

John Maynard Keynes, H.G. Wells, and a Problematic Utopia

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On March 17, 1928, John Maynard Keynes delivered a short lecture to a group of prep school children at Winchester College outlining a vision of a distant economic future. The lecture, which he later published as an essay under the title “Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren,” contained a century-long prediction of a future age of leisure and economic stability. Keynes’ essay has long been the subject of scholarly discussion, both on account of its nuanced optimism and its sometimes fantastical vision.¹ Keynes’ biographer, Robert Skidelsky, describes the essay as “the most eloquent expression of his utopianism” and approaches it primarily as a psychological expression, albeit one with economic content.²

Perhaps the most famous – and explicitly utopian – theme to emerge from the essay is Keynes’ prediction of a coming age where “the love of money as a possession” will be relegated to the realm of past superstitions, its purpose having been exhausted. According to Keynes:

All kinds of social customs and economic practices, affecting the distribution of wealth and of economic rewards and penalties, which we now maintain at all costs, however distasteful and unjust they may be in themselves, because they are tremendously useful in promoting the accumulation of capital, we shall then be free, at last, to discard.³

The pathway to this utopia was neither clear nor easy. As Philip Auerswald has noted, “a bumpy ride along the way to the steady-state bliss point was to be expected, but not feared” by Keynes.⁴ Keynes himself conditioned his prediction in noting that the “pace at which we can reach our destination of economic bliss will be governed by four things.” He then specified the conditions: “our power to control population, our determination to avoid wars and civil dissensions, our willingness to entrust to science the direction of those matters which are properly the concern of science, and the rate of accumulation as fixed by the margin between our production and our consumption; of which the last will easily look after itself, given the first three.”⁵

“Economic Possibilities” marks something of a public turning point in Keynes’ economic thought, particularly to the degree it was predicated on population. Keynes had long considered population growth to be an impediment to economic stability in the neo-Malthusian sense. His 1919 masterpiece,

¹ A sample of the voluminous literature on “Economic Possibilities” may be found in Summers, Lawrence H. “Economic possibilities for our children.” *NBER Reporter* 4 (2013): 1-6; Pecchi, Lorenzo, and Gustavo Piga, eds. *Revisiting Keynes: Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren*. The MIT Press, 2008.

² Skidelsky, Robert. *John Maynard Keynes. Vol. II: The Economist as Saviour, 1920-1937*. (1992) p. 234

³ Keynes, John Maynard. “Economic possibilities for our grandchildren (1930)” *Essays in Persuasion*. 1933, pp. 348-373.

⁴ Philip E. Auerswald *The Coming Prosperity: How Entrepreneurs Are Transforming the Global Economy*, p. 19

⁵ Keynes, “Economic Possibilities”

Economic Consequences of the Peace, devoted the better part of a chapter to the subject, both attributing elements of the First World War to unconstrained population pressures, and expressing dire concerns that the famous Malthusian devil would reemerge in coming years as a recurring strain on resource consumption.⁶

Population led Keynes to embrace the birth control movement in the 1920s as a means of countering the pressures of unconstrained growth. It also formed the basis for much of Keynes' involvement in the eugenics movement – an affiliation that lasted in various forms from his early years at Cambridge until shortly before his death in 1946.

In his less guarded moments, Keynes assigned an unsettling primacy to population in his diagnosis of contemporary political ills. This was the case in a 1925 lecture that he delivered in Moscow, a few short years after the Bolshevik revolution and amidst the ongoing solidification of Stalin's power. Though Keynes would elsewhere condemn the Soviet project in harsh terms, he cited Russia's population pressures in his attempt to assign a primary cause for the country's ills. "There is no greater danger than [population growth] to the economic future of Russia," he contended at the time. "There is no more important object of deliberate state policy than to secure a balanced budget of population."⁷

Keynes' "Economic Possibilities" lecture in 1928 struck a somewhat different tone on population. Although he included the aforementioned caveat as a precondition for his pathway to economic bliss, he also injected a specific observation about recent demographic patterns in Britain and the United States:

In spite of an enormous growth in the population of the world, which it has been necessary to equip with houses and machines, the average standard of life in Europe and the United States has been raised, I think, about fourfold. The growth of capital has been on a scale which is far beyond a hundredfold of what any previous age had known. And from now on we need not expect so great an increase of population.⁸

This observation revealed Keynes's engagement with the empirical reality of an ongoing demographic stabilization, at least in the two countries. Its significance to Keynes' larger body of work has been the subject of a fair amount of scholarly discussion. John Toye goes as far as to read a subtle yet crucial "recantation" of Keynes' earlier neo-Malthusian beliefs into this passage, though this likely pushes the evidence too far in light of Keynes' later statements on Malthus. Read in another light, it may actually reflect Keynes' confidence in the triumph of birth control and other related positions he had been advancing for the better part of a decade.⁹

Keynes' early writings on population were certainly geared to a world in which demographic expansion was to be expected for the foreseeable future. "I am unable to see any possible method of materially improving the average human lot which does not include a plan for restricting the increase in numbers,"

⁶ Keynes, "Economic Possibilities"

⁷ John Maynard Keynes, "Lectures in Moscow: The Economic Position of England," *The History of Economic Thought Website*. Written September 14, 1925. Accessed July 2016, <http://www.hetwebsite.net/het/texts/keynes/keynes1925moscow.htm>.

⁸ Keynes, "Economic Possibilities"

⁹ Toye, John. *Keynes on population*. OUP Oxford, 2000. p. 187; Magness, Phillip W., and Sean J. Hernandez. "The Economic Eugenicism of John Maynard Keynes." *Journal of Markets and Morality*, July 2017.

