Founding the World State: H. G. Wells on Empire and the English-Speaking Peoples

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Herbert George Wells was one of the leading public intellectuals of the first half of the twentieth century. Most famous today as a founder of modern science fiction, during the first half of the twentieth century he was known throughout the world as a visionary social and political thinker. Questions of global order occupied a central place in his work. From the opening decade of the century until the close of the Second World War, he campaigned tirelessly for the creation of a world state, which would act as a guarantor of universal peace and justice. Yet, scholarship on Wells pays insufficient attention to the complex and conflicted nature of Wells’s early views about how to build a world state. In particular, it neglects the tensions between his advocacy of a New Republic, formed by the unification of the English-speaking peoples, and his support for liberal imperialism. I analyze the development of this theme in Wells’s political thinking during the years before WWI, a formative period in his intellectual life. I demonstrate how his conceptions of race, empire, and Anglo-American union shifted over time, show how his political arguments connected to his underlying views about social explanation and language, and highlight how his interpretation of the United States profoundly influenced his ideas about world order.

Introduction
Celebrated as a genius by many, dismissed as a monomaniacal crank by others, H. G. Wells (1866–1946) was once hard to ignore. Most famous today as one of the founders of modern science fiction, during the first half of the twentieth century he was known throughout the world as an audacious and controversial public intellectual. Questions of global order were central to his work. From the opening decade of the century until the close of the Second World War, he campaigned tirelessly for the eradication of the system of sovereign states and the creation of a new order, characterized by universal peace and justice. He was the twentieth century’s most prolific, original, and influential advocate of the world state.

While an omnipresent figure before the Second World War, Wells’s star waned rapidly. Even as millions continued to marvel at his “scientific romances,” his political writings slipped into obscurity. Scholars in the nascent (sub)discipline of international relations, fighting for credibility in the rapid postwar expansion of the social sciences and buffeted by the power dynamics of the Cold War, had little time for such a protoan writer. There were some exceptions to this general rule. In 1950, for example, the eminent strategist Edward Mead Earle (1950, 181, 185) published an acute analysis of Wells’s political thinking in World Politics, describing him as a “mercurial and versatile genius” who had “exercised an almost unique influence on the generation [that] reached maturity during the decade 1910–20.” But few other scholars followed Earle’s lead.

Today, Wells’s writings about global politics are usually either ignored or mentioned only in passing. He makes fleeting appearances in some intellectual histories of twentieth-century internationalism and globalism (for example, Ashworth 1999; Mazower 2009; Rosenboim 2017, 211–16), and his ideas about human rights occasionally receive attention (for example, Partington 2007; Planinc 2017). Unsurprisingly, scholars cataloguing ideas about the world state frequently hail Wells (Cabrer 2010, 520; Craig 2008, 133; Weiss 2009, 260). For many years, W. Warren Wagar’s H. G. Wells and the World State (1961) was the most comprehensive account of his international thought, though it has recently been supplemented by the work of John Partington (2003a). Both make bold claims about Wells’s importance as a political thinker. Partington (2003b, 234), for example, argues that he “promoted, years ahead of his time, many of the internationalist policies and realities of the post-1945 period” and in particular that he was the first to develop a theoretical account of international functionalism. Among contemporary theorists of international relations, Daniel Deudney (2001; 2008) has demonstrated the most interest in Wells, writing insightfully about him as a pivotal thinker of post-Westphalian order. The “breadth and originality of Wells’s world order prophecies,” he claims, “were unmatched by any writer of the era” (Deudney 2001, 203).

None of this scholarship, valuable as it is, provides an adequate analysis of the early development of Wells’s vision of world order and, in particular, of his shape-shifting account of the “English-speaking” peoples and the British empire. Yet, this was one of his preoccupations during the Edwardian period, and he spent much time debating it with some of the leading imperial thinkers and politicians of the day. Wells saw both the “English-speaking peoples” and the empire as potential agents of world transformation—even as institutional foundations for a universal state—though he struggled to work out how they might be reconciled. In this article, I explore his evolving attempts to imagine a future world in the years before the First World War, the period during which he attained global fame and produced much of his most innovative and influential work. In doing so, I offer a new interpretation of the political thought of one of the most prominent twentieth-century visionaries of global order.

The fin de siècle was a key moment in the evolution of global politics. Deudney (2008, 215, 219) terms it the “global industrial period.” The industrial revolution, he

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Author’s note: I’d like to thank the following for their comments and/or assistance with this article: Peter Cain, Patrick Parrinder, Eliza Garnsey, Sarah Cole, Simon James, Adam Roberts, and the International Studies Quarterly reviewers and editors. All the usual disclaimers apply.
contents, was a “primal development,” as new technologies deepened interactions across the planet. “As the scale and tempo of human affairs changed, a major and tumultuous reordering of large-scale political relationships and institutions seemed imminent and inevitable.”1 Questions of “polity ontology” moved center stage. Contemporary thinkers propagated endless plans for transcending the state system, including pan-regional imperial structures, the European union, the federation of the British empire, and a world state.2 Numerous commentators regarded the (re)unification of the British colonial empire and the United States as the harbinger of a brighter future, one in which the “Anglo-Saxon race” or English-speaking peoples could order and police the world (Bell 2017b; 2020). Wells was foremost among them. In 1901 he published Anticipations, the book that made his name as a prophet. He predicted the emergence of a “New Republic” formed by the eventual “synthesis” of Britain and the United States. This polity would govern a globe-straddling empire dedicated to “civilizing” backward peoples, and it would serve as the nucleus of a future world state. However, Wells soon came to realize that the British empire and the Anglo-American New Republic were potentially incompatible.

To examine the early development of Wells’s political thought, I explore the character and purpose of his arguments about empire, race, and Anglo-American union; the theoretical assumptions that underpinned them; and the early twentieth-century intellectual and political debates he sought to steer.3 I draw extensively on Wells’s work, both published and unpublished, as well as the writings of some of his principal interlocutors. The first three sections of the article follow a broad chronological arc, tracing Wells’s mutating conception of the “New Republic.” Section 1 reconstructs his initial account, articulated principally in Anticipations. Section 2 examines the ontological basis of this imagined polity. Focusing on Mankind in the Making, published in 1903, and A Modern Utopia, which appeared in 1905, I argue that Wells grounded it in language rather than race. He was adamant that the “English-speaking peoples” not the “Anglo-Saxons” furnished the basis of unity. Yet, he never managed to escape the imaginative grid of global racial hierarchy, and despite his ostensible critique of race science, his account of the New Republic reinscribed a racialized geopolitical vision. Section 3 identifies an important but unacknowledged shift in Wells’s position that occurred in the following years, and which is most apparent in his 1906 volume The Future in America. Silently dropping his support for formal Anglo-American union, he promoted instead a looser cooperative arrangement. I argue that Wells rejected the “Larger Synthesis” for two reasons: first, he realized that the British empire was a bar to reunion with the United States, and second, he discerned a ubiquitous “state-blindness” among American citizens, an unwillingness to acknowledge the significance of state institutions in underwriting individual freedom, political stability, and economic productivity. The final section addresses Wells’s involvement in Edwardian debates over the British imperial order. I analyze his view that the British empire was an unparalleled agent of global “civilization,” as well as his attempt to navigate the tension between advocacy of the New Republic and support for liberal imperialism.

