *Socialism and the Family*, supporting free love and the public 'endowment of motherhood' to free women from dependence on men (Seymour-Jones, 1992: 269). Similar ideas were discussed in *A Modern Utopia* (1905), while *In the Days of*

the Comet (1906) portrays the effects of the comet's vapour trail opening humanity to the light of reason and extinguishing sexual jealousy and exclusive monogamy. Wells's attempt to broaden the remit and social base of the Fabians failed, and he left the society in 1908. However, his interventions did lead to the Fabians allowing the formation of sub-groups, and thus indirectly to the formation in 1908 of the Fabian Women's Group convened by Charlotte Wilson, and an Arts group which included Eric Gill, Hilaire Belloc and G. K. Chesterton. Wells's involvement with the Co-Efficients, the Fabians and the early debates about sociology were thus contemporaneous and short-lived (Mackenzie and Mackenzie, 1977; Mackenzie and Mackenzie, 1987; Seymour-Jones, 1992; Wells, 1984).

The rift between Wells and the Fabians was personal as well as political. Wells is widely supposed to have had a sexual relationship with Rosamund Bland in 1907, although Michael Foot (1995: 86) argues that there is scant evidence for this. Rosamund was Hubert Bland's illegitimate daughter whom he had deceived Edith into adopting, and the supposed liaison invoked her father's somewhat hypocritical fury. By 1908 Wells was certainly involved in a passionate relationship with another young woman active in the 'Fabian Nursery', an infantilising term for the young Fabians. Amber Reeves, daughter of William and Maud, was a very clever young woman who re-vitalised the Cambridge Fabians while achieving a double first and involved in an affair with Wells. Amber became pregnant in 1909 and subsequently, without deceit, married another young Fabian Blanco White. Beatrice Webb appears to have played some role in eventually preventing Wells and Amber from continuing to see each other. Wells had consequently rendered himself *persona non grata* with the Blands, Reeveses and Webbs. He then wrote *Ann Veronica* (1909), a novel loosely based on the affair whose defence of free love caused public scandal, closely followed by *The New Machiavelli* which lampoons the Webbs.

The best accounts of Wells's relationships with women are by Ruth Brandon (1991) and Michael Foot (1995). Foot's biography glows with his own and Wells's commitment both to socialism and to sexual liberation. Foot argues that Wells and Amber were deeply in love, and cites critically a lengthy extract from Beatrice Webb's diary, in which she refers to 'poor little Amber', and complains of Wells's pursuit of the relationship 'without giving her guardians and friends any kind of notice' (Foot, 1995: 89–92). The episode also figures in Ralph Dahrendorf's 1995 history of LSE, since Amber's father was Director of the School at the time. Dahrendorf argues that Amber 'almost broke her father's heart', and that for him it was a calamity (Dahrendorf, 1995: 110, 117). He says 'Wells's seemingly insatiable sexual appetite was exceeded only by his indiscretions as an author. In *Ann Veronica* . . . he combined both and upset the parents more than words can tell'. Amber is again portrayed as a victim who 'survived' and found 'a gentle forgiving husband' (Dahrendorf, 1995: 117). The view from LSE changed little, it seems, over the intervening eighty-six years.

The Sociological Society, LSE and the Martin White Chair

These events coincide with the early institutional development of sociology in Britain. As Maggie Studholme (2008) has argued in relation to Patrick Geddes, the intellectual direction of sociology can only be understood in the context of this process. The Sociological Society was set up in 1903, funded by James Martin White and in part intended to provide a London platform for the ideas of Patrick Geddes, whose view of sociology, influenced by Pierre Le Play, was shared by White. The Society held its first meeting in 1904, and its proceedings for 1904 to 1906 were published as the three volumes of *Sociological Papers*, the forerunner of *Sociological Review*. Philip Abrams says that 'In these three volumes there are sixty-one definitions of the nature and aims of sociology. It is in this chaos that the origins of British sociology are to be found' (Abrams, 1968: 3). There was disagreement about the place of eugenics, statistics, civics, ethics, social reform and social evolution in the emergent discipline.

Key participants in the Society included Patrick Geddes, Victor Branford, Francis Galton and Leonard Trelawney Hobhouse, but its membership (408 by the end of the first year), scope and attendance were diverse (Abrams, 1968; Dahrendorf, 1995; Halsey, 2004; Studholme, 2008). Wells himself was closely involved in the early meetings of the Society, and was listed as a member of its Council in the first two volumes of *Sociological Papers* (for 1904 and 1905), though not in the following year. His commitment to the separate status of the society is doubtful. In February 1904 he wrote to Ralph Mudie-Smith encouraging him to join the Sociological Society (Wells, 1998 (2): 8). A mere two months later, he accused a depressed Branford of having lost the confidence of the Webbs, and suggested to Beatrice Webb that they should incorporate the Society into the LSE: 'But why shouldn't the Scl of Economics annex the movement & employ Branford's activity . . . & all the rest of the trimmings to some purpose' (Wells, 1998 (2): 26).