Keynes argued in the *Guardian* in 1923. “If, in Malthusian language, the checks of poverty, disease and war are to be removed, something must be put in their place.”¹⁰

Despite this emphasis, Keynes was in no way wedded to the notion that population pressures must forever strain human well-being. His attraction to birth control was itself a project to tame the Malthusian devil that he saw as the source of the strain. Keynes noted as much in another essay from the same period, stating “Birth Control touches on one side the liberties of women, and on the other side the duty of the State to concern itself with the size of the population just as much as with the size of the army or the amount of the Budget.”¹¹ His early writings reflected a time of growing population pressures and developed their prescriptions to this circumstance. As Keynes explained though in his 1926 lecture that became his famous essay ‘The End of Laissez-Faire,’ a “considered national policy” on the subject entailed asking “what size of population, whether larger or smaller than at present or the same, is most expedient.”¹²

Britain’s demographic slowdown of the late 1920s presented just such an occasion to evaluate the course of policy, including what Keynes believed to be the effects of birth control liberalization. But Keynes never wedded his population interests to birth control exclusively, even as he hoped it would facilitate “safe and easy” restraints on growth and an accompanying shift in “custom and conventional morals.” “Perhaps a more positive policy may be required,” he observed in 1923.¹³ Three years later and with the earliest signs of demographic stabilization underway, he was beginning to consider circumstances beyond mere numbers. A time might soon arrive “when the community as a whole must pay attention to the innate quality as well as to the mere numbers of its future members.”¹⁴

With the stabilization well apparent by its composition, “Economic Possibilities” could accordingly be interpreted as Keynes’ earliest blueprint for a world in which the Malthusian devil had been successfully tamed. A tamed demographic pattern was not a cause for abandoning earlier views, but rather a vindication of the birth control movement and with it – as Keynes directly suggested in the 1928 essay – a necessary precondition for an age of leisure and its aforementioned utopian implications.

As evidence in support of this latter interpretation, the present study explores a little-noticed intellectual kinship between Keynes’s “Economic Possibilities” and another utopian work from the same period, H.G. Wells’ little-studied didactic novel *The World of William Clissold*. Expressing similar visions of an abundant and leisurely future, Wells’ *Clissold* was itself a product of a common intellectual circle in which the two thinkers moved. Keynes published a detailed and favorable review of Wells’ novel shortly before writing “Economic Consequences,” and the two men privately conversed about its themes and subjects. Keynes and Wells enjoyed a longstanding relationship even as they later diverged in some of their politics, with Wells veering significantly further to the left of Keynes. At the time of “Economic Possibilities” and *Clissold* though, the threads of a common utopian outlook – predicated upon

¹⁰ John Maynard Keynes, “The Underlying Principles,” *Manchester Guardian* Commercial Supplement, January 4, 1923

¹¹ Keynes, “Am I A Liberal?,” *Essays in Persuasion*, 1933

¹² Keynes, “The End of Laissez-Faire,” *Essays in Persuasion*, 1933

¹³ John Maynard Keynes, “The Underlying Principles,” *Manchester Guardian* Commercial Supplement, January 4, 1923

¹⁴ Keynes, “The End of Laissez-Faire”

population theory and steeped in eugenic beliefs – connected the two writers in a remarkably similar futuristic vision.

A Dinner, a Toast, and a Review

A distinguished assortment of over 180 intellectual and political figures assembled at the Holborn Restaurant in London on July 26, 1927. The dinner gathering marked the 50th anniversary of the Bradlaugh-Besant trial of 1877 – a criminal prosecution of two birth control reformers over the distribution of contraceptive literature. An elderly Annie Besant attended the gathering as a guest of honor, as did the late William Bradlaugh's daughter Hypatia. C.V. Drysdale, the son of George Drysdale, a physician and author of the "indecent" birth control literature that angered the authorities in the original proceeding, organized the event. Drysdale was also the heir to the organization his father created, the Malthusian League, in the wake of the prosecution to press for the liberalization of Britain's birth control laws.¹⁵

In one sense, Drysdale intended the dinner to serve as a victory lap for the organization. Upon its conclusion, the Malthusian League went into a period of extended dormancy, its original purpose having been accomplished through a series of birth control reforms over the previous decade. It also provided a gathering space for several leading figures in the occasionally schism-prone birth control movement. In addition to Drysdale and Besant, the American reformer Margaret Sanger attended. So did Julian Huxley, a prominent biologist, eugenicist, and advocate of birth control as a means of restraining population growth. The dinner program featured two formal speeches given as extended "toasts" to the anniversary. John Maynard Keynes, the presiding chairman of the event, gave the first as an homage to the legacy of the political economist Thomas Malthus. H.G. Wells delivered the second to mark the achievements of the League that bore Malthus' name.¹⁶

Keynes' remarks from the event survive in a set of written notes in his personal papers, the content of which directly presage the arguments he would present a few months later in "Economic Possibilities." They have never been published in full, and have managed almost entirely to escape the attention of historians and Keynes's biographers.¹⁷ His toast functioned as both a historical retrospective and – like "Economic Possibilities" – a futuristic projection with intimate ties to population theory. Structured as a short biographical treatment of Malthus, Keynes aimed to connect Malthus's legacy to the League's work while also sketching out his thoughts on the future of Malthusian principles.

