

H.G. WELLS, THE WORLD BRAIN AND THE HUMAN FUTURE

By Richard Slaughter

Herbert George "H.G." Wells is mainly remembered as a writer of speculative fiction, although during his lifetime he was perhaps more widely known as a social critic. His fiction and non-fiction, however, both expressed aspects of a strongly held progressive global vision. He had a pervasive sense that humanity was on the cusp of a 'new era.' Yet, he was equally aware that if it was to turn out well it was becoming urgent to address what he called 'the world problem.' By which he meant the growing number of interlocking problems that were becoming ever clearer and more concerning.



Postage stamp from the UK, commemorating the H.G. Wells science fiction novel called *The Time Machine* published in 1895.

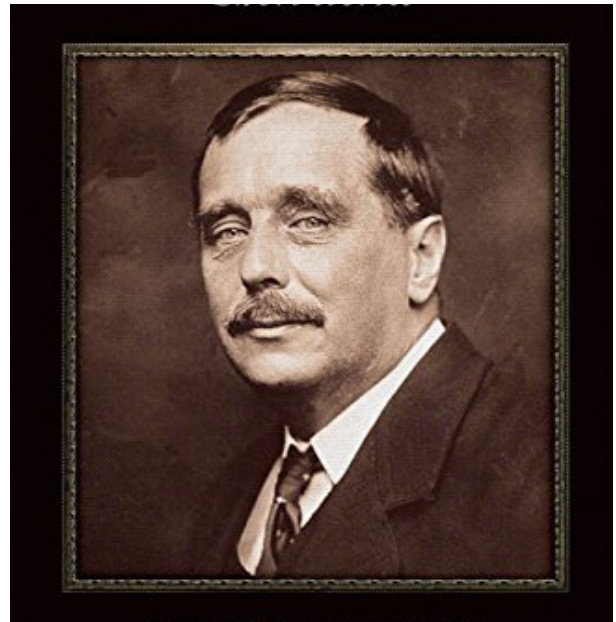
Image source: Shutterstock

[Wells](#) realized that solutions had to be conceived in a coherent and organized way. Yet he was constantly frustrated by what he regarded as the inadequacy of decision making within contemporary social and economic structures. He believed that politicians, diplomats, social administrators and, indeed, universities all fell short of what was required. In fact, he summarily dismissed the latter as being 'scarcely out of the fifteenth century.'

Rather than being merely frustrated, Wells devoted a great deal of time and effort to exploring what he believed were useful responses. Most involved fundamental shifts from passive acceptance of the recent past and present toward an active appraisal of the near-term future. He believed a more integrated approach to human knowledge could assist in this process, which is why he promoted the notion of a 'World Brain.'

WANTED, PROFESSORS OF FORESIGHT

His interests in the future were expressed early on in novels such as *The Time Machine* (1895) and *The War of the Worlds* (1898). These as well as related works endeavored to portray in dramatic form the consequences of time, discontinuity and radical change. They were widely read. Then, in 1932 and referring explicitly to phenomena such as the 'disappearance of distance,' he made a case for disciplined futures enquiry in a [BBC radio broadcast](#) called 'Wanted Professors of Foresight.' This is how he concluded his remarks:



**Herbert George Wells, born 1866.
English writer and publicist.**

Image source: From the cover of book "*The very best of H.G. Wells Short Stories*", amazon.com

Either we must make peace throughout the world, make one world state, one world-pax, with one money, one police, one speech and one brotherhood, however hard that task may seem, or we must prepare to live with the voice of the stranger in our ears, with the eyes of the stranger in our homes, with the knife of the stranger always at our throats, in fear and in danger of death, enemy-neighbors with the rest of our species. Distance was protection, was safety, though it meant also ignorance and indifference and a narrow, unstimulated life. For good or evil, distance has been done away with. This problem of communications rushes upon us today ... and it evokes the ... question: Is it peace? Because if it is not to be peace foreseen and planned and established, then it will be disaster and death. Will there be no foresight until those bombs begin to rain upon us?

Wells met with world leaders such as Roosevelt and Stalin. But these meetings did nothing to dissuade him from the view that there was 'a terrifying gap' between available knowledge and current social and political events.

On the one hand, he recognized the 'vast increase in available power' and the accompanying 'change of scale' that, in his view, had 'altered the fundamental conditions of human life' to the point where the species was more 'perilously poised' than ever before.