In the beginning of a New Time: The Larger Synthesis

During the 1890s the question of Anglo-American relations moved to the center of political discourse on both sides of the Atlantic. In particular, the Venezuelan boundary dispute (1895–1896) triggered acrimonious exchanges between Washington and London, prompting many commentators to recoil from confrontation and seek to forge a transatlantic “rapprochement” (Perkins 1968; Adams 2005; Burk 2009). The clamor for unity was partly a result of Washington’s new assertiveness. Although the United States had engaged in violent territorial conquest since its founding, the annexation of Hawaii and the Spanish-American War, both in 1898, signaled its first sustained burst of extracontinental imperialism. Many observers, especially in Britain, argued that the two countries should cooperate closely. Some even foresaw a form of collaborative “Anglo-Saxon” imperialism, a joint shouldering of the global “civilizing mission.” Proposals for fortifying Anglo-American relations ranged from deepening informal cooperation, through a defensive alliance, to projects for formal political (re)unification (Bell 2016, chap. 8).

The rapprochement has long presented a puzzle for scholars interested in hegemonic transition. Assorted explanatory variable have been posited: democratic culture, liberal values, shared strategic and economic interests. But, as Srdjan Vucetic (2011a, 2011b) has argued, race was a key determinant. Anglo-American cooperation, on this constructivist account, was “established on the basis of race, or, more specifically, because American and British elites succeeded in framing their community as a single Anglo-Saxon brotherhood” (Vucetic 2011b, 403–4).4 It was a “racial peace.” While political elites on both sides of the Atlantic “understood each other as fellow democrats . . . their antecedent ontology was always race, not regime type” (Vucetic 2011b, 413). Perceptions of shared interests and values were fashioned and filtered by a sense of common racial identity.

As the twentieth century dawned, Wells wrote a series of books and articles outlining a “New Republicanism” fit for a world in flux. The most significant was Anticipations. It offered a methodology for delineating the shape of things to come, a set of predictions about how existing trends would reshape the world, and normative arguments justifying the superiority of the future order. The consumption of the English-speaking peoples stood at the core of Wells’s account. Proclaiming Anticipations the “first attempt to forecast the human future as a whole and to estimate the relative power of this and that great systems of influence,” Wells (2008, 643, 645) later stated that the book comprised the “keystone to the main arch of my work,” and he returned obsessively to its main themes throughout his career.

Wells hoped that his bold vision of the future might seed ideas about the necessity of social transformation. In a performative vein, he thought that it might bring about the very changes he had predicted were inevitable. Pressing the novelist Arnold Bennett to help spread “my gospel,” he confided his belief that “a real first class boom and uproar and discussion about this book will do an infinite amount of good in the country.” Wells sought to reach a large audience, drawing the attention of “parsons and country doctors” as well as the denizens of the London literary scene (Wells to Bennett, Nov. 25, 1901, quoted in Harris [1960]).
He achieved his goal: the book was a best-seller, elevating him to the top ranks of intellectual celebrity (on its reception, see Smith 1986, 92–95, 97ff). It established his reputation as a seer of modernity. This burst of success had practical consequences for his career. It brought him to the attention of leading thinkers and politicians and generated invitations to join some of the most significant campaigning organizations of the time, including the Fabian Society and the Coefficients dining club. He was soon a prominent figure in Edwardian intellectual life.

In Anticipations, Wells analyzed how assorted social, political, and technological processes were dissolving venerable patterns of power and privilege, while heralding unprecedented forms of political association and human subjectivity. The English-speaking people was figured as both an agent and a product of change. The astonishing power of new transport and communications systems—the “distinctive feature of the nineteenth century”—propelled the argument. Altering the very conditions of human existence, “[m]echanism” had triggered more than a “mere” revolution—it had catalyzed an “absolute release from the fixed condition about which human affairs circled.” The reconfiguration of space and time augured a fundamental shift in geopolitical ordering. Technology was “abolishing locality,” eliminating traditional conceptions of territoriality and political identity (Wells 1999, 3, 44, 122, 74).

Wells was echoing a popular theme in fin de siècle political thought. Since the mid-nineteenth century, but especially from the 1880s onward, the development of new communications technologies—above all the electrical telegraph and the ocean-traversing steam ship—had prompted intense speculation about the abolition of distance, the acceleration of social and political life, and the imperative to develop new models of international, imperial, and global organization (Pemberton 2001; Bell 2007; Deudney 2008). Wells harnessed such concerns to his project for world transformation. He argued that the enormous “synthetic” communities of the future would necessarily differ in form and scale from those of the past. “Mechanism” provided both the infrastructural means through which the world would be rebuild, and—in the elevation of scientific rationalism to a pervasive ideology—the basis for an ethos that would constitute new types of human subjectivity and practices of rule. Parodying strains of contemporary utopianism, G. K. Chesterton (1904, 15) painted Wells as the man who believed most fervently that “science would take charge of the future.”

The New Republic would be germinated by small groups of individuals. The embryonic New Republicans—an emergent technocratic class of “efficients”—would act as a largely uncoordinated secret society, an “informer and open freemasonry,” gestating a fresh phase in human history. These groups would slowly coalesce, recognizing a common purpose and need for collaborative action. Sooner or later they would form a “functional social body” composed of scientists, engineers, teachers, administrators, and mangers, among others (Wells 1999, 155, 81). Here Wells was channeling the obsession with “national efficiency” that gripped swathes of the British intelligentsia, fearful that the public and state administration alike were plagued by torpor and ineptitude (Searle 1971; Tonooka 2017). Rigorously planned, well-governed, and populated by highly educated individuals, the New Republic would be a beacon of high efficiency. However, Wells cautioned that the developmental process was beset with danger. The efficents would come into conflict with other social formations determined to halt their relentless march—the traditional landed aristocracy, the “helpless, superseded poor,” a social residuum he termed the “people of the Abyss,” and finally, “a possibly equally great number of nonproductive persons living in and by social confusion” (Wells 1999, 56). The superior organizational skills and intelligence of the efficents would guarantee them ultimate victory.

The role of human agency in this epic of world-making was unclear. Wells frequently argued that the New Republic would only materialize if it was willed by enough people. It required dynamic leadership, assiduous planning, and effective mobilization. Alive to the daunting technical challenges facing humanity, and keen to grasp the possibilities they heralded, the New Republicans would be consummate “artists in reality.” Their artistry combined two primary features: a desire for order, efficiency, and simplicity, yoked to a zealous commitment—embedded at the heart of their “ethical frame”—to construct a world state (Wells 1999, 167). Fusing aesthetic sensibility and political vision, they would labor ceaselessly to reweave the threads of reality, transfiguring prevailing ideas about social order, political institutions, and the ends of human life.

This argument rested on Wells’s underlying ideational social theory, which posited that institutions and laws were crystallized beliefs. A change in belief would invariably alter people of the need to either modify or revolutionize patterns of belief. Elsewhere, however, Wells indicated that the new world would materialize regardless of human intervention, emerging from sociotechnical developments “with all the inevitableness and all the patience of a natural force.” The “final attainment of the larger synthesis, he wrote in this vein, appeared to be a process acting “independent of any collective or conscious will in man,” and it was “working now, and may work out to its end vastly, and yet at times almost imperceptibly, as some huge secular movement in Nature,” the equivalent of tectonic shifts in the earth’s crust or the annihilation of mountain ranges (Wells 1999, 139, 146–47). Here we see the clash between Wells’s scientific naturalism and the mysticism that permeated his political writings. However it was to be achieved, the result would be an order populated by a new type of human, their personalities attuned to incessant technological change and novel forms of living, working, and thinking.