After recognizing Malthus' famous population theorem, Keynes transitioned into the subject of birth control. Malthus himself opposed contraception for ethical reasons, favoring tactics such as encouraging late marriage as an alternative means of constraining population growth. The Malthusian League was therefore technically a neo-Malthusian organization, which admitted "the utility of...deliberate checks on conception about the use of which Malthus himself never committed himself." Keynes charted this

¹⁵ John Maynard Keynes Papers (hereafter cited as JMK), Kings College, Cambridge, PS/3/107; R.B. Kerr, "After Fifty Years – 1927" *Birth Control Review*, September 1927, p. 238

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Exceptions include Magness & Hernandez (2017); Bashford, Alison. *Global population: history, geopolitics, and life on earth*. Columbia University Press, 2014; and Singerman, David Roth. "Keynesian Eugenics and the Goodness of the World." *Journal of British Studies* 55.03 (2016): 538-565.

course's intellectual trajectory through Charles Darwin and, notably, "the name of Francis Place who more than 100 years ago completed the work of Malthus and was forerunner in the direct line of Bradlaugh and Annie Besant."¹⁸

The specific nod to Place, who, as dinner guests were told, "we should also remember to-day with Malthus," presents an unexplored feature of Keynes own economic thinking. Keynes likely knew of Place by reputation as both an interpreter of Malthus and as supporter of proactive birth control in his own right. Keynes had only recently begun his own exploration of Place's writings due to a recent correspondence with the American economic historian Norman E. Himes. About a month prior to the event, Himes sent Keynes a copy of Place's 1822 text *Illustrations and Proofs of the Principle of Population*, hoping to induce the Royal Economics Society into financing a modern reprint.¹⁹

Keynes replied to Himes two days after the dinner event, informing his correspondent in the United States that he had spent the previous weeks perusing the text. Keynes noted that "It is certainly, as I had always heard it was, of considerable historical interest." Although he feared a full reprint would be cost-prohibitive due to the dated nature of Place's scientific commentaries, he expressed his enthusiasm for "the real essence of the book" in its sixth chapter, containing Place's commentaries on the means of restricting population growth to rates below the expansion of the food supply.²⁰

Keynes turned next to the Malthusian League's own accomplishments and quickly associated them with further forays into not only population control, but heredity and eugenic design. "The notions both of Eugenics and of the struggle for survival are latent in Malthus's essay," he observed. By way of Place, Darwin, and Bradlaugh and Besant, they had become explicit to the League's purposes. Presaging his observations in "Economic Possibilities," Keynes noted the ongoing demographic stabilization in Britain and raised its implications for neo-Malthusian doctrines on birth control. "In my opinion the battle is now practically won," he declared victoriously, "at least in this country." While there were still modest legal obstacles "to reduce...the citadel is stormed." Keynes continued:

Within our own lifetime the population of this island will cease to increase and will probably diminish. Man has won the right to use the powerful weapon of the preventive check. But we shall do well to recognize that the weapon is not only a powerful one but a dangerous one. We are now faced with a greater problem, which will take centuries to solve. We have now to learn to use the weapon wisely and rightly. I believe that for the future the problem of population will emerge in the much greater problem of heredity and Eugenics.²¹

To Keynes, the task before the birth control movement was now one of a shifting mission of conscious societal design: "Mankind has taken into his own hands & out of the hands of nature the task and the duty of moulding his body and his soul to a pattern." His language was perhaps intentionally guarded on this final point, reflecting a style of the period that still treated public discussions of contraception and

¹⁸ In Piam Memoriam, JMK PS/3/109

¹⁹ Himes to Keynes, June 24, 1927; Keynes to Himes, July 1 and July 4, 1927, in Norman E. Himes Papers, Harvard University

²⁰ Keynes to Himes, July 29, 1927, Himes Papers. Following this initial exchange, Keynes and Himes began an extended correspondence over the next several years pertaining to a series of articles the latter was preparing on the history of Neo-Malthusian economic thought. Keynes subsequently published several of Himes' articles on this subject in the *Economic Journal*.

²¹ In Piam Memoriam, JMK PS/3/109

sexual norms as a social taboo. An additional crossed out line in Keynes' notes resolves any uncertainty about his intention though. His concerns indicated that in terms of human hereditary, "[q]uality must become the preoccupation" given that demographic stabilization, presumably with the aid of liberalized birth control laws, had been achieved.²²

The concluding message of Keynes' dinner remarks provides affirming context on the shift that Toye and others have seen in "Economic Possibilities," although it also refutes the posited "recantation" of Keynes' neo-Malthusian population beliefs. Rather than changing his position to follow the patterns of the demographic evidence, Keynes actually saw Britain's population pattern as both an affirmation of his position, and as a stepping stone to its next objectives. The theories of "Malthus and Place and Darwin have brought us to a great turning point." Keynes concluded with his formal toast on that note.

H.G. Wells' remarks followed those of Keynes. He left no similar notes, but another attendee provided a synopsis of his argument. Continuing with an intellectual history of the League and its cause, the novelist lamented the role of Karl Marx, and particularly his inattention to population, in deflecting and distracting from the progression of Malthusian thought. As he explained, "To the Marxian the Law of Population meant nothing, and the whole Darwinian system, which was founded on the Law of Population, also meant nothing." He ended on a prediction that the birth control movement would right this course as the "history of mankind has been altered forever" by the League's role in removing these obstacles.²³

Both messages resonated with the audience but also and more significantly, they illustrated the common ground between the two speakers. Both were familiar associates from British intellectual circles. Keynes famously anchored the core of London's Bloomsbury Group, and Wells' philosophical pursuits brought him into frequent intellectual and social exchange with many of the same people.