On the other hand, he saw societies, institutions, and would-be 'leaders' failing everywhere. "It is our common quality," he mused, "to be wise after the event."

A 'WORLD BRAIN'

The notion of a World Encyclopedia, or a World Brain, appealed to Wells as a strategy to compensate for 'inherited privilege' and make better use of human capabilities across the board. He believed that humanity needed a unified mind or way of understanding and interpreting the 'world problem.' The Encyclopedia would help to create 'a common ideology' and, in so doing, provide 'a possible means of dissolving human conflict into unity.'

Wells would have been fully aware that this was an expression of 'high idealism,' which is perhaps why he pursued this goal with such determination and resolve. To this end, he coined the rather stark and uncompromising phrase 'a new world or nothing.' It's therefore worth noting that in 1970, some 30 years after Wells' death, [Frank Herbert](#), well-known author of *Dune*, edited an anthology entitled [New World or No World](#), published in support of Earth Day.

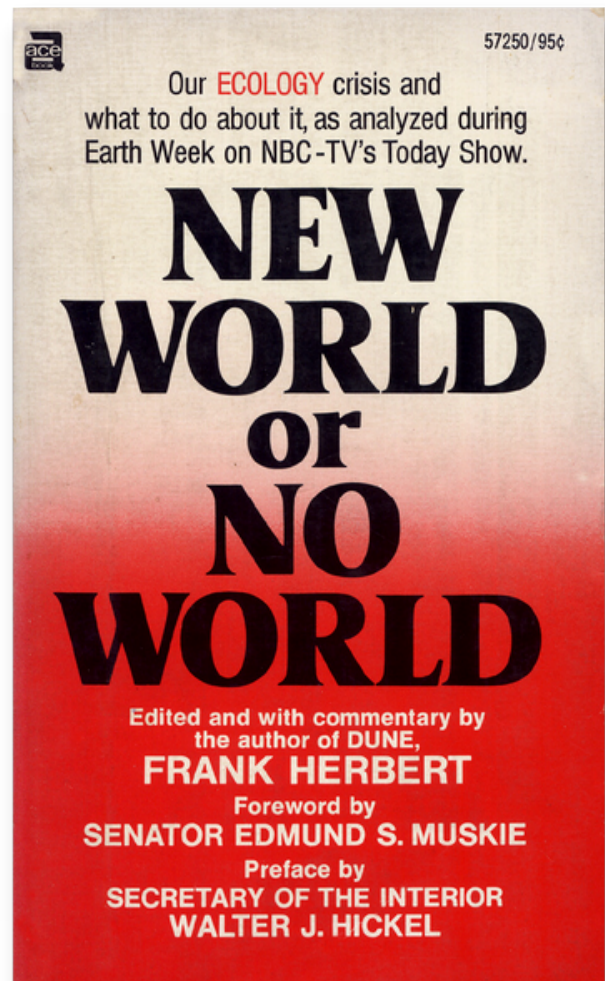


Image Source: Amazon.com

Viewed from the 2020s, Wells provided clues regarding other factors that would compound 'the world problem' in years to come. For example, he identified 'dignified amateurishness,' which he believed characterized the American political elite at the time. Another factor is his dour and somewhat dismissive view of big business that he suggested was 'completely bankrupt of political or social philosophy.' To drive the point home, he added, rather frostily: 'it probably never had any. It had simply a set of excuses for processes that for a time were extremely profitable and agreeable.'

RE-READING THE WORLD BRAIN

In my re-reading of the *The World Brain*, I was struck by how Wells responded to a constant stream of innovations with disruptive consequences. The ramping up of technical power and the consequent change of scale were 'altering the fundamental conditions of human life' and 'straining every boundary, every institution and every tradition in the world.'

Yet, it's fair to say that while such views had enormous potential value, effective responses were uncommon or half-hearted at best. The point is that there was not then, nor is there today, any remotely adequate, properly resourced organizational support globally for the kind of evolving, future-relevant perspectives he knew were required. Equally, however, there was much that remained unclear at the time. For example, it was not until after World War II that post-modern scholarship, for example, would undermine Wells' belief that humanity could unite around any single 'ideology' or unified way of thinking.