The LSE was set up by the Webbs in 1895 with a bequest from Henry Hunt Hutchinson of £20,000. But the development of sociology at the LSE was largely funded by Martin White. In 1903, as well as supporting the Sociological Society, he gave £1000 to fund a series of lectures on sociology at the University of London. In 1907, he also endowed a temporary lectureship in sociology, held by Edward Westermarck and made permanent in 1911; donated £10,000 to endow a Chair in Sociology; and funded a number of bursaries and scholarships. Despite White's expectation that Geddes would be appointed, the Chair went to Hobhouse – a figure whom even the British Sociological Association retrospectively described as 'lacklustre' (BSA, 2005). White went on to endow another post for Geddes as Professor of Botany in Dundee, an appointment especially designed to allow Geddes to spend most the year elsewhere. Geddes and Branford continued to work through the Sociological Society and the Outlook Tower in Edinburgh, and later through Le Play House and the Institute of Sociology, whose archives are now held by the University of Keele.

The outcome of the LSE Chair appointment is particularly ironic, since Dahrendorf (1995) records that Hobhouse did not particularly want the position, and vacillated for some time before accepting it.

There were, however, four, not two, contenders for the Chair. Halsey (2004: 22) suggests that one of these may have been Wells himself. There is no hard evidence for this, and by 1907 Wells was moving away both from the Sociological Society and the Fabians. What is abundantly clear is that in 1904 and 1905 Wells was seeking such an appointment (Smith in Wells, 1989 (2): 27). In April 2004 he wrote to Beatrice Webb about the Sociological Society, complaining that she was able to work for nothing, making life more difficult for those who, like Wells, did not have a private income. He suggested that she donate her wealth to LSE and draw a salary. Thus 'Who is going to pay £1000 a year to research professors when you had turned out the best work for nothing? . . . You make it nearly an impossible industry for unsupported persons like myself, & knock all the stuffing out of the arguments that might find a chair of sociology for me – not Kidd, not Geddes, not that flimsy thing Westermarck, but me to fill' (Wells, 1998 (2): 25).

In August 1904, he wrote (again to Beatrice Webb) ' I presume there is no hope of an endowment for me unless I get it myself, and sociology will have to be considered in suspense with me until I've got a war chest' (Wells, 1998 (2): 43). In May 1905, he wrote directly to the Prime Minister Arthur Balfour (whom he had met through the Webbs), asking for an endowment of £1000 to free his writing from the demand of the market place. 'I have thought, for example, of a text-book of Sociology that I venture would be a seminal sort of work. There's a good deal of activity in the directions 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' (Wells, 1998 (2): 72). Balfour passed this request to his Parliamentary Private Secretary, whose response was that he was not convinced 'that Wells was a true genius' and 'that sociology was not an exact science' (Smith, in Wells, 1998 (2): 73).

By late 1905 Wells's public position at least was to deny that he aspired to such academic recognition. His response to 'some fancied claim I make to consideration as a sociologist' was to 'eagerly repudiate so disastrous a claim' (Wells, 1998 (2): 79). It is nevertheless possible that his ambitions in this direction were reawakened with the endowment of the Martin White Chair. Studholme (1997, 2007, 2008) argues that the appointment of Hobhouse rather than Geddes to the Chair effectively prevented the engagement of sociology with wider environmental concerns, and that the dominance of LSE well into the postwar era compounded this. Similarly, if Wells had been appointed, the history of sociology would have been very different: both utopia and gender relations would have been central to the discipline from the outset. If 'The So-called Science of Sociology' is now treated as a mere footnote, if that, both in histories of sociology and in histories of Wells's own life and work, this may not have been inevitable. It should more properly be read as a serious prospectus for a quite different *and then potentially possible* development of

sociology – a kind of 'Lenin shot at Finland Station' for the discipline (Zizek, 2005) which is less repressive of normative and utopian aspects of social understanding. A larger project would be to treat the whole of Wells's output, including both the novels and his prolific journalism and non-fiction writing, as an alternative sociology. Here, I want to focus on how far, and in what sense, Wells's claims about sociological method in this seminal article are worth reviving a hundred years on.