Keynes and Wells had known each other for several years at that point, with population, birth control, and eugenics serving as common features of their respective interests. An early letter from Keynes to Wells indicates their recurring exchanges on these issues lasted the better part of a decade. Writing in 1920, Keynes alerted Wells to two recent books by American geographer Ellsworth Huntington, in which he espoused the eugenically-infused theory of climactic determinism. Keynes recommended Huntington's works as a "fascinating commentary on Universal History," suggesting they may complement Wells' own book project at the time, *The Outline of History*.²⁴

The two men continued to collaborate on a number of birth control causes throughout the 1920s. Wells, along with Keynes' close associate and Bloomsbury member Lytton Strachey, volunteered to offer testimony in a later court proceeding involving the attempted censorship of Margaret Sanger's pamphlets in London. Letters from Bertrand Russell and Harold Cox in Keynes' papers attest to his own involvement in the defense of Sanger, including apprising him of Wells' attempt to introduce testimony

²² Ibid.

²³ R.B. Kerr, "After Fifty Years – 1927" *Birth Control Review*, September 1927, p. 238

²⁴ Keynes to Wells, January 10, 1920, H.G. Wells Papers, UIUC. Wells' corresponding letter to Keynes is lost, but appears to make reference to his own intended use of *Economic Consequences of the Peace* in the forthcoming book. Wells drew from Keynes in his finished text. See H.G. Wells. *The Outline of History: Being a plain history of life and mankind*. Cassell, 1921, p. 1076.

in court.²⁵ Keynes and Wells played organizing roles in a 1922 Neo-Malthusian Conference in London, also featuring Sanger, Cox, Drysdale, and several other leading eugenicists. Both served as honorary vice presidents of several birth control societies and eugenics organizations, and appear to have been regular attendees at the meetings and proceedings of the same groups throughout the 1920s.²⁶

Wells personally enlisted Keynes to comment upon his long-neglected 1926 novel, *The World of William Clissold*, and several clues indicate the two men viewed the work as a point of philosophical common ground. Wells' *Clissold* was atypical of his better known fictional tales in that its plot essentially consisted of a running social commentary on the present and future states of human society. The titular character was openly assumed to be a stand-in for Wells himself, and the novel's text served as a vehicle of delivery for his own commentary on politics and society. Like Keynes' "Economic Possibilities," it envisions an openly utopian future of leisure and abundance, subject to favorable population patterns and contingent upon a scientifically-minded elite. The novel differs, though, in that it provides a more explicit prescriptive route forward, whereas Keynes largely sidesteps this question when presenting his futuristic vision in his essay.

Keynes enthusiastically read a copy of the manuscript that Wells provided to him, writing to share his "enjoyment" with the text. Reflecting on the novel's poor reception with the public, in part due to its odd style, Keynes dismissed the "tedious" complaints. Wells' critics had missed "something of immense talent and life, and so interesting" on account of its form.²⁷ In a second letter on the subject, Keynes likened the book's reception to Wells' public feud with Hilaire Belloc a few years prior over the former's alleged anti-Catholicism. Wells took parting shots at Belloc in *Clissold*, which appear to have enjoyed Keynes' approval. The economist apparently shared the novel with his uncle W. Langdon Brown, who then wrote Wells to share an assessment that "William Clissold appear[s] to have approved" of his famous nephew.²⁸

Keynes also volunteered to advocate for *Clissold* and hinted he would soon publish a review. Referencing his own journalistic connections to *The Nation and Athenaeum*, Keynes informed Wells that the magazine's managing editor "shares my feeling that there is far more sympathy between your views and ours than between most couples in the [illegible] world."²⁹

True to his promise, Keynes authored one of the very few positive reviews of *Clissold*, which was published in the *Nation and Athenaeum* and in the *New Republic* a few months prior to the Malthusian League dinner. His extended discussion of the book's philosophical and political arguments almost immediately zeroed in upon the question of population. The review contained his first written acknowledgement of Britain's demographic stabilization, suggesting that it portended an aging society in the next 50 years.³⁰ The prediction was only the beginning of the similarities, though, with Keynes' own futuristic vision in "Economic Possibilities." As Keynes would detail in his review, Wells advanced an

²⁵ Russell to Keynes, January 30, 1923 and February 3, 1923, and Cox to Keynes, February 9, 1923 in JMK SS/3/3, 4, 8

²⁶ Pierpoint, Raymond, ed. *Report of the Fifth International Neo-Malthusian and Birth Control Conference*. Kingsway Hall, London, July 11th to 14th, 1922. William Heinemann Medical Books, 1922.

²⁷ Keynes to Wells, October 11, 1926, H.G. Wells Papers, UIUC

²⁸ Brown to Wells, November 4, 1926, H.G. Wells Papers, UIUC

²⁹ Keynes to Wells, October 15, 1926, H.G. Wells Papers, UIUC

³⁰ Keynes, "One of Wells' Worlds," *The New Republic*, February 2, 1927

enthusiasm for a future society under the guidance and direction of men of a certain type of mind, temperament, intellect, and scientific character. Both men, it seems, envisioned a utopia of sorts, premised upon enlightened elites and standing in stark contrast with the impetuous and agitating rabble of that they observed in contemporary socialist and labor movements.

Both authors left several clues attesting to the connection between their respective works. In Keynes's case, the evidence appears in his own editorial decisions for his 1932 compilation of shorter works, *Essays in Persuasion*. While arranging this work Keynes specifically paired his well-known "Economic Possibilities" with his then-obscure review of *Clissold* under a chapter heading "the future."