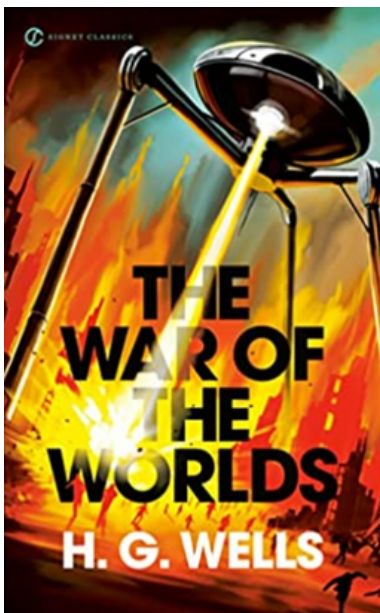


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CONFLICT, TECHNO-OPTIMISM AND THE INTERNET OLIGARCHS

In the years following World War II, it became clear that while humanity may, in theory, be said to share significant common interests, these were insufficient to counter the continuing effects of diversity, difference and open conflict. Human affairs remained turbulent and unstable.

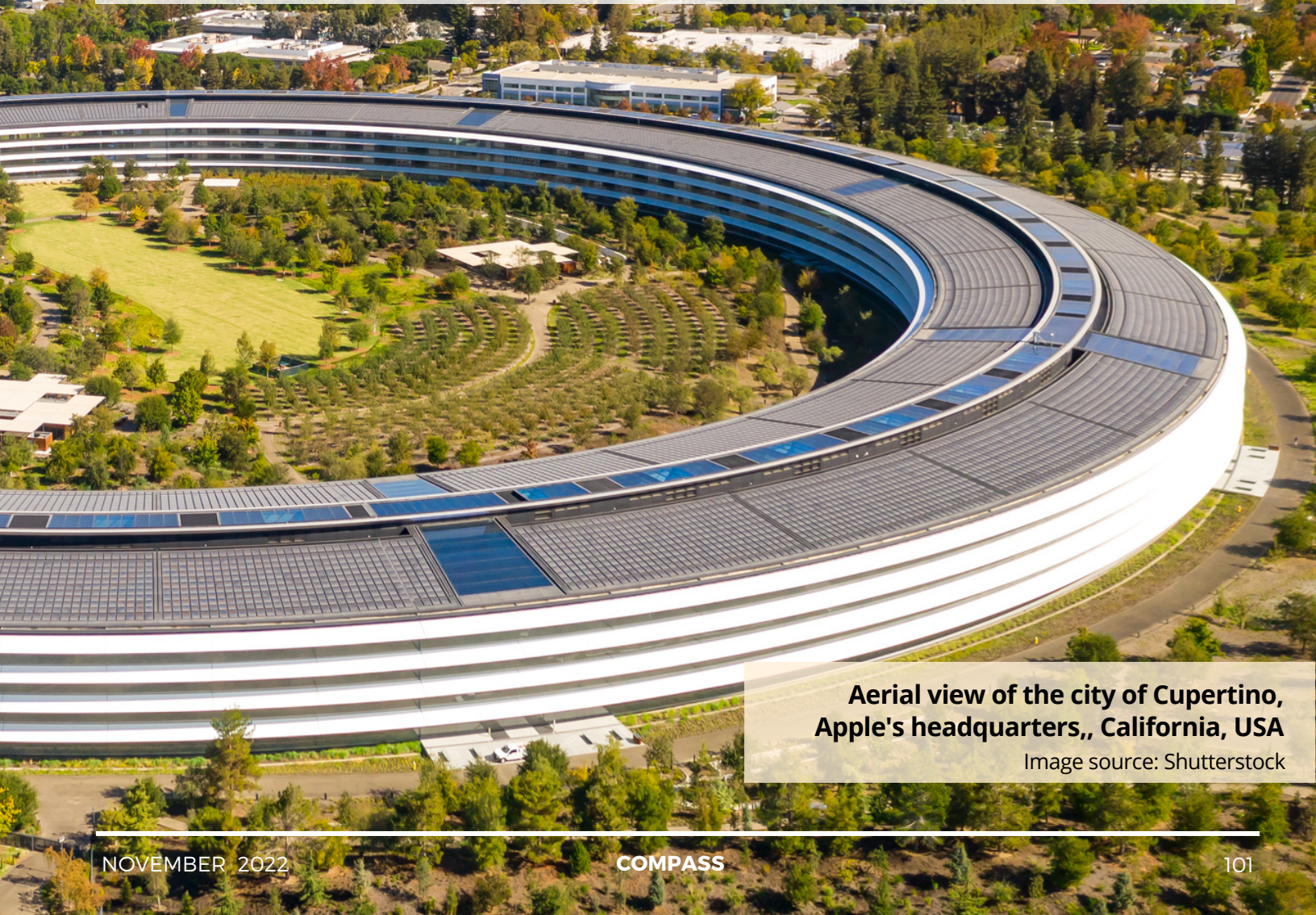
Wells had understood all-too-clearly that a fractured and conflicted world would be hard put to solve 'the world problem.' Hence, the despair he experienced in his final years is understandable. One only needs to recall the history of the United Nations over the same period to get the point. To this day no-one has solved the conundrum of finding ways to assert and maintain generally agreed-upon values, policies, actions with those that remain at odds with or directly opposed to them -- as is currently being demonstrated in the most destructive manner possible in Ukraine.