A so-called science

If Wells made his intervention into a situation of considerable fluidity, it was nevertheless against the tide. He was attacking the one point on which there was some agreement, for if there was a consensus about the nature of sociology in those early years, 'it lay in the belief that sociology should be a science' (Abrams, 1968: 3). Wells himself summarises the article in his autobiography nearly thirty years later:

> In February 1906, I find that I was defending my method of approach to the problems of administration, at a meeting of the Sociological Society, in a paper entitled 'The so-called Science of Sociology'. . . . In this paper I insisted that in sociology there were no units for treatment, but only one single unit which was human society, and that in consequence the normal scientific method of classification and generalization breaks down. '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 in the real world with which to compare it. We have only the remotest ideas of its lifecycle and a few relics of its origin and dreams of its destiny. . . . Sociology 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, that is to say, in the highest sense of the word, literature'.
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> There were, I argued, two literary forms through which valid sociological work may be carried on; the first, the fitting of 'schemes of interpretation' to history and the second, smaller in bulk and 'altogether under-rated and neglected', the creation and criticism of Utopias. This I maintained should be the main business of a sociological society. This essay was a little excursion by the way and the subsequent discussion was entirely inconclusive. Mr. Wilfred Trotter thought it was an 'Attack on Science' and Mr. Swinny defended Comte from my ingratitude.
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> (Wells, 1984: 657–8)

This retrospective summary does not do justice to the case Wells makes. Wells had a better scientific education (partly under T. H. Huxley) than most aspiring sociologists. He makes an argument against reductionism, and thus, in a sense, for respecting the level of the social as something indivisible. He describes

Comte and Spencer as 'pseudo-scientific interlopers' (Wells, 1907: 365); he later wrote that Spencer 'came near to raising public shiftlessness to the dignity of a national philosophy' (Wells, 1984: 664). The claim that the methods of sociology should be akin to those of history is close to later arguments following Clifford Geertz that sociology, like anthropology, is best understood as 'thick description'. Wells had also spent a considerable amount of time studying classical and literary utopias, and had recently completed *A Modern Utopia* (1905) – modern, in the sense that it embeds the recognition that unlike classical utopias, any imagined alternative must now be both global rather than national and changing rather than static. But the relation between sociology and utopia is rendered in different ways. Wells suggests a project of 'utopography' – a mapping of all the different versions of the ideal society, 'a sort of dream book of huge dimensions . . . upon the Ideal Society. This book . . . would be the backbone of sociology' (Wells, 1907: 368; see also Kumar, 1987; Parrinder, 1995).

One might suppose that such an enterprise would generate a sociology *of* utopia, in which sociology is the dominant narrative and utopia the explanandum. That is the relation implied in 1979 in an article on 'Sociology and Utopia' (Levitas, 1979) and endorsed by Alan Warde in a discussion in 2010 at the first British Sociological Association Presidential Event on Climate Change. But Wells also construes sociology *as* utopia and utopia *as* sociology. Part of the reason for this relates back to his claim about the impossibility of comparative method, since there is nothing in the real world with which to compare society. Utopia provides a virtual point of comparison. Max Weber would not have wholly disagreed with this, since he explicitly describes ideal types or conceptual models as utopias (Weber, 1949). But for Wells the comparison is also prophetic and normative, measuring what exists against the direction of social development and, simultaneously, against the ideal society: 'Suppose now the Sociological Society, or some considerable proportion of it, were to adopt this view, that sociology is the description of the Ideal Society and its relation to existing societies, would this not give the synthetic framework Professor Durkheim, for example, has said to be needed?' (Wells, 1907: 367).

This is not a position wholly alien to sociology, certainly French sociology, either then or now. Emile Durkheim was among those presenting papers to the early Sociological Society. His *Division of Labour in Society*, published in 1893, is regarded as a canonical work in the history of the discipline. The third part of this book, 'Abnormal Forms', largely conforms to Wells's approach. For Durkheim, the normal development of society from simpler to more complex forms entails an increasing division of labour, and a shift from mechanical to organic solidarity. And 'Though normally the division of labour produces solidarity, it sometimes happens that it has different, and even contradictory results' (Durkheim, 1964: 353). The anomic division of labour, the forced division of labour, and the absence of appropriate regulation are all presented as observable phenomena and as departures from this norm. Durkheim went on to argue that 'the study of these devious forms will permit us to determine the conditions of the normal state better. When we know the circumstances in which

the division of labor ceases to bring forth solidarity, we shall better understand what is necessary for it to have that effect' (Durkheim, 1964: 353). Durkheim's mode of argument has generally been criticised both because of the hypothesis of unilinear development, and because of the 'illegitimate' normativity of the method. A century later, André Gorz argued that 'it is the function of utopias . . . to provide us with the distance from the existing state of affairs which allows us to judge what we *are* doing in the light of what we *could* or *should* do' (Gorz, 1999: 113). If not defining this process as sociology, Gorz at least endorses this normative approach as a proper perspective for sociologists.