The new time would be an age of vast omnifertant political associations. Wells (1999, 143) identified several “spacious movements of coalescence” as possible agents of future synthesis: Anglo-Saxonism, the “allied but finally very different” ideology of British imperialism, Pan-German and Pan-Slavic groupings, and the “conception of a great union of the ‘Latin’ peoples.” He also predicted that the brutality meted out by the “white” powers would precipitate the unification of the “Yellow” peoples of East Asia. Wells was far from alone in envisioning a future dominated by massive pan-movements—in Imperialism, for example, the political economist J. A. Hobson (1997, 332) foretold a world dominated by a handful of “great civilizational empires.” Yet, Wells was skeptical about the likely success of most pan-movements. The pan-Slavic and the pan-Latin peoples were too weak and divided to form a durable polity. A Pan-Germanic movement was feasible, not least because the Germans exhibited remarkable technological prowess and had the most “efficient” middle classes in Europe, but they were hamstrung by a political system at once too aristocratic and monarchical. They would fail to draw willing support for accession, meaning that a German attempt to conquer Europe entailed war with France to the West or Russia to the East. A more likely outcome, Wells (1999, 145) suggested,
was a negotiated compromise between the continental powers, leading to the creation of a federal European union.

For Wells, the New Republican ideal would be best realized by the fusion of the United States and the British colonial empire. “A great federation of white English-speaking peoples,” he claimed, was both likely and desirable during the coming decades. It would reorder the world, enforcing stability and spreading civilization. This was a vision of white supremacist global governance. Again emphasizing human agency, Wells contended that the main impediment to realizing the New Republic was a lack of “stimulus,” a political shock that would focus minds and motivate action, although he speculated that German naval expansion and the potential emergence of an East Asian synthesis might perform a catalytic role (Wells 1999, 146, 145–46). *Anticipations* was no bombastic hymn to lasting British predominance, for Wells argued that the intramural balance of power was shifting westward across the Atlantic. The ideal of efficiency embodied more successfully in the United States than in Britain. It was already pulling ahead economically, and political and military ascendancy would soon follow. Consequently, the “intellectual, political, and industrial center of any permanent unification of the English-speaking states” would be located in a megalopolis that would sprawl between Chicago and the Atlantic. The future was likely to be Anglo-American.

*Anticipations* was at once a bold exercise in sociological extrapolation, a creative example of social prophecy, an expression of the fin de siècle racialized categorization of the world, and a pointed intervention in contemporary political controversy. The previous decade had witnessed a wide-ranging debate over the possibility of Anglo-American union. It had begun in earnest in the early 1890s and was bolstered by fear of conflict over Venezuela and the subsequent “rapprochement.” Played out in literary periodicals, pamphlets, speeches, newspaper columns, and fictional narratives, it was given institutional support by a cluster of civil society associations established to promote Anglo-American cooperation. The campaign for unification represented, Wells argued, a “preliminary sigh before the stirring of a larger movement.” Skeptical of the effectiveness of the existing associations (Wells 1999, 147), Wells regarded them nevertheless as a sign of things to come, a portent of synthesis. In *Anticipations*, he constructed the most elaborate and theoretically sophisticated account of Anglo-American union found at the time.

Like most advocates of Anglo-American unity, Wells was unclear about the institutional structure of the future New Republic. He referred to a “federal government,” but alternated between calling it a “federation” and “confederation” (Wells 1999, 148, 146; 1903, 391). Recognizing that knotty constitutional problems had to be surmounted, especially the clash between monarchical and republican models of government, Wells was blithely confident of success. In Panglossian mode, he argued that the New Republic would also resolve the vexed status of Ireland and South Africa, “two open sores of incorrigible wrong.” While they would never be happy under the “vaciating, vote-caching incapacity of British Imperialism,” a federation of the English-speaking peoples would make it possible for them to achieve “equal fellowship,” thus removing the sources of bitterness and allowing them to flourish (Wells 1999, 148–49). Generally loathe to acknowledge other writers, Wells did endorse A. V. Dicey’s intriguing proposal for the creation of “isopolitan” citizenship: “the extension of common civil and political rights throughout the whole of the English-speaking people” (Dicey 1897, 458; Wells 1999, 148; Bell 2014a). But whereas Dicey had proposed common citizenship as an ostensibly modest alternative to full political union, Wells incorporated it into his account of a fully-fledged New Republican state.

Whatever institutional form the New Republic assumed, Wells argued that it would command a huge joint fleet capable of dominating the oceans of the world. Its population would far exceed one hundred million people. The greatest empire in history, it would administer most of the existing British imperial territories, as well as much of the Caribbean, the Americas, the Pacific, and the “larger part of black Africa” (Wells 1999, 146). Entrusted to an unprecedentedly large polity, and injected with an enervating dose of “efficiency,” the civilizing mission could finally be enacted on a global stage. This steroidal fantasy of universal order and virile imperial masculinity was the apotheosis of the nineteenth century conception of empire as a paternalistic pedagogical technology, educating the backward peoples of the world until they were capable of self-government.

Adamant that his vision of the future was no idle dream, Wells (1999, 146) regarded the New Republican synthesis “not only as a possible, but as a probable, thing.” It would be an achieved fact by the turn of the second millennium. However, Wells offered conflicting accounts of the political inflection of his prognostications. He wrote to one correspondent that it was the “prospectus of a new revolutionary movement,” while he boasted to another that it was “designed to undermine and destroy the monarchy, monogamy, faith in God & respectability & the British Empire, all under the guise of speculation about motor cars & electrical heating.” (Wells to Joseph Edwards, July 11, 1901; Wells to Elizabeth Healey, February 7, 1901, quoted in Smith 1998, I, 383, 379). Yet he informed the radical journalist W. T. Stead, a fellow Anglo-American unionist, that the book was intended as “a sketch of a possible new Liberalism, that I have sufficient confidence to believe might very usefuly supersede the chaotic good intentions that constitute contemporary Liberalism” (Wells to Stead, October 31, 1901, quoted in Baylen 1974, 61). He made a similar point to Winston Churchill (Wells to Churchill, November 19, 1901, quoted in Smith 1998, I, 457). Wells’s political thinking at the time oscillated between audacious revolutionary claims and the profession of gradualism. It is perhaps best to read his work as trying (though often failing) to reconcile two temporal registers, a relatively modest liberal-socialist reformism aimed at influencing contemporary British debate, and a hugely ambitious vision of world transformation that necessitated transcending the very world he was otherwise seeking to modify. It was often unclear how these temporal logics could be rendered compatible.