It's fair to say, however, that Wells' influence continued long after his death. For example, there have been many attempts to assemble and integrate knowledge following World War II. The *Encyclopedia Britannica* was widely regarded (at least in the West) as the world's most popular source of 'reliable knowledge.' Then, of course, it became overwhelmed by the sheer amount of information and by the impossibility of constantly updating a paper-based medium.

By the late 20th and early 21st centuries the IT revolution was ramping up and everything changed again. Some aspects

of this process are described in [Deleting Dystopia](#). One of key things to remember about this particular revolution is that, while its origins lay in government funding and the idealism of pioneers, early optimism was very quickly overwhelmed by commercial greed and unquestioned self-interest. [Shoshana Zuboff](#) and others have shown how *unprotected human space was colonized before anyone was aware of what was happening*. Which, in turn, has led to a compromised and repressive global system of information, trade and commerce that has been called [‘surveillance capitalism.’](#)

Here is a primary example of how Wells’ perceptions make even greater sense today, and for one very specific reason: the stakes have grown ever higher. If whole populations find themselves surrounded by layers of criminality and exploitation it is perhaps partly because the challenges of modernity have been ignored, fudged or fumbled by successive administrations that failed to take up the foresightful tools and methods that Wells employed and promoted. It’s a historical fact that that the IT revolution began in the USA and gave rise to Silicon Valley and its problematic offspring. A widespread failure to protect society from the diminished dictates of Neoliberalism could also be taken as evidence of the ‘amateurishness’ that irritated Wells in his day.



**Aerial view of the city of Cupertino,
Apple's headquarters,, California, USA**

Image source: Shutterstock

A further critical point that would have been obvious to Wells, but is seldom brought to full awareness, reside in the thin and inadequate views of technology that exist in the United States and beyond. [Moshin Hamid](#) is among those who have brought clarity to this issue by identifying a widespread 'sense of techno-optimism ungrounded in any profound understanding of technology.' There is, in other words, a clear line between the absence of quality and discrimination that Wells sought to find in political and business circles and the way that Google, Amazon, Facebook et al rush powerful new technologies from the lab to the market with little or no attention to the consequences. Wells understood that although technologies can be said to help 'build the future,' nowadays they can also undermine it.

There are, however, ways beyond such rather obvious traps. For example, it helps to recognize that 'world domination though tech' reflects merely one, highly perverse and very risky, mode of implementation. The good news is that many others are being tried and tested. One worth mentioning goes by the name of [The Public Square](#).



Big Tech icons on iphone

Image source: Shutterstock

A 21ST CENTURY WORLD BRAIN?

It's common these days for people to unthinkingly search online for answers to their questions and one gigantic company is far and away the most popular, widely used and, of course, immensely profitable. Doing so, however, exposes the users to radical abuse as their movements, choices and preferences are all tracked, recorded and sold to a veritable army of data processors and digital marketing firms. This has become so common that many or most people don't even realize how profoundly their privacy has been compromised. Their private lives and their unique interiority have become mere 'behavioural surplus' to be bought and sold like any other property. An exceptional article written by Matthew Cain for [The Boston Review](#) makes a strong case for the view that it was not merely 'a few bad actors' that, in his words 'destroyed the Internet' but Capitalism. Yet the world of the Internet is, of course, open to all and a vast amount of knowledge can be derived from sources that actively seek to serve real or perceived needs.

