

# A Short History of the World

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Studying history invariably means exposing yourself to the risk of not seeing the forest because of all the trees. Thus there is a strong temptation to present surveys of the grand sweeps of history, or, in the words of Braudel - *le longue durée*. For those who know many of the details, such endeavours can be truly fascinating, on the other hand, in history as in so much else, the devil is to be found in the detail, and the general sweep can too easily turn into mere insipidity. Tempting it is to find the hidden laws of complex phenomena, be it in human history as well as in nature, but too often such generalization, despite their charms and strong persuasive powers, do in the end turn out to be as many dead-ends and red herrings. Wells ambition is more modest though. Basically Wells is an educator, a journalist with a didactic mission. He does not address himself to the learned experts but to the common man. Thus his language is simple, (and incidentally studded with his own idiosyncratic spellings and turns of phrase, respectfully preserved by the editor) and the tone is that of an elderly uncle that takes you by the hand and gently guides you through the mess. Hence one reads the work, not so much as to gain instruction, but to savour a period piece.

Somewhat bizzarely Wells starts from the very beginning at the formation of the earth, covering in a succession of some very short chapters the billions of years of evolution, until the advent of man. The contemporary reader can view this with a certain amusement gauging the state of knowledge of natural history available more than eighty years ago. Yet the verdict is that Wells is remarkably correct, never being off more than a factor of two as to ages. Still those introductory pages do not in any way contribute to the main concern, namely human history.

Why is there such a thing as Human history? Humans are just animals, and as animals they have been adapted to a biological niche. Had Humans remained in that niche, human life might have been unchanged for hundreds of thousands of years, just like that of their predecessors. Then there would have been no Human History at all, just a subbranch of Natural History, and not a very interesting one at that. One may regret that Human History did arise, that the state of Man before was one of grace, a potentially indefinite tenure in the Garden of Eden, no matter how red in tooth and claw. But it did arise, humans created their own niche, namely that of civilization, an outward projection of their over-sized brains.

Civilization comes in two varieties. The sedative one based on agriculture and the nomadic one based on pasture and herded animals. Pre-civilized people, as noted initially, have never played any part in history, being confined to scattered tribes or family groups eeking out a level of substinence, being in cruel equilibrium with their environment, as is the case with any other purely biological lifestyle. Civilization means population increases and the need for a social cohesion transcending ties of blood and personal friendship. The nomadic and the sedative way of life is often seen as antagonistic. The sedentary people

generating cities and wealth coveted by the free-loading Nomads. Hence the recurrence of sacking, and more ambitiously, downright conquest. So many of the early Empires were actually formed by Nomads stealing the fruits of toil, but in their turn being assimilated in the process. Wells is fond of dividing humans into overarching races. There are dark and brunet races at the margins of the historical scene, while the main races of concern to Human History are the Semitic, the Aryan and the Mongol, the latter including the Oriental. Nowadays no writer would so easily get away with such sweeping characterizations as one could in the time of Wells. But more seriously Wells seems to confuse language with race, thus classifying not only the Laps with Mongolians<sup>1</sup> but also the Finns and the Hungarians, which is preposterous. The grand civilizations in the Middle-East are assumed to have been formed by Semitic invaders, just as the Semitic empires would crumble under the early Aryan onsets creating the Greeks and the Persians and penetrating deeply into the Indian peninsula. Those Aryans would then form new Empires, notably the Roman, under siege from more nomadic and barbaric Aryans, and during the fifth century or so hell broke loose and Europe was torn asunder by unchecked migrations by mostly Germanic tribes, leading to the implosion of the Roman Empire. Then there would be new onslaughts of Nomads. The Semitic Nomads from the Arabian Peninsula created the Arabic empire, which later was subjugated by Turkish Nomads from Central Asia. Still later Mongol Nomads overrun most of Eurasia, running out of steam before including all of Western Europe. Mongols also raided old Arabic territory and often conquered China. This is classical history. History of battle and conquest and creation of vast empires, which however were more in the minds of men than on the ground, and hence often disintegrated as easily and abruptly as they had been formed. If you are exposed to those tales as a Child, they will remain with you as the Magic of Fairy-tales, and you will never forget Alexander the Great or Julius Ceasar. However, such events occur on many scales, and if you would study a territory and period unknown to you, say Feudal history in Japan, it will just seem as a mess of battles, moving hither and thither, much sound and fury, but in the end signifying nothing. Just as the history of Europe, with all its battles and waxing and waning of fortunes, may seem very important to you, but from a more exalted position, seem as pointless as the Japanese. But the Devil is in the detail, and this is what serious academic study of history is all about.