Some advocates of Angloworld consolidation saw it as the potential end of history, the terminal form of global political organization, while others regarded it as a transitional phase, a step on the road to a yet grander epoch. Wells fell squarely into the latter camp. He thought that the final stage of human political evolution—at least on earth—would be the creation of a universal world state, a synthesis of the New Republic and the other predominant powers. The New Republic would be self-overcoming. By the year 2000, the English-speaking federation would most likely set in motion the incorporation of the European union and the “yellow state.” A true universal polity would emerge only after at least another century had passed, though it might take as long as a thousand years (Wells 1999, 177; Wells 1902, 331). There was no guarantee that this process would be peaceful. The synthetic associations would battle for global
domination unless or until their energies could be harmonized to create a higher unity (Wells 1999, 139). Although Wells had initially presented Anticipations as a work of scientifically informed social prophecy, it ended as spirited advocacy, celebrating the virtues of the New Republic and the value of English-speaking leadership. As he confessed a few years later, “I had intended simply to work out and foretell, and before I had finished I was in a fine full blast of exhortation” (Wells 2016a, 17).

**Cyborg Imperium: On Race and Language**

The ideology of “Anglo-Saxonism” pervaded fin de siècle political discourse in the British empire and the United States (Horsman 1981), with many thinkers viewing race as the basic ontological category of politics, and the “Anglo-Saxons” as the most highly developed racial group, ordained to dominate the world. White supremacist visions of global governance circulated widely. While most accounts of Anglo-American union were grounded in claims about racial kinship and superiority, Wells staked out a different position, arguing that language not race provided the foundations of the New Republic.

Long fascinated by the nature and functions of language, Wells assigned it a pivotal role in his understanding of human evolution (Hardy 1991). Following T. H. Huxley, he argued that contemporary evolutionary dynamics were fundamentally different from those that had originally produced humans (Wells 1975b, 211). Humanity, in all its manifold complexity, resulted from the fusion of natural and social forces. The modern “civilized man” was a synthesis of “natural man” and “artificial man,” the former a product of millennia of Darwinian natural selection, the latter molded by “tradition, suggestion, and reasoned thought” (Wells 1975a, 217). Wells argued that while the basic biological features of humanity were the same as those found in the Palaeolithic era, innumerable changes in “suggestions and ideas” had occurred since. The “artificial factor” had been “modified” by learning and the accumulation of knowledge (Wells 1975b, 211, 217). Language was central to the development of artificiality, the escape from brute nature. Writing and speech were fundamental features of social evolution.

His most fully developed account of the linguistic basis of the New Republic is found in *Mankind in the Making*. Much of the book was dedicated to “man-making,” forging citizens suitable for the New Republic through improving education and child-rearing practices. Wells restated his support for the political consolidation of the “English-speaking community,” its teeming multitude of citizens “scattered under various flags and governments throughout the world.” It was essential to comprehend the whole of this distributed polity, “unless our talk of cooperation, of reunion, is no more than sentimental dreaming” (Wells 1903, 34, vii). Once again, he argued that technological and political developments were tending toward the creation of a “new State,” a “great confederation” of “republican communities” all “speaking a common language, possessing a common living body of literature and a common scientific and, in its higher stages at least, a common education organization” (Wells 1903, 391).

While there were significant political obstacles to overcome, he reiterated that the underlying similarities between the communities were of yet greater significance (Wells 1903, 260, 266). “Until grave cause has been shown to the contrary,” he declaimed, “there is every reason why all men who speak the same language, think the same literature and are akin in blood and spirit, and who have arrived at the great constructive conception that so many minds nowadays are reaching, should entirely disregard these old separations” (Wells 1903, 27). Identity trumped geography in the machine age. The territorial boundaries dividing the English-speaking peoples would be eradicated. It was vital to acknowledge that they were one people endowed with a common destiny, a community that “should become aware of itself collectively and should think as a whole” (Wells 1903, 361).

Wells’s (1903, vii, 34) analysis of the New Republic was marked by spatial ambiguity. Despite opening and closing with an encomium to the English-speaking peoples, the bulk of *Mankind in the Making* refers only to Britain and the United States. Canada, Australia, and New Zealand were absent, as were Ireland and the Cape Colony in southern Africa. Moreover, Wells never explained clearly the selection criteria for inclusion in the New Republic. As with many other Anglo-unionists, the exact boundaries of the future polity were indistinct.

He argued that the New Republic faced a major problem. The quality of written and spoken English exhibited by its inhabitants, especially in the Colonies, was worryingly low. This hampered the “development of the racial consciousness,” which depended on clear and intelligible communication, facilitating the growth of a sophisticated public culture capable of sustaining and disseminating complex ideas. The “thought of a community,” he maintained, “is the life of that community,” and if that thought was underdeveloped, or “disconnected and fragmentary,” weakness and division would result, threatening the sustainability of the whole.

“That does not constitute an accidental defect, but essential failure” (Wells 1903, 128, 390). It was a feature, not a bug. Linguistic degeneration was, he cautioned the readers of *Mankind in the Making*, the “darkest cloud” hanging over potential confederation (Wells 1903, 131). It was essential to act before it was too late.

Both the future of the New Republic and the World State depended on a significant improvement in the linguistic capacities—and thus the thought-worlds—of (white) English speakers. The answer, Wells argued, lay in standardizing language, eliminating the distracting cacophony of dialects, idioms, and accents, that inhibited interpersonal communication and cognitive development. The citizens of the New Republic needed to speak with “one accent, one idiom, and one intonation.” This was a “necessary preliminary” to the “complete attainment of the more essential nucleus in the new Republican idea” (Wells 1903, 156, 157). He outlined various projects for achieving this end. For example, he supported the campaign for “simplified spelling,” seeking to alter the orthography of the language. He also argued that more effort should be put into the systematic institutionalization of knowledge. “Organized general literature,” Wells proclaimed,

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3 Wells also rejected some of the most extreme eugenic arguments of Anticipations, defending instead a more limited “negative” eugenic program (Parlington 2005).
would be the thinking department of the race. Once this deliberate organization of a central ganglion of interpretation and presentation began, the development of the brain and the nervous system in the social body would proceed apace. Each step would enable the next step by being wider and bolder. The general innervations of society with books and book distributing agencies would be followed by the linking up of the now almost isolated mental worlds of science, art, and political and social activity in a system of intercommunication and sympathy. (Wells 1903, 388)

The technologies that made union both practical and necessary—above all the “more highly evolved” forms of telegraph and phonograph—also provided the means for improving language, chiefly through the rapid worldwide dissemination of information (Wells 1903, 137). This process would produce a vast “collective mind” pulsing with the synthesized intelligence of the English-speaking people.

Utopian energies animated the racial discourses of the time. Anglo-American union was frequently hailed as an instrument of global justice and perpetual peace (Bell 2014b, 2017b). Moreover, the line between science fiction—then emerging as a popular medium for both critiquing the present and envisioning assorted futures—and dreams of Anglo-American union were often blurred. Fictional and nonfictional discourses interpenetrated, spawning a cacophonous imperial intertext.6 In particular, both emphasized the revolutionary potential of communications and infrastructural technologies, their ability to reshape social structures, geopolitical alignments, and human subjectivity. Imaginative renderings of future Anglo-American unification and global domination—often in the wake of cataclysmic war—were a prominent feature of late Victorian and Edwardian science fiction on both sides of the Atlantic (Bell 2020). Although Wells did not write the New Republic into any of his novels, Anticipations and Mankind in the Making figured the electrical telegraph as animating the living body of the new polity, generating a form of distributed cognition, even consciousness, among its scattered elements. They can be read as contributions to the science fiction of empire. He conjured up a picture of a cyborg imperium—a translocal fusion of humans and machines, acting as a single integrated entity and endowed with a form of agency, poised to order and rule the world.