Wells also argues that the interpellation of utopias is inevitable, and that it is better that this process be explicit than implicit. Similar arguments were to be made throughout the later twentieth century, as the assumptions embedded in 'value-neutrality' were repeatedly exposed. Wells insists:

> There is no such thing in sociology as dispassionately considering what *is*, without considering what is *intended to be*. In sociology, without any possibility of evasion, ideas are facts. . . . I submit it is not only a legitimate form of approach, but altogether the most promising and hopeful form of approach, to endeavour to disentangle and express one's personal version of [the Social Idea], and to measure realities from the standpoint of that idealisation. I think, in fact, that the creation of utopias – and their exhaustive criticism – is the proper and distinctive method of sociology. . . . Sociologists cannot help making Utopias; though they avoid the word, though they deny the idea with passion, their very silences shape a Utopia. (Wells, 1907: 367–8)

Wells's arguments did not catch on. In Britain at least, a view of sociology as a science still dominates and is propagated to lay audiences and novice students. It is reinforced by an increasingly utilitarian approach to schooling and higher education and an increasing commodification of knowledge. Steve Bruce's *Sociology: A Very Short Introduction* (1999) insists on the fact/value distinction as strongly as did Hobhouse. Bruce devotes an entire chapter to those he calls 'impostors', mainly comprising 'improvers and utopians' (Bruce, 1999: 83), although he offers no definition or discussion of utopia and the apparent object of his obloquy is social reform. Halsey refers to 'the rivalry between science and literature for ownership of the intellectual territory of social criticism and social reform'. This is partly a description of a historical polarity, but it is one perpetuated by Halsey himself when he describes 'the arts form[ing] a significant barrier to scientific sociology' in Europe (2004: 15). However it was precisely this positioning that enabled social theory in continental Europe to retain its critical edge. Halsey redraws the science/literature polarity as a distinction between explanation and interpretation, with explanation aligned with science and quantitative methods, interpretation aligned with literature, qualitative methods and cultural studies. He refers in passing to Wells's article on sociology (2004: 22), but depicts Wells simply as a novelist, ignoring his scientific education and his extensive and popular non-fiction writings: 'despite

the protests of novelists like H. G. Wells, sociology has persisted in its claim to scientific status, offering a rational and coherent account of human action' (Halsey, 2004: 7). Wells is not alone in being so relegated, for William Morris is also described as a 'man of letters', a designation that would have provoked the craftsman and revolutionary socialist Morris to apopleptic rage (Halsey, 2004: 22). And Halsey quotes Runciman's declaration that 'post-modernism has retreated, taking with it those aspects of the study of behaviour which properly belong with literature rather than science' (cited in Halsey, 2004: 16).

As Halsey observes, the insistence on scientificity is a peculiarly British phenomenon. It is linked to a culture of anti-intellectualism and utilitarianism even among intellectuals. It is also linked to the difficulties of establishing sociology as a 'respectable' discipline. Abrams (1968: 65) notes that the growth of sociology in the early years of the twentieth century was inhibited by its non-recognition by the older Universities as an actual or potential discipline. And this may, as he says, also have contributed to Geddes's rejection for the Martin White Chair. Geddes was explicitly opposed to erecting boundaries between disciplines in the study of work, place and people, a position clearly at odds with emergent formal differentiation of both geography, pioneered by Mackinder, and sociology. Abrams also suggests that the very possibility of access to political and reforming routes created a supply-side problem in the growth of sociology. It is notable that in *Durkheim is Dead!*, a riff on the history of the discipline set around 1910, the sole British player, apart from Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson, is Beatrice Webb (Berger, 2003). The suppression of normativity and utopianism in sociology is, arguably, due to this quest for respectability through recognition as a science. It is also one of the reasons sociology is so boring: knowledge rendered unimaginatively may result from deep self-censorship. For Wells is surely right that sociologists carry silent utopias in their work, both as inspiration and substance. Most sociologists who work in fields of social inequality – economic inequality, class, gender, ethnicity – are driven by a critical conviction that these inequalities are damaging and wrong. Somewhere underpinning this is an implicit idea of a good society in which such inequalities are absent. The caution in expressing this is much greater in sociology than in, say, political theory where normativity is accepted and thus utopianism more admissible. The opening paragraph of a recent collection of essays on *Globalisation and Utopia* endorses utopianism as a mode of political thinking:

> To be utopian, we suggest, is the stuff of politics, and it first involves subjecting the politics of the present to critique. Secondly, it involves imagining human communities that do not yet exist and, thirdly, it involves thinking and acting so as to prevent the foreclosure of political possibilities in the present and future. The perspective adopted in this book is that the question of how to anticipate and imagine communities that 'do not yet exist' animates many critical socio-political engagements with contemporary globalization.
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> (Hayden and el-Ojeili, 2009)

The authors do go on to discuss Wells. But even though one of the authors is a sociologist, it would have been much more difficult and contentious to have written:

> To be utopian, we suggest, is the stuff of sociology, and it first involves subjecting the society of the present to critique. Secondly, it involves imagining human communities that do not yet exist and, thirdly, it involves thinking and acting so as to prevent the foreclosure of social possibilities in the present and future.