The Roman Empire was an innovation in the history of Mankind. It was not created in one swoop through the military triumphs of a single individual with whom the empire was identified. Rome was not a monarchy but a republic, and as such it is tempting to point out parallels with the Greek city states, retroactively exalted as democracies, although one should be wary of pointing at connections instead rather stressing the parallels, such entities probably arising independantly throughout history given congenial circumstances<sup>2</sup>. The Roman Empire grew slowly over centuries, solidifying its power gradually, escaping the fate of early obliteration, which befell many of its neighbours. (What ever happened to the Etruscans?). It did not and in fact could not tolerate rivals, one niche has only space

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<sup>1</sup> A romantic, but I fear deeply flawed assertion

<sup>2</sup> It is always intellectually satisfying to provide simple explanations. Wells hazards that flat countries with high population densities will tend to form large empires, while scatterd settlements in mountainous country will stimulate self-reliance and democracy

for one, and three so called Punic wars resulted in the destruction of Carthage. Wells claims that the price of victory was high. The character of the republic being founded on free men, the latter found themselves out of possession, while a few became inordinately rich. After that the seed of decline was sown, well before the climactic glories of the realm, when actual power more and more came to reside with the army usurping that of the senate. And indeed the Republican spirit was lost as Caesars were created. Yet for most of its dominance, it was founded on the idea of citizenship. And when that idea was not developed it eventually was enfeebled and faded away, and with that the will to maintain the empire, because an empire is not something on the ground, as we have already remarked, but something in the minds of men.

Religion plays an important role in Wells narrative. From time to time he let the sweep of the epic momentarily stop and he focuses on a single personality. Be it Buddha, Confucius, Lao Tse, Jesus<sup>3</sup> or Muhammad, or as in the case of Jews a single tribe. The Jews invented monotheism, and the idea that the divinity is not identical with its manifestation, the confusion being rejected as idolatry. This is a very significant idea, namely recognising an existence beyond the world of the senses, with truly deep implications. Furthermore Wells points out that the Jews did not write the Bible, the Bible created the Jews in their late Babylonian captivity. After that they transcended being a mere nation or tribe, and thus survived in their diaspora, otherwise they would probably have been lost to history buried in the obscurity which is the lot of the majority. Christianity as well Muhammedanism are just variations on the Jewish idea of Jahve, each concentrating on one of its prophets. The alternate religions, like Buddhism which in a sense goes one step beyond monotheism into atheism, have played a more marginal role in the affairs of the world; and as to Hinduism Wells is frankly dismissive, discarding it as primitive superstition<sup>4</sup>.

Christianity played an important role in the decline of the Roman empire. In a sense one can liken the Roman Empire to the cocoon into which Christianity embedded itself before it would be able to flex its wings. Rome split off, with the eastern part in a sense surviving in a manner of speaking until the fall of Constantinople, with the western part trying to revive itself both as a religious empire and as a worldly, both combined into the Holy Roman Empire (der zweiter Reich) initiated by Charlemagne, grandson of Martell, who according to Western legend stemmed the expansion of Islam and hence saved Europe from being part of the Islamic world<sup>5</sup>. The Holy Roman Empire was a Frankish one, a tribe that split into French and German speaking, and the division of which inaugurated the division between France and Germany, which has dominated Continental European politics. Yet the combination of the sacred and the profane was unstable, and much of the medieval period in Europe is characterized by a struggle between the emperor and the pope, where initially the popes were victorious (we all remember Canossa) but eventually

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<sup>3</sup> Wells is interested in the possibly historical figure of Jesus. Concluding he was a charismatic preacher, but of a frail constitution. Unable even to carry his own cross without collapsing, and expiring quickly upon his crucifixion, unlike the tougher bandits on either of his sides, holding out throughout the night

<sup>4</sup> which not surprisingly earned him actual street-protests from Hindus

<sup>5</sup> Naturally would Islam have triumphed, we would be celebrating that as well, eternally thankful to the course history had decided to take

marginalized<sup>6</sup>. And so on.

The trouble with presenting a survey of history is that so many histories are going on at the same time, so many threads that cry out to be taken up. They all intertwine and influence each other. Wells does not have a particular theme, not one anyway that is apparent initially. Thus much of his presentation is confusing, especially chronologically. Where you are more informed, this disadvantage is less pronounced, as you do not read him so much for precise instruction as for the sweet pleasure of being reminded. So tempting as it is to touch upon the Arabic expansion, and the preservation of culture it involved, and the Crusades, the source of contemporary hostility and suspicion (although in the end Crusades degenerated into internal Christian bloodshed), I will refrain. The main point is what are the really important things, not the noise but the turning points? Turning points are only apparent retroactively (the most obvious example being the birth of a great man), and the trans-atlantic discoveries of a Columbus had comparatively very little impact on contemporary society.