Wells rejected the racial theories on which most accounts of Anglo-American union were based. In A Modern Utopia, published in 1905, he warned that “the world is in a sort of delirium about race and the racial struggle,” a delirium legitimated by a “vast edifice of sham science” (Wells 2005a, 218, 224).7 This underwrote some of the worst problems facing humanity. The error assumed different forms. Some thinkers asserted that there was a “best race,” and regarded all others as inferior, even as “material for extermination.” Dreaming of Weltpolitik, stern German professors vouched for the superiority of the “Teuton,” while their British equivalent, Cecil Rhodes—himself an enthusiastic Anglo-American unionist (Rhodes 1902)—“affected that triumph of creative imagination,” the “Anglo-Saxon race.” Such racial supremacism augured a world of death and destruction. For those aiming to establish a “Welt-Apparat”—a “global police machine”—it was a “perfectly sound and reasonable policy,” but it would necessitate “national

6 For an interesting discussion of popular culture and politics, see Furman and Musgrave (2017).

7 On fin de siècle British racial discourses are Lorimer (2013) and Qureshi (2011).
Instrument” and First and Last Things (2016b), and utilized it to intervene in debates over the methodology of social science (Wells 1907a; Bell 2017a).

Nominalism underwrote his critique of racial classification. The pragmatist philosophy of the unique, he argued in A Modern Utopia, demonstrated that the “mania” for race was fundamentally misguided. Races were “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” (Wells 2005a, 220, 23; see also Wells 2016b, 67). Here Wells invoked both methodological and ontological individualism. Human groups were no more than the sum of their parts. Since all persons were “individualized,” he rejected the claim that racial differences were inherent and “insurmountable” (Wells 2005a, 221).

Despite his denunciation of racial theorizing, Wells’s early work nevertheless articulated a racialized picture of the New Republic. This was most apparent in Anticipations, which was studded with racist passages, but it was also true of his subsequent texts. Although Wells grounded his vision of an emergent polity on linguistic foundations, his position was very hard to practically distinguish from explicitly racial accounts of the English-speaking peoples or Anglo-Saxondom: it drew from the same stock of images, vocabulary, and conceptual resources. Moreover, his constant resort to charged racial markers—and in particular his tendency to classify polities as “white,” “yellow,” and “black”—highlighted an inability to escape the dominant interpretive frameworks shaping perceptions of the world. Even as he rejected racial classification, Wells reaffirmed a Eurocentric developmental account that assigned societies a place in a hierarchy topped by the advanced (“efficient”) Europeans and Americans. They were given the role of helping backward peoples to realize their imminent potential, to “civilize” them. Ultimately, then, Wells offered a distinctive variation on the theme of liberal imperialism.

American Pathologies

In April 1906 Wells visited the United States for the first time. He collected his thoughts in The Future in America, a popular addition to the genre of travelogues that attempted to divine the inner essence of the country (Frankel 2007; Seed 2016). Widely regarded as embodying the future, the United States was viewed as both laboratory and template for social change. It was one of his most successful books. In December 1906 William James told Wells that it was as “good a service as a foreigner has ever performed” (James, 2003, XI, 290). Franklin Giddings, one of the leading sociologists in the United States, was even more effusive: “It is a wonderfully true book, and I am deeply thankful that you have said the American people all the things which it contains. As a 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 (Giddings to Wells, June 2, 1906, Wells papers, University of Illinois). While these judgements exaggerate the quality of Wells’s book, they highlight the esteem in which many held him.

The Future in America marked an important, but unacknowledged, shift in Wells’s account of future global order. While he reiterated his view that Britain and the United States were bound together by a shared history and destiny, he silently dropped his discussion of synthesis, whether as normative preference or prediction. “Our future is extraordinarily bound up in America’s and in a sense dependent upon it,” but not, he maintained, because “we dream very much of political reunions of Anglo Saxondom and the like” (Wells 2016a, 22). It was as if he had never written Anticipations or Mankind in the Making. Wells glided from impassioned prophecy-cum-endorsement to outright rejection, without flagging the move for his readers. Moreover, the Larger Synthesis was not mentioned in Wells’s other major political writings of the prewar era, including New Worlds for Old (1908), First and Last Things, or his extended essay on “The Great State” (1912).

The answer to this puzzle, I want to suggest, lies chiefly in what Wells learned from his travels around the United States. He went in search of America’s dream of the future but was underwhelmed by what he found. Wells thought that the key to American destiny, like that of any country, was the coherence and quality of its national will (Wells 2016a, 19). He travelled there, he informed his readers, “to find whatever consciousness or a common purpose there may be.” He sought to discover their Vision, their American Utopia, how much will there is shaping to attain it, how much capacity goes with the will—what, in short, there is in America, over and above the mere mechanical consequences of scattering multitudes of energetic Europeans athwart a vast healthy, productive, and practically empty continent in the temperate zone. (Wells 2016a, 21)

Wells never defined national will clearly, nor discussed how it could be measured, but the quest for this elusive property shadowed his visit and shaped his conclusions. Writing abord the ocean-liner Carmania as she hurtled across the Atlantic to New York, Wells confessed that in researching his trip he had struggled to find an idea of the future animating American life (Wells 2016a, 21, 22–23). This indictment was amply confirmed during his travels: The Future in America is as much a study of disenchantment as of celebration. The United States was thriving economically, and Wells was awed by the scale and tempo of change, but the social conditions, the political system, and the intellectual life of the country were all worryingly defective. This diagnosis, I contend, had deep implications for Wells’s account of future geopolitics.

The overriding problem was that the United States promoted a hypercompetitive capitalist ethos rooted in extreme individualism and motivated by worship of private property. This simultaneously drove the motor of change and threatened to undermine the majestic promise of the country. “Property becomes organized, consolidated, concentrated, and secured. This is the fact to which America is slowly awakening at the present time.” In a system based on democratic equality, lacking a landed aristocracy and a proletariat, unrestrained capitalism generated a massive concentration of wealth that threatened the very foundations of society (Wells 2016a, 77, 78). The fabled robber barons, Astor, Morgan, Rockefeller, and Carnegie, stood at the apex of this bloated system, accumulating unimaginable riches at the expense of the poor. It is little wonder that Wells sympathized with the progressives fighting the obscene excesses of the Gilded Age, or that many leading progressive thinkers embraced him as an inspiration and ally (Bell 2017a).

Although Wells was struck by the diversity of the American population, he maintained that its vibrant core was descended from British colonists. While the “typical” American was “nowhere and everywhere,” Wells insisted that “he”

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8Wells cited assorted sources for his research, including Thodore Roosevelt, Thorstein Veblen, Moisey Ostrogorsky, and the Harvard psychologist Hugo Munsterberg (Wells 2016a, 112).
was nevertheless an “English-speaking person, with extraordinary English traits still, in spite of much good German and Scandinavian and Irish blood he has assimilated.” But dangers abounded. Some of the most despondent—and racist—passages in *The Future in America* concerned the threat of unchecked immigration. Here Wells intervened in one of the most fiercely contested debates in American politics, a debate characterized by vicious hostility to immigrants from East Asia, eastern Europe, and Ireland (Lake and Reynolds 2008; Vitalis 2015; Lake 2019). Wells argued that the United States was foolishly admitting huge numbers of peasants from central and eastern Europe and transmuting them “into a practically illiterate industrial proletariat.” Uneducated, uncivilized, and poorly disciplined—inefficient—the teeming masses threatened social stability and political destiny. Crowded in festering slums, they were easily manipulated by machine politicians, their sheer numbers stoking ethnic tensions and undercutting wages. The country faced an urgent choice: improve the machinery of assimilation or close the border (Wells 2016a, 109, 132). Although Wells emphasized “efficiency” rather than “race,” his arguments dovetailed with nativism. Unsurprisingly, he was praised by supporters of tighter immigration restrictions (for example, Auerbach 1907, 292–301; Warne 1913).