The most well-known and widely used source is [Wikipedia](#), which [Liam Mannix](#) refers to as 'humanity's best effort at collecting all our knowledge in one place.' He adds, 'it has more than 6.5 million articles and is now 90 times larger than the full 120-volume *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Research suggests that, overall, it is 'fairly reliable' but with a tendency to be uneven. More specifically, 'it's not so good with history. Its articles on drugs miss key points. Its coverage of historic elections suffer from errors of admission.' Consequently, journalists, academics and students are often discouraged from using it.

Mannix also reports on research concluded from a review of more than 100 studies that it remains ‘a reliable source of information across almost all domains studied.’ One reason for the overall success of this online resource is that it is not owned by a corporation or government but staffed and maintained by volunteers. It is free to use and therefore seeks financial support. However, according to Mannix the overall ‘secret’ of the organization is that it is ‘more than the sum of its parts’ because the encyclopedia has evolved ‘from something created by someone to something created by a process.’

The internet itself, while not devoid of ‘bad actors’ and other hazards is undoubtedly a vast and potentially useful resource. One of the most significant innovations to date is the Internet Archive. It describes itself as a vast digital library with more than 600 billion pages and nearly 40 million books at its disposal, along with images, software and a vast collection of audio, video and TV recordings. It is undoubtedly a formidable and priceless resource that Wells would have regarded with awe. But, of course, the mere presentation of knowledge in new forms has little or no effect on the continuing ‘world problem.’ That remains a quintessentially human project.

TRUE GLOBAL EMERGENCY

H.G. Wells is rightly regarded as the most significant writer of the 20th Century to have characterized ‘the future’ as a fateful combination of opportunity and danger.

Further, that to grasp the former, the latter absolutely required close and sustained attention on a planet-and-species-wide basis.

What, then, to make of the fact that precisely the same issue still confronts us today? It resides in the very real threat of species extinction due to runaway anthropogenic climate change coupled with the continuing unwise pursuit of ever more powerful and disruptive technologies.

The ‘world problem’ has become a true global emergency.

The reality of our predicament can, however, be interpreted in at least two generically divergent ways.

One is to unconsciously reflect the original perverse mainstream reaction to projects such as [The Limits to Growth](#) – deny, avoid, reject. Which leads inevitably to Dystopian decline or worse. An altogether different and more helpful option is to consciously *accept* the fact that ‘do-nothing’ responses inevitably lead to Dystopia. A recent article by Ian Tucker confirms the point when he quotes mainstream scientist [Peter Kalmus](#) that ‘as a species we’re on autopilot, not making the right decisions’.

On the other hand, and this is key -- recognizing that fact may, just may, unleash a tidal wave of motivation and focused effort around the world sufficient to achieve system change on the magnitude, scale and intensity required. That this is no mere fantasy or projection is clear from Carlos Pereira’s concluding chapter in his and Ugo Bardi’s outstanding anthology [Limits and Beyond](#). If or when such a change occurs the chances are perhaps better than even that humanity can avoid the worst of Dystopia and finally work towards truly *human* futures that reflect our deepest needs and most productive aspirations.

Jennifer Gidley's outstanding book [The Future: A Very Short Introduction](#) confirms the salience of this view, as does my 2010 anthology [To See With Fresh Eyes - Integral Futures and the Global Emergency](#).

If there is indeed any foundation upon which humanity could unite, it is indeed from elements such as these. Perhaps Wells' dream has a solution after all.

But it's up to us now to define, share and enable it.

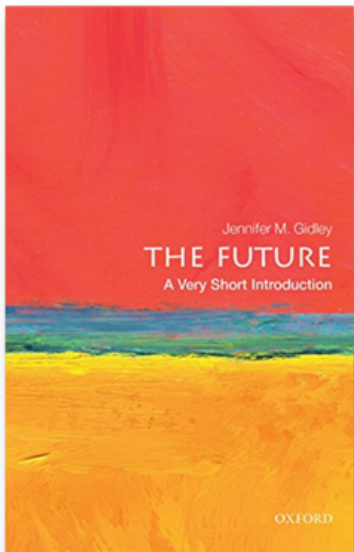


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Also consider listening to Richard Slaughter on The FuturePod (episodes 113 and 116) at futurepod.org.