One may probably claim with a high degree of accuracy that until the end of the 19th century civilised life throughout the centuries differed comparatively little. Nowadays we are accustomed to a great change of the conditions of material life generation from generation, and for most people actually going back into the past would not so much be an experience in nostalgia as much as an exercise in deprivation. But in former times it mattered very little whether you lived in the times of the Egyptian empire, the Roman or 16th century Spain. The 18th century with its enlightenment and scientific progress is often heralded as the dawn of modernity, but the real change did not occur until the early 19th. The Industrial Revolution, Wells argues, is as such nothing historically remarkable. Industry is fundamentally a matter of extreme division of labor, and as such can be traced far back in history. What really mattered was, Wells claims, the mechanical revolution, which replaced the power of man as the engine of civilization with the power of the machine. The mechanical revolution depended upon the ability to handle metal, i.e. iron, in far larger chunks than had previously been possible. It revolutionized history as much as the agricultural revolution several thousand years earlier, and put its special stamp on the form the modern industrial revolution would take, each reinforcing the other in the process. In fact the mechanical revolution enabled man to take control over nature, and thus profoundly changing his relation to it. From being something bigger and sustaining to be fought and nourished by, it turned into something fragile and precious, to be tendered and harvested. In fact history as we have known it until then seemed capable of continuing its waxing and waning indefinitely, only slowly grinding down its environment. Empires would come and go, and future students of 10'000 BC would have quite a lot to catch up on in their studies. Nowadays we have a sense that history is coming to an end. Progress and exponential growth cannot continue indefinitely. Somehow it has to end, although with the disappearance of the nuclear threat from the consciousness of man, it is no longer

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<sup>6</sup> The ways of the world involves a striking mixture of extreme competence and blatant incompetence. The Roman popes being in general singularly fit examples of the latter. This politically very important position was wasted on old men at the end of their tethers, rather than on vigorous man in the prime of their lives, pursuing thought-out policies through institutions of regularized and authoritative succession, as Wells wisely remarks

so clear how it will end.

And by this we have come to the point of real departure for Wells, - How to save mankind. Western triumph and scientific and economical progress had lasted for over a hundred years, and seemed until the catastrophe of the First World War (or the Great War as Wells naturally refers to it as) brought about the crisis, unshakeably assured. To Wells the salvation appears to lie in the same triumph of self-awareness through the social sciences, that the natural sciences had enjoyed until now, and for which Wells had proved such a tireless champion. In fact Wells notes

Men will listen dispassionately to the most diverse suggestions about stars and molecules, but ideas about our ways of life touch and reflect upon everyone about us.

Thereafter follows a lecture on Socialism, which boils down to an analysis of ownership and property. What kind of things must necessarily be the property of individuals (toothbrushes, tools of artists, your own bodies) and what things can be communal? Wells puts forward the idea that the sense of ownership is instinctive and primitive man had it in a degree much keener than modern man. That civilization can be viewed as a process of mitigating instinctive proprietary sense. This process is however long and tortuous, filled with contradictions. The French Revolution started in order to protect property from wilful taxation, but ended of course by calling into question the very property it had risen to protect. Because what greater obstacle is it to the equality and fraternity of man, than the unequal distribution of property itself? Wells associates the name of Marx to a harsh and elementary form of Communism, and cannot refrain to point out the convergence of views between free-trading economists of the Adam Smith ilk and Marxists, noting that the logic of reality triumphs over the logic of theory. The gist of Wells arguments is for a world government, a unified economy and a rational exploitation of the planets limited resources, as well as management of health, education and general well-being. In particular an abolishment of wars and petty national quarrels. In short Wells is calling for an end of history as we know it.

Wells sees the States as an example for the rest to follow. Pointing out that the United States was made possible by the drastic improvement of communication. Without the railway, San Fransisco would be more easily administered from Peking than from Washington. An American Hero is of course Lincoln, who is honored with a mini-portrait which argues (correctly I think), that the main concern of Lincoln was not the abolishment of slavery, but the integrity of the Union. The contemporary Communist experiment in Russia he rejects as one characterized by perfect faith and absolute inexperience.

Wilson who came to save Mankind from itself, and was indeed initially hailed as a Saviour, he paints as an exaggaration of the usual human tragedy of being great in dreams but incapable in performance. And he concludes with the dire warnings that the Great War may in twenty or thirty years time return, but now on a disastrous scale. Wells lived not only to see the Second World War, but also to see it to its end, including the dropping of the bomb, whose shadow so darkened the second half of the 20th century.

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