The social crisis precipitated by mass immigration was amplified by other vices. He worried that political myopia hobbled the American system. In particular, Wells diagnosed a pervasive “state-blindness”—a lack of a “sense of the state.” Despite their assertive patriotism, the typical American (male) citizen failed to understand 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” (Wells 2016a, 140; Wells 2008, 111, 245). As Charles Merriam (1920, 386–87) glossed the idea, which was widely adopted by writers in the United States, Wells meant that Americans lacked “political consciousness and interest expressed in political action for the commonweal.” This blinkered individualism simultaneously fueled the hypercompetitive capitalist economy and produced the inequality and social anomie that threatened its very existence.

Francis Coker (1914, xiii), a young political theorist, commended Wells for pinpointing the lack of imagination displayed by American elites. For Wells (2016a, 184), such intellectual failures damaged the political culture. Intelligence, and especially “intelligence inspired by constructive passion,” was the “hero” of the “confused drama of human life.” State-blindness was an impediment to enlightenment, to recognizing both the ills of the contemporary world and strategies for overcoming them. The implications of Wells’s argument for a future New Republic and world state were clear. The United States was a poor candidate for leading the effort to fabricate either of them. It was not (yet) ready to engage in the epic task of building a globe-spanning political association.

Despite all of these problems, Wells maintained that the United States was still the best hope for the future of humanity. Because of the “sheer virtue of its size, its free traditions, and the habit of initiative of its people,” it would and would remain the indispensable nation, and with it the “leadership of progress must ultimately rest” (Wells 2016a, 250). It was both synthesis and microcosm: a fecund synthesis of peoples and languages carving out an ever-greater role in the world and a microcosm of what may eventually supersede the parochial nation-state. Yet, absent a fully developed sense of the state, this would remain more an immanent potentiality than an immanent probability.

**Civilizer-General: The Value of Empire**

In 1914 Wells added a new preface to the English edition of *Anticipations*. Expressing pleasure at how well the book had lasted, he restated his New Republican prophecy, “The whole of that chapter, the Larger Synthesis, has stood the wear of fourteen years remarkably well. For the most part it might have been written yesterday.” He would change very little if he started afresh (Wells 1999, xiii, xiv). Listing a series of errors and miscalculations in the text, Wells was happy to acknowledge faults with the work of his earlier self—Anglo-American union was not among them. On the eve of the First World War, then, he reaffirmed his account of future Anglo World unification.

How can this reaffirmation be squared with his position in *The Future in America*? The answer, I argue, can be found in his views on empire and on historical time. Visiting the United States had highlighted the substantial differences between the English-speaking polities, as well as their conflicting attitudes to empire. This precluded synthesis in the near future. In the long-run, however, such differences could be overcome—whether through irresistible social forces working their providential magic or by concerted human action—and the English-speaking peoples would fuse into a single political community. The synthesis was pushed deeper into the future. In the meantime, the British empire offered both a vehicle for helping to civilize the world and a template for a universal state.

During the Edwardian years Wells threw himself into the maelstrom of imperial debate. Like many radicals, he was ambivalent about the value of imperial rule (Morefield 2014; Bell 2016). Some of his best-known fictional writings have been read as imperial critique—*The War of the Worlds* and *The First Men in the Moon* as anti-imperialist parables. But it is a mistake to view Wells’s early work as evidently anti-imperialist.9 During the years in which he made a name for himself as an author of scientific romances, he defended a variant of liberal imperialism and sought to reform the British empire in order to prolong its existence. Empire, he argued, possessed instrumental not intrinsic value. It was a valuable means to a greater end. It was legitimate only insofar as it helped to realize a vitally important goal: the supersession of the system of states and the creation of a universal political order. If and when it stopped being useful, it would need to be replaced. Empire was, as he put it in his autobiography, “a convenience and not a God” (Wells 2008, 765). Prior to the First World War, Wells was torn between a patriotic impulse to defend the British empire, a visionary enthusiasm for imperium as a model of postsovereign political order, and disdain for imperial greed and hubris.

The future of the empire was a topic of fierce debate during the Edwardian period (Cain 1996; Howe 1997, 191–274; Morefield 2004). At times it occupied the very center of political life, most notably when in 1903 Joseph Chamberlain, the Tory Secretary of State for the Colonies, initiated his controversial tariff reform campaign. Politicians

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9For conflicting accounts of imperialism in Wells’s fiction, see Worth (2010), Deane (2014, chap. 7); and Parrinder (1995, 65-80). For an excellent account of his literary works and milieu, see Cole (2019).
and intellectuals from across the spectrum joined the fray. Their attention focused principally, as it had for their late Victorian predecessors, on the settler empire—on “Greater Britain” (Bell 2007). Most of those favoring consolidation endorsed variants of “imperial federation.” As with the debate over Anglo-American union, which was parasitic on the earlier discourse, imperial federalism encompassed a broad spectrum of plans, from greater informal coordination to dreams of a globe-straddling nation-state. By 1900 the debate seemed exhausted, with the Imperial Federation League disbanded and its heirs fighting over the best way to proceed. It was given fresh impetus by Chamberlain’s program and then by the Round Table’s insistent promotion of an imperial federal “commonwealth” (Kendle 1975; May 1995; Morefield 2014, chap. 3).

The Fabian Society, which Wells had joined in 1903, was the most proimperial of the British socialist organizations of the time. A majority of its leading members—including Sidney Webb and George Bernard Shaw—sanctioned imperialism of one kind or another. However, the Society did not speak with one voice on the topic, and its members disagreed over assorted imperial issues. Wells’s Fabian work focused principally on domestic social and political reform. The main forum for testing and refining his views on empire was the “Coefficients Club.” Established in 1902 by Sidney and Beatrice Webb, it was envisaged as the “brains trust” for a new political party committed to improving national efficiency, though it soon morphed into a high-powered discussion group (Semmel 1960, 81).

Invitations to join the Coefficients were extended to a dozen prominent individuals, including Leopold Amery, Bertrand Russell, Halford Mackinder, Leo Maxse, William Pember Reeves, William Hewins, Lord Robert Cecil, and Lord Haldane. Wells was a founding member. While there was some overlap with the Fabians, the group was dominated by Tory imperial reformers, Sidney Webb informed Wells that they planned to address “the aims, policy, and methods of Imperial Efficiency at home and abroad” (Harrison 2000, 327). Wells later recalled that the monthly meetings of the group in 1902 and 1903 had probed the “future of this perplexing, promising, and frustrating Empire of ours” and that they played “an important part in my education” (Wells 2008, 761).