Venturing into prescription is usually regarded as straying from sociology: safety lies in not doing so. And indeed sociologists may be right that *in their case* open normativity detracts from public respectability. Malcolm Wicks MP, previously Minister for Energy and from 2009 the Prime Minister's special representative on international energy issues, opened the BSA Presidential Event on Climate Change. He said that the moment social scientists crossed the line from factual evidence to advocacy, they are of no further use to government. As Tim Jackson responded, they may however be of much greater use to humanity.

Our present predicament

This BSA event was significant partly as a demonstration of the engagement of sociologists with our current predicament. By this I do not mean the predicament of sociology. This of course is severe and may have far-reaching consequences for the discipline. Huge cuts to the Higher Education and public sector budgets, widespread institutional restructuring and job losses, and an increasing Gradgrindish emphasis on educational qualifications as marketable commodities, are likely to combine to reduce both the demand for and the supply of dedicated sociology departments and degree courses. This is virtually certain to reduce the remaining small space in academia for critical social theory. But the potential extinction of human beings, or at least widespread death and disruption in the wake of climate change and the pressure of ecological limits, is a much greater worry. In these circumstances, it is scarcely possible to agree with Bruce that 'an academic discipline can function only if it is driven by its own concerns and not those of others' (Bruce, 1999: 84), or that 'agendas external to the discipline are an unhelpful distraction' (Bruce, 1999: 88). Participants in the Presidential Event questioned whether sociology has anything distinctive to offer in thinking about possible sustainable futures and modes of reaching them. The answer is clearly yes, but it demands modes of thinking that are explicitly utopian *in method*. Such a claim involves exploring the relationship between sociology and utopia, sociology as utopia and utopia as sociology. It will lead us to a different rendering of these relations than Wells suggested, and above all does not embed a single model of an ideal society as aspiration or to which we are tending.

Utopia and sociology

Utopia is a contested concept. Lay understandings are generally either dismissive or hostile, seeing utopianism as at best impractical dreaming, at worst totalitarian hubris. They overlap with an often uncritical approach that identifies utopia with a literary genre, and posits a 'utopian tradition' including writers such as Plato, and Thomas More as well as Edward Bellamy, William Morris, Wells himself and more recently feminist utopians such as Ursula Le Guin and Marge Piercy. Beyond literary and science fiction studies, theorists use the term in a range of different ways, often in direct contradiction of each other. Thus Marx used the term 'utopian' for those socialists whom he saw as 'unscientific', in that they did not address or understand the material basis of social change. Those same utopian socialists accepted the division between utopia and science, but regarded themselves as scientific. Conversely, Karl Mannheim defined utopia as that which brings change about (Mannheim, 1979) – quite explicitly distancing the category of utopia from depictions of ideal worlds which, he argued, were frequently ideological rather than transformative.

As I have argued before, there are strong arguments for adopting a broad, analytical definition rather than one based on content, form or function, if only because it enables the more sociological approach of tracking these change in different historical circumstances. In this sense, utopia may be understood as the expression of the desire for a better way of being or of living (Levitas, 1990, 2010). Such a definition is closer to that of Ernst Bloch, the Marxist philosopher whose three-volume *The Principle of Hope* is an unavoidable landmark in the study of utopia (Bloch, 1986). Bloch argues that human experience is marked by lack and longing, giving rise to a utopian impulse, the propensity to long for and imagine alternative ways of being. Crucially, however, he said that this longing cannot be articulated other than through imagining the means of its fulfilment. In this sense, everything that reaches to a transformed existence can be considered to have a utopian aspect – and the whole of philosophy, and much else besides, becomes implicated in the idea of utopia. The generic utopian content lies in the attempt to grasp the possibility of a radically different human experience, and entails a form of anticipatory consciousness. Bloch's key concept is the 'not yet', carrying the double sense of not *yet*, but an expected future presence, and still *not*, a current absence. For Bloch, representation of what is must include the horizon of future possibilities, possibilities which are always plural, and which are dependent on human agency for their actualisation. Wishful thinking is the beginning of this transformative agency, but it is only by the *education* of hope that this move can take place. Such a definition goes beyond, but includes, the more common descriptive definition of utopia as a reasonably holistic description of an alternative society that is characteristic in discussions of a putative literary genre. Both senses of the term are relevant to a utopian method in the social sciences (Moylan and Baccolini, 2007), but the latter is closer to Wells's intentions.