Wells, for his own part, wrote a fictionalized Keynes into the plot of his novel, almost certainly reflecting their real-life encounters in the intellectual circles of 1920s Britain. The unusual incorporation of living figures by name into a fiction work served its own purpose of framing the title character's own intellectual circles. Wells explained this feature at the time of the novel's release, noting they were necessary "to get the full effect of contemporary life in which living ideas and movements play a dominant part." As an example he offered Clissold's fictionalized encounter with the psychiatrist Carl Jung, noting "certain original ideas of his have been taken and woven into the Clissold point of view."³¹ Wells clearly used Keynes in a similar manner to imprint ideas upon the novel's characters, and almost certainly with the economist's nod of approval.

Keynes' name appears at a couple of points in the novel, including one extended encounter as told through the titular character's voice. Describing Keynes as the "idol" of his brother Dickon (another didactic manifestation of Wells himself), William Clissold recounts meeting the famous economist at a lunch party in London. Without specifying the particulars of their disagreement, Clissold states that they fell "foul of each other rather sharply" over a description of "the way a gorilla sits down" in their mutual readings of *The Mongol in Our Midst* – a now-notorious pseudoscientific book by F.G. Crookshank that attributed "inferior" racial characteristics to "Mongoloid imbecility," and suggested their transmission into Caucasian heredity. "Neither of us really cared very much about the way a gorilla sits down," continues William, "but we both chanced to be wickedly argumentative that day. We scored off each other, and that is all that passed between us."³²

The unusual and slightly frivolous encounter carried a secondary message of greater substance, as William then announced his hope that Keynes received the message of his book: "Keynes has affected both Dickon's ideas and mine profoundly, and I shall be disappointed if this stuff I am writing here among the olives does not reach him at least in Cambridge—with my friendly greeting."³³ Judging by Keynes' favorable reception of the book, the intended message indicated that a number of *Clissold's* arguments emerged from Wells' now-lost intellectual exchanges with Keynes over the years.

"Economic Possibilities" and *Clissold*: A Philosophical Kinship

When publicly addressing matters of population and heredity, Keynes often retreated into deeply opaque language. His published remarks on the subject are strongly suggestive of a hereditary elitism,

³¹ "Mr. Wells' Three Decker Novel," *Manchester Guardian*, June 28, 1926

³² H.G. Wells. *The World of William Clissold*, Benn Brothers, 1926, Book 5, Section 8

³³ *Ibid.*

but in a few less guarded moments he espoused policies that reflected a belief in negative eugenics, or the use of the state to regulate reproduction and population patterns actively.³⁴ He nonetheless avoided the inflammatory rhetoric that sometimes inhabited this area of politics, and generally tried to remain aloof of the internecine disputes that sometimes plagued the various birth control, Malthusian, and eugenic organizations of the time – even as he served as an honorary officer in several of them.³⁵

Far from speculative esotericism, Keynes left a direct clue about his strategy in addressing these subjects in public settings. Following the Malthusian League dinner in 1927, he sent a short postcard to fellow attendee Julian Huxley containing a cryptic quoted line from the first edition of Malthus's *Essay on Population*: "The impressions and excitements of this world are the instrument with which the Supreme Being forms matter into mind." In apparent reference to further remarks from the dinner, Keynes appended a short comment of his own: "Yes, an odd occasion, but rather fascinating. A little word-control wouldn't have been out of place."³⁶ It is not difficult to imagine that he was referring to Drysdale's exuberant but somewhat unpolished declaration at the conclusion of the dinner: "all animal life was subject to the two desires - hunger and sex - which in a state of nature were always in conflict with one another. Only by Birth Control could this antagonism be overcome."³⁷

Keynes clearly took his own advice in the published form of his 1930 essay, at least to a point. His plan to arrive at the "destination of economic bliss" was indeed governed by the aforementioned four goals, but the plan to achieve those goals, or more to the point, the plan to achieve the first three, controlling population, avoiding war and civil dissention, and entrusting science to the scientists, as the fourth would naturally follow from them, was not specified in "Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren." H.G. Wells was not nearly as circumspect in 1926 when he wrote *Clissold*, though, and Keynes links his "Economic Possibilities" to that work in very clear terms.

Assessing the social condition in "Economic Possibilities," Keynes asserted that "for the first time since his creation, man will be faced with his real, his permanent problem-how to use his freedom from pressing economic cares, how to occupy the leisure, which science and compound interest will have won for him, to live wisely and agreeably well."³⁸ This passing nod to men of science and financiers is precisely the ground Wells stakes out as pivotal in *Clissold*. Indeed, Wells identifies these two groups, scientific businessmen and financiers, in the fifth book of the novel, (the same book in which Keynes is referenced for the second time in the novel), as the true "revolutionaries" of mankind's progression.³⁹

³⁴ Examples include Keynes' essays "End of Laissez-Faire" and "Am I a liberal?"