There was widespread agreement among the Coefficients on the need to consolidate the British colonial empire, though they diverged over questions of imperial economic organization and defense. In March 1903 the group discussed Anglo-American relations. The minutes, penned by Amery and Mackinder, document a wide-ranging debate, recording that “it was generally concluded that circumstances would ultimately bring about some form of Anglo-Saxon union,” though this was unlikely in the next few years. Obstacles persisted; patience was necessary. They finished by noting that the group was split between supporters of an active policy to encourage union and those professing caution (Coefficient minute book, March 16, 1903, 1902–1903, 3). The general consensus about the future signals how widespread belief in union was at the time. In January 1905 Wells presented a paper to the club, asking “What Part are the Colored Races Destined to Play in the Future Development of Civilization?” It illustrates both his critique of prevailing accounts of race and his failure to escape the assumptions of the position he rejected. Wells opened by defining civilization as the achievement of peace, first between individuals and then between polities. This argument provoked numerous objections from the assembled group. In particular, it was asserted that many of the most civilized states had been bellicose, and some of the least civilized—the “Australian black fellow,” for example—were peaceful. The bulk of his audience maintained that civilization was better understood as a combination of material abundance and organizational sophistication. Wells ploughed on, rejecting the “biologic-evolutionary” idea that there were intrinsic differences between races. Existing inequalities, he maintained, could be explained by structural variables, and in principle they could be overcome.

However, in the paper Wells still distinguished between “colored” races that were capable of contributing to civilization on an equal basis with the “white” races and those that would have to contribute in a different manner: “even if deficient in brainpower, some of these races possess physical characteristics [that] might render them, either pure or interbred with higher races, the only possible basis of civilization in certain parts of the world” (Wells 1904–1905, 1–4). Those places and races were left unnamed, but the image Wells conjured up was a familiar one, the peoples of the world arrayed in a developmental hierarchy, with those at the top—those with the greatest cognitive powers—duty-bound to help those below them. This was a conventional liberal imperial narrative, fleshed out with an unorthodox account of civilization and a scathing critique of racial science.

Wells was on friendly terms with some of the leading imperial ideologues of the day. His closest interlocutor was Amery, a prominent journalist turned political campaigner. Originally a Fabian, Amery soon drifted into the orbit of the Tory social-imperialists under the spell of Alfred Milner. In his satirical novel of 1911, The New Machiavelli, Wells cast Amery as Crupp, a progressive Tory devoted to both domestic reform and empire (Wells 2005b). For “persons like ourselves,” Amery wrote to Wells in September 1903, it made sense to “get our Imperialism independent of Tory party politics” (Amery to Wells, September 1903, Wells papers, A108–1). The future of the empire was too important to be left to the vicissitudes of party political conflict. The two men had much in common. “Our minds certainly worked very much alike in many ways,” Amery (1953, 223) observed later, “and for some years we saw a good deal of each other.” He marveled at Wells’s extraordinary insight into technological developments and the fertility of his imagination, though he rejected his scientific rationalism (Amery 1953, 225–26).

As Wells recognized, his dream of an English-speaking New Republic resonated strongly with the “constructive” imperialism of Milner and Amery. In a self-reflective moment in First and Last Things, he acknowledged that the New Republicans of Anticipations and Mankind in the Making were less a desirable ideal than an extrapolation of existing political trends (Wells 2016b, 114). “Most of the people who have written to me to call themselves New Republicans,” he

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10 Of the Fabians, Wells’s views on empire were closest to those of Sydney Olivier. On Wells’s fraught relationship with the Fabians, see Smith (1986, chap. 4) and Parrinton (2008, 522–35). On Fabian international and imperial thought, see Wilson (2003) and Claeyts (2010, 180–98).

11 Informal groups were central to imperial debate in Edwardian Britain (Thompson 2000).

12 In the 1950s, Russell (1958, 77) mistakenly recalled that he and Wells were the only nonimperialist coefficients. He might have been projecting Wells’s later views onto his earlier self.

13 It is likely Wells was one of those pushing an active policy.

14 On Amery, see Faber (2007), Louis (1992, 29–75), and Epstein (2010). Faber (2007, 311) describes Wells as Amery’s regular “sparring partner.”
observed, “are I find also Imperialists and Tariff Reformers.” Among his contemporaries, those who best approximated the model were Milner “and the Socialist-Unionists of his group,” men who were as “a type harshly constructive, inclined to an unscrupulous pose and slipping into a Kiplingesque brutality” (Wells 2016b, 115). The young Winston Churchill was another devotee, and his later promotion of the “English-speaking peoples” owed much to the inspiration of Wells (Tovey 2008).

Wells’s most detailed Edwardian account of the subject, “Cement of Empire,” was published in Everybody’s Weekly in 1911. He defended an idealized liberal vision of the British empire. In doing so, he diverged from his former coefficient colleagues. Hewins, Maxse, Amery, Milner, and Mackinder, for example, all supported Chamberlain’s program. Indeed Hewins, the political economist of the group, was arguably the key influence on Chamberlain’s conversion to tariff reform (Wood 1983, chap. 9). Wells demurred, nor was he attracted to the view that imperial federation could serve as a vehicle for realizing a radical liberal (even socialist) political agenda, a view promulgated, at one time or another, by J. A. Hobson, L. T. Hobhouse, Keir Hardie, and H. M. Hyndman (Claeys 2010, 207–9). Some radicals even saw it as a template for a future post-Westphalian order. Thus in 1911 Hobhouse (1994, 116) stated that it was “a model, and that on no mean scale, of the International State.” Wells remained unmoved by this line of argument.

Wells contended that the empire was a fortuitous product of accident and individual endeavor, rather than coherent government policy. In Selenyean vein, he claimed that “[t]he normal rulers of Britain never planned it; it happened almost in spite of them” (Wells 1911, 38). It was less a vehicle of conquest than of “colonization and diplomacy.” (Given Wells’s earlier acknowledgment of the fate of the Tasmanians, it is striking that he did not regard colonization as a form of violent conquest.) Echoing a common trope, he maintained that the British empire was unprecedented. “Essentially it is an adventure of the British spirit, sanguine, discursive, and beyond comparison, insubordinate, adaptable, and originating” (Wells 1911, 33, 37–38; on this trope, see Bell 2016, chap. 5). Aligning himself with those who “desire its continuance,” he launched an attack on projects for imperial preference and an integrated imperial defense system, arguing that they were gravely flawed. They shared the same weakness as all plans for imperial federation: there was little that united the “incurably scattered, various, and divided” empire. It faced no common foe to catalyze a sense of common purpose. Wells argued that if it was understood properly, and if it acted to improve the lives of its subjects, it could and should endure. He said little about institutional innovation, implying that he thought the existing governance structure was adequate for the task. “It is to the free consent and participation of its constituent peoples that we must look for its continuance” (Wells 1911, 37, 34).

If it was to be anything, the empire had to be a civilizing force. The English language was fundamental to its resilience. Since language was an agent of civilization, the empire had to become the “medium of knowledge and thought to every intelligent person in it” (Wells 1911, 39). It was to become a vast technology for the progressive education of humanity. Although his discussion of institutional reform was vague, Wells’s commitment to liberal imperialism was clear.