Bloch's approach allows for the expression of utopia to be fragmentary or fleeting. Classical sociology, in contrast, was essentially holistic, although sociology also has its origins in the quest for a better world. This is most obviously true of such early 'founding fathers' as Comte and Saint-Simon, while all of Marx's writing is infused with the desire for the world to be otherwise. But in fin-de-siècle social thought the connection between sociology and utopia was closer. Besides Wells's own work, the fifteen years before the founding of the Sociological Society saw the publication of a series of texts that are 'classics' of utopianism, of feminism, of sociology. They include Bellamy's *Looking Backward* [1888] which was, unlike most utopias, intended as a blueprint, and which spawned a vast political movement in the United States. *Looking Backward* appears never to have been out of print. In 1948 in Britain, the *Daily Herald* carried a review which said 'A Prophet gets reprinted – and he's right so far'. *Looking Backward* was the immediate trigger for Morris's *News from Nowhere*, written as a riposte to Bellamy, and originally serialised in *Commonweal* in 1890. Morris would no more have described himself as a sociologist than a man of letters: he was an artist, craftsman, and energetic political agitator, both a Marxist and an exponent of a kind of Ruskinian moral economy. The American sociologist Charlotte Perkins Gilman authored the classic feminist text *Women and Economics*, first published in 1898 and for which she claimed the influence of Geddes. She also wrote a series of utopias beginning with *Herland*, serialised in *The Forerunner* in 1915 (Gilman, 1979). We can add to this list Emile Durkheim's *De la Division du Travail Social* (*Division of Labour in Society*) (1893); Friedrich Engels's *The Origins of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884); Bellamy's *Equality*, the 1897 sequel to *Looking Backward*. This list is illustrative rather than definitive or exhaustive.

Looking at these works, one can identify strong similarities between what are now deemed 'sociology' and 'utopia'. All of them contain a great deal of recognisable sociological explanation (even if we would now regard it as wrong, in both the sociological and utopian texts), as well as a great deal of utopian aspiration, the delineation of a better world, and a generous helping of prediction. Kumar (1978) argues that classical sociology, in Marx Weber and Durkheim, involves a foreshortening of view in which the perceived future is collapsed back into the present. As argued above, Durkheim's book, a founding classic of sociology, is deeply utopian both in intent and content, reading the *actual* state of the world as pathological, contrasted with a benign normality which *should have* happened, and which must and will. The 'normal' course of events is wholly congruent with the fictional evolution of the socialist state outlined by Bellamy. What is specifically *sociological* about Morris is the demonstration of the connectedness of work, art, social relations, space and human happiness. This connectedness, and especially the connection between individual biography and history, is the very essence of the sociological imagination (Mills, 1959). Morris preserves the element of desire at the core of utopia, but offers an argument about the condition of its realisation. Later commentaries on utopia have used Morris's *News from Nowhere* to challenge

the idea that utopia is necessarily totalitarian; and to make another, larger claim that the primary function of utopia, especially in this more holistic form, is the *education of desire*. Utopia creates a space in which the reader is addressed not just cognitively, but experientially, and enjoined to consider and feel what it would be like not just to live differently, but to want differently. As a result the taken-for-granted nature of the present is disrupted.

The parallels between sociology and utopia, if utopia is understood in its more holistic sense, are indeed striking. But sociology foregrounds what utopia backgrounds, and utopia foregrounds what sociology represses. Sociological models of how the world works are explicitly holistic, descriptive, explanatory and present (or past) oriented. They are, necessarily, imaginary. The construction of a model or theory about how society works is an imaginary reconstitution of society. Such models are sometimes explicitly critical, normative, and prescriptive, but more usually implicitly so: our very silences shape utopias. Utopian models, on the other hand, are explicitly holistic, imaginary, critical, normative, prescriptive and often future-oriented. On the other hand, most of them contain descriptions of present conditions, not just as a foil for the better utopia, but as a generalised explanation of how social processes work, and therefore what needs to change. In this sense, they are present-oriented – so much so that some commentators would say that utopias are *always* primarily about the present, their function *always* primarily critical. The centrality of explanatory models cuts straight across the dichotomy of science as explanation, literature as interpretation. But utopia involves the imaginary reconstitution of society in a slightly different sense: it is, precisely, the imagining of a reconstituted society, society imagined otherwise, rather than merely society imagined.