³⁵ Keynes held a number of honorary titles and positions in the British Eugenics Society, C.V. Drysdale's Malthusian League, Marie Stopes' Society for Constructive Birth Control and Racial Progress, Margaret Sanger's World Population Congress, and the World League for Sexual Reform, among others. In a letter to Margaret Sanger, Keynes noted that he was "not at all in touch with the internal politics" of these groups. Of the British organizations, he continued, "I feel most in sympathy with the group connected with the Eugenics Society" and with the birth control clinics supported by Harold Cox. Keynes to Sanger, January 24, 1929, Sanger Papers, Library of Congress

³⁶ Keynes to Huxley, July 28, 1927, Huxley Papers, Rice University

³⁷ R.B. Kerr, "After Fifty Years – 1927" *Birth Control Review*, September 1927, p. 239

³⁸ Keynes, "Economic Possibilities"

³⁹ Wells, *Clissold*, Book 5, Section 2

In order to understand these two groups as the true revolutionaries, though, the very concept of revolution must, of necessity, be redefined away from strictly political, specifically socialist grounds.⁴⁰ This is rendered possible, for both Keynes and Wells, because of the rapid changes evident in Anglo society in the first third of the 20th century, changes which saw labor and money render men dependent upon one another to a greater degree than was previously experienced. This interdependence would, according to Wells, ultimately result in nothing less than a “metamorphosis of man” into a single world community.⁴¹ While not a foregone conclusion for Wells, this metamorphosis was nonetheless a necessity. Man would either adapt in this way or die.

Because this metamorphosis was necessary on the one hand and not assured on the other, Wells believed it would have to be brought into being by what he termed an “Open Conspiracy.” This conspiracy, this revolutionary movement, would require power, and the requisite power was only to be found with the aforementioned scientists and financiers. According to Wells, “The people who have control in these affairs can change the conditions of human life constructively and to the extent of their control. No other people can so change them.” “A world unity” was his clear goal, but it was to be a “scientifically organized economic world unity,” which would only incidentally result in any kind of political unity. It was, according to Wells, “not a project to overthrow existing governments by insurrectionary attacks, but to supersede them by disregard. It does not want to destroy them or alter their forms but to make them negligible by replacing their functions.”⁴²

What would emerge would be a sort of cosmopolitanism, a cosmopolitanism which would at once see the importance of flags and nationalism of all stripes dissipate, and the consolidation of production into ever larger organizations which would come to be managed by a natural elite. Political institutions would follow, of course. Wells called for a supreme court of international law, a confederated world government, and even a global police force. But these institutions would be secondary, at most. The strategy, according to Wells, would have to be “sub- or super-legal.” It would have to be truly, and thoroughly, revolutionary. Man himself would be forever altered, and “all the world” would be his meeting place. Further still, said Wells, “All the world is our court and our temple, our capital and our fair.”⁴³

Wells’ meeting place of the world, though, was one fraught with population difficulties, and here Wells found his most common ground with Keynes. As Keynes had pointed out, the European and American standard of living had risen fourfold in the face of – in fact “in spite of” – explosive population growth. But with the accumulation of capital at levels sufficient to fuel growth and an ongoing demographic stabilization, the Malthusian trap had become a relic of the past – at least in England.⁴⁴ Indeed, a

⁴⁰ Keynes emphasizes this point in his review of *Clissold*, simultaneously hinting at his own characteristic discontent with the alternative that Labour presented to his favored but intellectually faltering Liberal Party. As Keynes noted, “Clissold’s direction is to the Left—far, far to the Left; but he seeks to summon from the Right the creative force and the constructive will which is to carry him there. He describes himself as being temperamentally and fundamentally a liberal. But political Liberalism must die “to be born again with firmer features and a clearer will.” See Keynes, “One of Wells’ Worlds”

⁴¹ *Clissold*, Book 5, Section 2.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Clissold*, Book 5, Section 8

⁴⁴ Keynes, “Economic Possibilities”

dramatically increasing population would be nothing short of counterproductive, hence its incorporation into Keynes' four conditions of bliss.

Similarly, Wells found not fear, but solace in declining English birth rates, writing,

It does not alarm me in the least that the English birth rate for 1925 is the lowest on record. With a million and a half unemployed in England, I wish it could be lower. I hope it will be. I hope the time is not far off when every child born in England will be born because its parents fully meant it to be born and because they wanted it and meant to rear it. A time will come when all the world will have passed through and out of this slum phase in the development of a large scale economic life, and when birth control will be universal.⁴⁵

It bears noting, though, that Wells' topic in the *Clissold* section in question was not English birth rates, but race, and his concerns with population need to be read through that distinct lens. Wells was not concerned with population in the "civilized world," but with the civilizing effect that population control could have on what he referred to as the "slum strata" of the globe. This is because, according to Wells, the remedy to the "great slumifactions" was not "more white babies, but more civilisation."⁴⁶ In the end, "civilisation" to Clissold meant, quite clearly, fewer non-white offspring.

And civilization, of course, could come only from those revolutionaries previously called up to create the Open Conspiracy necessary to remake man in his new, cosmopolitan image: the scientific businessmen and the financiers. According to Wells:

They and they alone can exercise a sufficient directive force to hurry the economic development of the more dangerous lands past the festering phase. It is they alone who can arm or disarm, corrupt or control. With them resides the possibility of a concerted breaking down of the fantastic barriers to trade, transport and intercommunication that now protect backward, wasteful, misplaced and slum-creating forms of employment. No other sort of men can do that, but only big business men. They can strengthen the hands of the labour intellectuals and enforce their demand for a rising minimum standard of living throughout the planet. With a rising standard of comfort the springs that feed these dank dangerous marshes of low-grade breeding will dry up, because whenever comfort rises, the birth-rate falls...and as their realisation of their responsibilities grows, as the Open Conspiracy realises itself, it will become the guiding power in world affairs.⁴⁷

Keynes, for his part, concurred with this feature of the conspiracy. In his 1927 *New Republic* review of *Clissold*, he asserted that "The creative intellect of mankind" was only to be found "amongst the scientists and the great modern businessmen." Revolutionaries, thus, would have to be recruited not from the left, but from the right. Keynes typified the Open Conspiracy as nothing short of persuading "the type of man whom it now amuses to create a great business, that there lie waiting for him bigger things which will amuse him more."⁴⁸

⁴⁵ *Clissold*, Book 5, Section 12

⁴⁶ *Clissold*, Book 5, Section 12

⁴⁷ *Clissold*, Book V, Section 12

⁴⁸ Keynes, "One of Wells' Worlds"

In Wells' rendering through *Clissold* the reader must contend with a eugenic outlook where race emerges at the forefront of a distinct utopian vision. It is both a feature of his population theory and a reflection on Britain's demographic stabilization vis-à-vis the world.

