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H.G. Wells' Interview With Stalin Helped Change the Fundamental Principles of Liberalism

7-8 minutes

I doubt that any other interview of the last ten years was more dramatic, more interesting as a clear statement of two positions or, in a sense, more absurdly grotesque than H.G. Wells's interview with Stalin.

They met in Moscow on July 23 of last year and talked through an interpreter for nearly three hours. Wells gives a one-sided story in the last chapter of his "Experiment in Autobiography." The official text of the interview can now be had in a pamphlet issued by International Publishers for two cents. A longer pamphlet, costing fifty cents in this country, was published in London by *The New Statesman and Nation*. It contains both the interview and an exchange of letters in which Bernard Shaw is keener and wittier than Wells or J.M. Keynes. There is, unfortunately, no letter from Stalin. We know what Wells thinks about him; it would be instructive to hear what Stalin thinks about Wells.

The drama of their meeting lay in the contrast between two systems of thought. Stalin, with full authority, was speaking for communism, for the living heritage of Marx and Engels and Lenin. Wells is not an official figure and was speaking for

himself; but he spoke with the voice of Anglo-American liberalism. Stalin represented the class-conscious proletariat of all countries. Wells claimed to represent the interests of humanity as a whole, but he actually defended the middle-class-conscious technical workers. Stalin advocated revolution and Wells argued against violence. He pictured a new world-order achieved painlessly by education and by a sudden miracle of the human spirit. Stalin was too busy creating a new order to disengage its outlines from the excavations of the Moscow subway and the scaffolding that surrounds the House of the Soviets. Furthermore, there was a contrast of age and country between the two men, Stalin representing the iron age in Russia and Wells the hopefulness and trust in the future of England before the First World War.

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The burlesque quality of their meeting lay in the purpose that Wells carried to Moscow. During the spring of that year he had visited America and had been enthralled by the New Deal. Brain-Trusters familiar with his own books (these, indeed, are the source of the Brain Trust) had unfolded to him “a view of the world which seemed to contain all I had ever learned and thought.” He spent an evening in the White House and decided that Roosevelt was “the most effective transmitting instrument possible for the coming of the new world order.” At the same time, he perceived a striking similarity between Washington and Moscow. The two governments differed in method, but the end they sought, “a progressively more organized big-scale production, was precisely the same.” Therefore he determined to bring them together. He thought, modestly, “If Stalin is as able as I am beginning to think him, then he must be seeing many

things as I am seeing them.” He would urge Stalin to forswear Marx, to forsake the proletariat, to forget all his outdated nonsense about class hostility, and immediately to join with Roosevelt in a united front—against what? Against nothing in the world but the “mental tangles, egocentric preoccupations, obsessions, misconceived phrases, bad habits of thought, subconscious fears and dreads and plain dishonesty in people’s minds” that are today the sole obstacles standing in the way “to the attainment of universal freedom and abundance.” That was his proposal. Imagine a Mohammedan missionary setting out to convince the Pope that he ought to renounce the Bible and make pilgrimage to Mecca, after being circumcised. Then imagine Wells in the Kremlin, if you can.

Short-legged, long-waisted, smiling, armed with an ingratiatingly candid self-esteem, he makes his proclamations of faith and international good will to the interpreter, who writes them down and repeats them in Russian. Stalin, after politely asking Mr. Wells’s permission to smoke, sucks at his big pipe and gives his answers slowly. Wells rushes on to new subjects. The two men are talking in different worlds, Stalin in the iron present, Wells in the golden future; there is no meeting of minds. Yet this failure to communicate is not Stalin’s fault. He listens patiently, he considers everything Wells has to say and answers it point by point, without haste or condescension, exactly as if he were trying to explain the aims of the Russian revolution to a slow-witted but influential worker in the Putilov factory. Wells, on the other hand, hardly listens at all. Wells is the apostle, Wells is bearing a message, Wells is pursuing his own ideas with inexorable deafness. At the end of three hours he goes away, having forgotten nothing and learned nothing, except that Stalin cannot be liberalized.

It is an absurd situation, and it is also mildly tragic. If Wells had asked the right questions and had listened to the answers, he would not have been converted to Stalin's point of view, but at least he would have been able to measure some of his own ideas against reality. Several of the proposals he made in the tracts and novels of his middle period are now being tested in the Soviet Union. Thus, he once suggested that there ought to be a caste of Samurai, men and women who would dedicate themselves wholeheartedly to the task of guiding a new society. Membership in this caste would be voluntary and open to everyone who could meet the qualifications and the severe disciplinary tests. It is obvious that the real organization standing nearest to Wells's Samurai is the Russian Communist Party, and he might have learned how it functioned. Again, Wells has always dreamed of technically trained administrators given power to remake the world; they have some of this power under the Soviets. He had always emphasized the ideal of planning, and Stalin could have told him about some of the difficulties that must be overcome when planning is attempted on a continental scale. But Wells in the Kremlin asked no practical questions.

In recent years, such questions have ceased to concern him deeply. He has fixed his mind on the future so obstinately, he has wished and schemed and plotted so long for Utopia, that he is beginning to think it is just around the corner. "The socialist world-state," he says, "has become a tomorrow as real as today." But Wells's world-state of tomorrow will be created suddenly and without shedding blood by an Open Conspiracy of middle-class technicians. It has nothing whatever to do with the socialist state that exists today in a sixth of the world, after being violently created by a proletarian revolution. Stalin can have that

real state, with all its problems; Wells would rather clutch his dream.