The imaginary reconstitution of society

Utopianism can thus be seen as thus a kind of speculative sociology, an attempt to explore and predict what might be, and to expose it to judgement. Establishing the parallels between sociology and utopia does not necessarily demonstrate that utopia is either a distinctive, or a good, method for sociology. It could after all be a reason to take sociology less seriously, rather than to take utopia more seriously. Kumar (1990), discussing Wells's article, suggests that it is sociology that is in need of revision, but does not develop what this would mean. My contention is that by thinking about utopia as a method, and specifically in thinking about it as a method *rather than a goal*, we can think more effectively about alternative futures. And that is necessary, given both environmental constraints and the economic crisis. For if the old argument against utopia is that 'socialism doesn't work', what is now evident is that capitalism doesn't work either. Moving on from here requires a level of holistic and institutional thinking that only sociology, or an integrated, interdisciplinary social science including sociology, can attempt, and for political effectiveness, a capacity for the education of desire that only utopia can offer.

What might such a method look like? Utopia as method, the Imaginary Reconstitution of Society, has three modes. The first two of these are an analytical, *archaeological* mode and a constructive, *architectural* one; the third is, for want of a better term, *ontological*. In its archaeological mode, IROS involves excavating from political discourse the underpinning model of the good society, piecing together actions, statements and silences into something resembling a coherent whole, in order to lay this open to open to scrutiny and to public critique. Most political programmes have at their heart an image of the good society, even as they typically deny their own utopianism and direct the term with hostility at others. This practice is noted by Mannheim, and by Bauman (1976) in *Socialism: the Active Utopia*, where, following Mannheim, he observes that the struggle for the future is in part a contest between class-based projects and aspirations. In this sense, both the New Right and New Labour were utopian projects, albeit in both cases class war from above. It is quite wrong to read New Labour as characterised by managerial pragmatism: this claim ('what works') disguises precisely the meritocratic utopia satirised in 1958 by Michael Young in *The Rise of the Meritocracy*. The point of this – part of Wells's 'exhaustive criticism' – was, as Young reiterated in 2001, that meritocracy was ultimately neither possible nor desirable, if only because the middle classes will do anything to prevent their dimmer offspring from descending the social scale (Young, 2001). Curiously, Halsey apparently misinterprets Young's book and suggests comparing his 'utopia' with Durkheim's 'dream for France' (notably not referred to as a Utopia). Halsey says 'Michael Young was content to leave his readers with a now famous formula: IQ = E = M, where IQ is measured intelligence, E is effort, and M is merit. Sociologically this is a good frame' (Halsey, 2004: 110–11).

We need this archaeological mode in relation to the explanations that are given for contemporary conditions, for implicit projections and for explicit policy proposals for sustainable futures. But we also need a holistic modelling of alternatives: IROS in architectural mode. What, for example, are the implications of global warming for social life, for how, and indeed where, we might live? What are the implications of forced migration, or resource depletion? If everyone in the world used resources at the rate of London, we would need three planets rather than one. Looked at in this way, it is perhaps the project of continuing economic growth that appears utopian in the pejorative sense, rather than the imagining of alternatives. The point of the Imaginary Reconstitution of Society is that rather than positing individual lifestyle changes, it demands a more holistic and institutionally specific look at the collective alternatives open to us. This architectural mode is much more difficult, especially for sociologists, because it contradicts disciplinary traditions. Nevertheless, if we avoid this, we cede the ground to those with far less understanding of social processes. At present the climate change agenda is being dominated by scientists who are overly optimistic about technological solutions and who regard the role of social science as one of persuasion and behavioural manipulation after the fact. There is little understanding of the way in which both the

production and use of technologies are embedded in forms of livelihood and ways of life. Above all, there is little challenge to economic growth as presently understood and measured, or capitalist relations of production. Elsewhere (Levitas, 2010a) I sketch what some elements of an alternative future might incorporate: rethinking what constitutes wealth, 'production' and growth; making sustainability central; revaluing care and thinking in terms of the total social organisation of labour; promoting and achieving equality; introducing basic income guarantees; rethinking wellbeing. But the point here is simply that such alternatives need to be part of the sociological enterprise. Nor is this simply a matter of external forces and external structures, systems of production, consumption and distribution. The structures of feeling, and of desires and wants that accompany them, also need to be understood holistically.