Interestingly, Keynes avoided making any similar overtly racial specification in his own discussion, expressing a more guarded yet also certain stake in general matters of heredity. Otherwise the two men reached their positions through remarkably parallel paths – through early detection of an emerging population pattern in Britain, a common embrace of a scientifically organized world, and their respective self-situating among forward-looking intellectual elites operating neither in the shadow of a greed-driven past nor the mobs of organized labor and a socialistic rabble. A lightly elaborated but pervading eugenicism hovered around the entire system, occasionally rising to the front as in Keynes' marginalia about the preoccupation of "quality" in his outline for the Malthusian League dinner. At least for the moment, Keynes and Wells were effectively engaged in a public exchange of letters and remarks through their respective media, and largely in concurrence about the close similarities between their systems - Wells' "open conspiracy" and Keynes' pathway to bliss.

Conclusion

In the years that followed Keynes traced his futurist themes further, developing their common elements with the "open conspiracy" into a full-blown system, a system that would ultimately coopt from the old what it had to in the name of building the new. What had to be coopted was quite clear for Keynes; it was the love of money. While this love might well have been unnecessary in the large, indeed even pointless in Keynes' estimation, it was nonetheless a very useful instrumentality. "They have no creed, these potential open conspirators," he wrote in his review of *Clissold*. "That is why—unless they have the luck to be scientists or artists—they fall back on the grand substitute motive, the perfect ersatz, the anodyne for those who in fact want nothing at all—money."

The desire to operationalize the system of 'Economic Possibilities' became part the project Keynes continued in his famous *General Theory* in 1936. The relevant discussion in his magnum opus reads as more of a caveat than an instructional guide, but also carries forward a number of unmistakably common themes from the 1930 essay. With one great war behind him, and another on the horizon, he presented his "new system" in the language of peace—peace almost everyone genuinely wanted but could not attain. The "new system might be more favourable to peace than the old has been. It is worth while to repeat and emphasise that aspect." Dictators, he opined, were often warlike, but economic conditions facilitated their bellicose actions. And what were these conditions? "The pressure of population and the competitive struggle for markets." Keynes went on to conclude that the struggle for markets "which probably played a predominant part in the nineteenth century, and might again," ostensibly leaving concerns of population to the side. But the concern with population was, without question, still crucial to the Keynesian project.⁴⁹

Curiously, without "population control," as Keynes referred to it, it is not at all clear that any of the rest of the economic prescriptions of his masterwork would yield favorable results. With population control, and the further requirements Keynes illustrated, nothing short of peace could result. He wrote:

⁴⁹ Keynes, *The General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money*. Macmillan, 1936, Chapter 24, Part IV

Thus, whilst economists were accustomed to applaud the prevailing international system as furnishing the fruits of the international division of labour and harmonising at the same time the interests of different nations, there lay concealed a less benign influence; and those statesmen were moved by common sense and a correct apprehension of the true course of events, who believed that if a rich, old country were to neglect the struggle for markets its prosperity would droop and fail. But if nations can learn to provide themselves with full employment by their domestic policy (and, we must add, if they can also attain equilibrium in the trend of their population), there need be no important economic forces calculated to set the interest of one country against that of its neighbours.

The old Malthusian population devil, it seems, was sitting in plain sight – constrained as it had been since the demographic stabilization of Britain in the late 1920s, but a prerequisite condition for the entire system to work. And Keynes would specify exactly that much a year later upon being invited to deliver the British Eugenic Society's annual Galton lecture in 1937. In a sense his lecture remarks read as something of a post-script to the *General Theory*, elaborating upon a second Malthusian devil rooted in unemployment following a breakdown in effective demand. Particular circumstances of policy became possible in times of stationary population. One passage showed striking similarity to Keynes' earlier vision from 'Economic Possibilities.'

"A gradual evolution in our attitude towards accumulation, so that it shall be appropriate to the circumstances of a stationary or declining population, we shall be able, perhaps, to get the best of both worlds- to maintain the liberties and independence of our present system, whilst its more signal faults gradually suffer euthanasia as the diminishing importance of capital accumulation and the rewards, attaching to it fall into their proper position in the social scheme."⁵⁰

Keynes also reiterated in his lecture that he did not "depart from the old Malthusian conclusion" on population – he only wished to warn of the new problems that may arise once it is chained, and prepare accordingly such that "fiercer and more intractable" forces would not be set loose.