However, there were serious obstacles to realizing the full potential of empire. To become “civilizer-general,” it had to be governed by an enlightened administration and overseen by politicians who understood its true value. Instead, it was endangered by the “intellectual inertness” of those entrusted to rule, the “commonplace and dull-minded leaders” (Wells 1911, 39, 40–41). This was a recurrent theme in Wells’s Edwardian writings. His searing reflections on deficiencies in the British education system were inflected by a concern that schools were incapable of producing citizens and leaders equipped to pursue the imperial mission. He lambasted private schools for manufacturing docile, unimaginative drones. “I submit this may be a very good training for polite servants, but it is not the way to make masters in the world” (Wells 1905, 227). The incompetence of the imperial class even threatened the settler empire, as people in Australia, Canada, and New Zealand had already begun to turn to the United States for ideas and inspiration (Wells 2016b, 42).

Moreover, a successful liberal empire required its citizens to behave in a civilized manner. Conquest, settlement, and imperial governance necessitated an appropriate set of dispositions, comportments, and attitudes. This too was lacking. In The Future in America, Wells had castigated the vicious racism of white southerners in the United States. His compatriots were no better. British settlers living in the Cape, for example, exhibited the same deplorable stance: “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” (Wells 2016a, 169, 170). Fully realizing the potential of the British empire required substantial change. It was threatened by the very people who hymned its virtues the loudest.

The empire was worth saving. However, this created a problem for Wells, because British imperialism was a bar to union with the United States. When he was composing Anticipations, Washington seemed ready to embark on a policy of overseas expansion, perhaps in conjunction with the British. An era of Anglo-American interimperialism beckoned. Cementing ties between the polities would accelerate the creation of a New Republic. The vast new polity would properly fulfill the role of civilizer-general, educating and inspiring the world’s peoples for their eventual integration into the universal state. Yet, by the time Wells visited the United States in 1906, he sensed that imperial enthusiasm had cooled. The Americans were even ready to shed the Philippines “at as early a date as possible” (Wells 2016a, 111). Wells recognized that future American political development would fall principally within continental bounds, while the British remained wedded to their global imperial project. “So long as we British retain our wide and accidental sprawl of empire across the earth we cannot expect or desire the Americans to share our stresses and entanglements” (Wells 2016a, 22). Given the position of the British empire, and the current failings of the United States, it made sense to temporarily prioritize the improvement of the former over
reintegration with the latter. The New Republic had to be deferred.

Conclusion: Toward Cosmopolis

Wells was one of the most influential theorists of global order during the first half of the twentieth century. He made his name as a social and political commentator during the Edwardian years. Drawing praise from some of the leading political scientists, sociologists, philosophers, and politicians of the day, his work attracted the attention of a huge audience throughout the world. Tracing the early development of his ideas about empire, race, and the world state sheds light on an important contributor to modern international and imperial political thought.

During the last two decades, political theorists and intellectual historians have explored the multifarious ways in which questions of empire infused, and helped to give shape to, the tradition of Western political ideology, and liberalism in particular. After a long hiatus, international relations scholars have likewise (re)turned to the study of imperial forces and formations, though unlike their predecessors they do so less to justify empire and racial supremacism and more to comprehend their intercalated dynamics. Wells’s early work appeared at a key juncture in the development of modern international thought. Like many thinkers of his time, he was at once a confident imperialist—at least in his pre–First World War writings—and a dedicated internationalist. These positions were often thought to be compatible rather than antithetical. But Wells’s ambition was much grander and more far-reaching than most of his contemporaries, combining a fierce critique of sovereignty and nationality with a professed desire for a fully-fledged world state, a new polity that would bring peace and justice to the earth and that would eventually serve as an incubator for a posthuman species that would set forth for the stars. On this account, both the British empire and the New Republic were institutional vehicles for helping to realize a true and durable model of universalism. Even as he stood in the long shadow of nineteenth-century liberal imperial thought, so he helped to inaugurate another tradition—that of technophilic world statism. Although there were precursors, it was Wells’s vision, proselytized relentlessly over the course of a fifty-year writing career, which set the terms for much twentieth century thinking about globe-spanning political communities bound together, and justified by trust in the promethean powers of modern technology. He was also a founder of futurology, the attempt to rigorously identify future sociopolitical patterns and trends, a practice that flourished during the Cold War (Andersson 2018).

Race, too, is now on the horizon of international relations scholarship. Long avoided or disavowed, it is increasingly acknowledged that racism, and processes of racialization, have been central to the construction of political orders throughout the modern era and into the present (Anievas, Manchanda, and Shilliam 2015; Bell 2019; Vucetic 2011a). White supremacism suffused political science (including the subfield of international relations) from its birth in the late nineteenth century (Schmidt 1998; Hobson 2012; Blatt 2018, chap. 3; Vitalis 2015; Thakur, Davies, and Vale 2017).

Wells plays an equivocal role in this grim genealogy. Hostile to the racial theorizing of the time, he stood out from most of his contemporaries by rejecting claims of “Anglo-Saxon” distinctiveness and destiny, focusing instead on the power of language as a binding agent of translocal communities. He deplored the “mania” for racial explanations and prejudice. W. E. B. Du Bois, among others, regarded him as an ally in the fight against racial inequality (Bell 2017a). Wells does not slot neatly into our standard interpretive grids. But his writing also highlights how difficult it was to escape the racial imaginary of the day, for despite his commitment to critique he ended up reproducing many of the same tropes, frames, and conclusions, as those openly professing white supremacist accounts of global order.

Wells’s interwar writings challenged the legitimacy of empire, without ever fully rejecting its instrumental value, but he continued to regard his beloved English-speaking peoples as an engine of global transformation and the embryo of a future world state. His work and career stands as a cautionary reminder of both the complexity of the history of political thought and the role that racial categories and assumptions played in shaping ostensibly progressive visions of world order.

His Edwardian work explored two possible institutional foundations for the world state. The future polity could be built on the back of the British empire or through Anglo-American union. Initially, Wells believed that the two models could be fused together, but he soon saw that they pulled in different directions. Anticipations looked a century ahead, whereas The Future in America scanned a closer horizon. In the former, Wells expressed confidence that Britain and the United States were sufficiently alike to merge seamlessly together into a “Larger Synthesis.” The latter expressed a more cautious outlook. His transatlantic visit convinced him that Washington was turning away from overseas imperialism and that the ubiquity of “state-blindness” rendered the country unfit to shoulder the burden of state-building on a global scale.

Wells thought that the passage of time would resolve this tension. The unrelenting processes remaking the world would eradicate, or transcend, any obstacles to union in due course. The shared identity of the English-speaking polities was more fundamental than their differences, and it was deeper than the connection between Britain and the rest of its sprawling empire. “[O]ur civilization,” he proclaimed in The Future in America, “is a different thing from our Empire, a thing that reaches further into the future,” and Americans were part “of our community, are becoming indeed the larger part of our community of thought and feeling and outlook.” This commonality was far more “intimate” than any link we have with Hindoo or Copt or Gingalese” (Wells 2016a, 22–23). In the short-term, the British empire—at least if governed properly—could serve as a civilizer-general, combating ignorance and spreading progressive institutions and values. It could help to dissolve nationalism and prepare people throughout the world for the emergence of a new universal order. The “precursor of a world state or nothing” (Wells 2008, 765), it was a self-dissolving enterprise. But eventually the English-speaking peoples would unite, constituting the vanguard of the world state. They would lead humanity into a bright future.

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