Of course it is impossible in 2010 to believe, as Wells apparently once did, that there is even in principle a single model of the good society that could constitute a regulative ideal. Utopias are thus necessarily multiple. Moreover, no actual imaginary reconstitution of society can adequately articulate the desire for a better life; nor can it at the practical level resolve all present problems without producing new ones, so all utopias are necessarily provisional. Wells was working with a very modernist model of utopia, and of sociology. Over the last century, utopianism has become more fragmentary, cautious, and open, and concerned more with process than with content, producing increasingly reflexive and internally critical narratives (Moylan, 1986; Moylan and Raffaella, 2007; Levitas, 2000). This change has also been characteristic of sociology. Still less can we believe that a passing comet, or progress either as evolution or revolution, will deliver us into this condition: 'our own right hands the chains must shiver, chains of hatred, of greed, of fear'. Wells would scarcely have sung the *Internationale*, but he also believed progress to entail human agency.

This brings us to the third mode of the utopian method, the *ontological* mode The description of utopia as a space for the education of desire underlines the point that the imagination of society otherwise involves imagining ourselves otherwise. This is a central element of *In the Days of the Comet* and *Ann Veronica*. Imagining ourselves otherwise is not an impossible project; we do it all the time. We play routinely with narratives of self that place us in other relationships, with better bodies and more money, in smarter houses, as more effective operators in the world. Such fantasies, to which advertising appeals, are for Bloch the beginning of utopian desire for a better life and a better world. The challenge always is to free these at least partially from the trap in which the wishes of the weak are only those which the powerful wish them to have. In *A Modern Utopia* Wells encounters his 'best self': taller, stronger, more elegant and a member of the ruling elite, but eminently recognisable. The Fabians were also apt to imagine other people otherwise, especially the lower classes. The fear of addressing what kind of subjects or agents might effect or inhabit future societies is partly a proper suspicion of where this might lead. Utopianism is still often pilloried for doing violence to human nature, and the increasing turn to evolutionary

psychology downplays the extent to which human nature is inevitably completed by, mediated by and expressed in social structures and cultural formations. Here too it is necessary to interrogate the subjects interpellated in different scenarios. Versions of human nature are at work in all the current attention to happiness and wellbeing that risk being substituted for material equity. The scope for behavioural manipulation runs through policy documents, perhaps especially those concerned with 'welfare reform' (both of which terms beg a great many questions). But again, an archaeology of ontologies is much less contentious than positing potential alternatives.

Nevertheless, it is essential in considering possible futures to think about human wellbeing. The conventional Marxist position is that this is impossible, since we cannot predict the needs and wants of people in a future society. And, as Fredric Jameson (1982, 2005) argues we are also limited by what it is possible for us, in our historically specific context, to imagine. Yet the fact that our imaginings will fall short and will end in necessary failure does not excuse us from trying. Human needs can only be specified abstractly: food, shelter, social interaction, status and recognition. Their concrete satisfaction is always sought in a matrix of socially defined needs, wants and satisfactions (Leiss, 1978). Human survival demands that this matrix is oriented away from material consumption and high carbon emissions. Equity demands that they are oriented away from forms of consumption based on exploitative and unfair trading relations. Human happiness demands that we find ways of engaging with one another that allow less fear, more genuine connection, more love (and, Wells would have insisted, better sex).

One approach is to stop at specifying the resources people will need to define and effect collectively their own wellbeing. But that may be an evasion. A different approach can be found in the work of Roberto Unger (1984, 1998, 2007) who marks out clearly a utopian ontology (although he would balk at both terms), a way of being in the world which allows deeper and more satisfying human relationships. Unger suggests that we need to be able to imagine ourselves not radically other, but slightly other, to enable ourselves to act differently in the world; and through the collective improvisation of institutions, to open up new possibilities for the future and new possibilities for ourselves. It is an approach which could perhaps be mapped on to the Transitions movement, which looks for ways to develop sustainable ways of living, starting from where we are, especially in towns; and which incorporates considerations of necessary self-transformation in 'Transitions Hearts and Minds'. But above all Unger argues that we need to encourage in our children prophetic identities based on what they might become, rather than fixed identities of ascribed or parental characteristics. The insistence on utopian ontology as processual and dynamic speaks back to Wells's understanding that any modern utopia must be both global and dynamic.

Speculative sociology, the delineation of potential futures, is not prediction or prescription, or even prophecy. Sociology as utopia, utopia as sociology must now entail multiple, provisional and reflexive accounts of how we might

live. The imagination of society and ourselves otherwise expands the range of possibilities. While sociologists may legitimately claim particular competence in understanding systemic connections and mapping alternatives, they of course do not have any such claim to superior ethical competence. Wells referred also to the exhaustive criticism of utopias, and this is a matter both for professional expertise and for democratic public debate. If sociologists do not engage in this way, they cede the ground to others, chiefly engineers, global capitalists, and evolutionary psychologists. Our very silences shape utopias. The need for the Imaginary Reconstitution of Society as a tool in its actual, desperately needed, reconstitution takes us, if not exactly back to Wells, at least back to the future.

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