Keynes' relations with Wells endured the strains of the novelist's odd and somewhat notorious 1934 interview with Joseph Stalin, and a related spat it provoked with George Bernard Shaw. Notably, Shaw charged Wells with a strange failure to appreciate the finer nuances of the Soviet strongman's conversation, dubbing the writer enamored with "Clissoldism" from his widely-panned novel of a few years earlier. Keynes attempted to mediate the public dispute by offering a partial defense of Wells, taking barbs at the socialist Shaw's clinging to a Victorian caricature of "the capitalist." The intervening events of war and Depression, Keynes noted, had destroyed that prior age. Today's capitalist "is a forlorn object, Heaven knows—at the best, a pathetic, well-meaning Clissold."⁵¹ To save Wells from greater charges, he conceded the character's impracticalities.

Keynes appears to have wanted to shield Wells from Shaw's scorn, but his enthusiasm for the utopian elements of the novel was starting to wear. His form in this published response was intentionally replete with barbs of his own, and continued in an exchange of letters where he engaged the socialist theorizing of Shaw's biting pen. Wells' novel itself dropped from Keynes sight after that point, and drifted to its

⁵⁰ Keynes, John Maynard. "Some economic consequences of a declining population." *The Eugenic Review* 29.1 (1937).

⁵¹ "Mr. Keynes replies to Mr. Shaw," *The New Statesman and Nation*, 10 November 1934

present state of obscurity. Wells himself subsequently turned to other matters, foremost among them the composition of his famous internationalist manifesto *The Rights of Man*.

A crucial theme of the late 1920s conversation persisted in Keynes' mind though, suggesting he was not ready to relinquish the utopian theorizing that had characterized his public dialogue with Wells in the previous decade. A letter written two years after the Shaw exchange and around the time that the *General Theory* appeared in print leaves no doubt whatever regarding Keynes' placement of eugenic planning at the heart of his economic theories of population, and here he was decidedly less circumspect that was often the case in both his public utterances and published works.

Writing to Margaret Sanger in 1936, Keynes revived an old theme from Wells' *Clissold* and his own Malthusian League dinner remarks in 1927. Sanger approached the economist from overseas seeking assistance in furthering the birth control cause in America. The two were old acquaintances dating to their mutual work on population control in the early 1920s before the demographic stabilization of Britain was apparent. Keynes responded to her request by noting a "certain shifting in my views" since that time. Using a line of argument almost identical to his Malthusian League dinner remarks, Keynes confirmed where his position now stood: "In most countries we have now passed definitely out of the phase of increasing population into that of declining population, and I feel that the emphasis on policy should be considerably changed - much more with the emphasis on eugenics and much less on restriction [of population growth] as such."⁵²

Here Keynes differentiated his involvement with the birth control movement from his larger interest in eugenics. Birth control had been a feature of that interest, a policy of the moment situated to the particulars of demography prior to the stabilization. Changing population patterns were not its end though, as Keynes' shift toward matters of hereditary quality now indicated.

Distinct parallels to Keynes' notion of a shifting focus appear in Wells' own tackling of birth control. In *Clissold*, he approaches the subject as a turning point. "Birth control is indeed essential—nay, more, it is fundamental—to the conception of a new phase of human life that the world republic will inaugurate," its main character explains. To William Clissold, birth control's function was not an end to itself to be achieved then set aside, but a means to a theorized break between "the newer conception of life from the old" – between subservience to nature (or a superstitious "providence") and man's seizing of the tools of scientifically informed order. The new "idea of life" in Wells' utopia "gathers together every available force to free man from accident and necessity and make him master of the universe in which he finds himself." A eugenic design becomes the plainly stated end of this line of reasoning. Birth control achieved population stability but what followed next was an opportunity to start anew, free of the impediments of population pressures. Thus concludes Clissold, "Given sufficient wisdom to control that, and these nightmares of civilisation suffocating under the multiplicity of its darker and baser offspring, dissolve into nothingness."⁵³

The first wave of Britain's birth control movement culminated in the removal of most legal restrictions upon the dissemination of contraceptive information by the early 1930s, and the ensuing opening of family planning clinics and medical practices. Both Keynes and Wells both welcomed this outcome, though they also gradually withdrew from the day to day politics of the issue and its associated

⁵² Keynes to Sanger, June 23, 1936 Margaret Sanger Papers, Library of Congress

⁵³ *Clissold*, Book 5, Section 12

organizations.⁵⁴ Significantly, Keynes' involvement with the broader eugenics cause did not follow the same path. He assumed a higher profile role with the British Eugenics Society after the Galton lecture in 1937 and remained involved in its affairs until his death. The organization somewhat tempered its own scope in the wake of the Second World War, including drifting away from Drysdale of the old Malthusian League. Hereditary planning remained its focal point though, and as of 1945 it still advanced the "voluntary sterilization" of the "unfit" and claimed an assortment of "scientific" interests in the effects of "race mixture."⁵⁵

Keynes did not live to see the eugenics movement's broader decline to its present discredited state. To the contrary, his outlook on its prospects was strangely optimistic as seen just two months before his death in 1946 as he used one of the Society's dinner functions to extol "the most important, significant and, I would add, genuine branch of sociology which exists, namely eugenics."⁵⁶ The rocky pathway to economic bliss, it seems, was still wedded more than ever to notions of hereditary planning and design.

⁵⁴ For example, Keynes gradually withdrew from Marie Stopes' Society for Constructive Birth Control, resigning after many years of inactivity in 1939. He seems to have tired of the movement's internal politics. See Toye, p. 186

⁵⁵ Eugenics Society, Statement of Principles, 1945, Alexander Carr-Saunders Papers, LSE

⁵⁶ John Maynard Keynes, and Alexander Carr-Saunders. "The Galton lecture, 1946: Presentation of the Society's Gold Medal." *The Eugenics Review* 38, no. 1 (1946). 40