

The Rights of Man

or

What Are We Fighting For?

H. G. WELLS

with an introduction by

BURHAN SÖNMEZ

President of

PEN International



RENARD PRESS

RENARD PRESS LTD

Kemp House
152–160 City Road
London EC1V 2NX
United Kingdom
info@renardpress.com
020 8050 2928

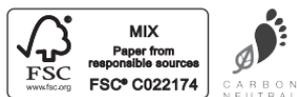
www.renardpress.com

The Rights of Man first published in 1940
This edition first published by Renard Press Ltd in 2022

Edited text and notes © Renard Press Ltd, 2022
Introduction © Burhan Sönmez, 2022

Cover design by Will Dady

Printed in the United Kingdom by Severn



ISBN: 978-1-913724-70-2

9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Renard Press is proud to be a climate positive publisher, removing more carbon from the air than we emit and planting a small forest. For more information see renardpress.com/eco.

All rights reserved. This publication may not be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted, in any form or by any means – electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise – without the prior permission of the publisher.

CONTENTS

Introduction	
‘He Told Us So’	
<i>by Burhan Sönmez</i>	5
Preface	13
<i>The Rights of Man</i>	25
I. Imperative Need for a Declaration	27
II. Security from Violence	33
III. Habeas Corpus	38
IV. Democratic Law	43
V. The New Tyranny of the Dossier	47
VI. The Right to Subsistence	53
VII. The Right to Work and to Have Possessions	61
VIII. Free Market and Profit-Seeking	66
IX. The Revised Declaration	72
X. A French Parallel	79
XI. An Alternative Draft and Some Further Suggestions	88
XII. The New Map of the World	95
XIII. A Book for Which the World Is Waiting	109
Note on the Text	117
Notes	117

INTRODUCTION

He Told Us So

Published about one hundred and fifty years after Thomas Paine's ground-breaking work *Rights of Man*, H.G. Wells' essay shared its name, but addressed a very different world. In his approach, Wells was much more direct, declaring a desire to establish a new world system in contradiction of every government, including the current British government. The first step towards achieving this new world system was to set out a framework ensuring that all citizens of the world had the same rights, and in *The Rights of Man* he set down the foundations of this framework.

He was pondering these matters at the age of seventy-four, when he was a respected author who had published more books than anyone could count, and he had witnessed many upheavals, including the two world wars.

Today, the identity of the 'intellectual' seems to have lost its former power. 'Intellectual' was used to describe someone who was not only a cultured person, an artist or academic, but someone in the creative arts or the world of thought who took an active interest in social matters. Wells was one of

the best examples of his generation. Alongside his writing – including his wildly popular novels such as *The War of the Worlds* and non-fiction works like *The Outline of History* – he strived towards the betterment of society and the happiness of ordinary people. It was not enough for him to be successful in his own work and to become a kind of expert in his field, contrary to the prevalent attitudes of today. For the intellectual, the world was a whole, and he was an integral part of it.

This ideology greatly affected the way Wells wrote and lived, and had its roots in his childhood. When he was eight years old, he was bedridden due to a broken leg, and his father carried him books from the library to pass the time. The books allowed Wells to escape out into the world from his bed, so it is perhaps not surprising that his novels were full of dreams – dreams of a time machine, invisibility, alien invasion. However, while the images he created were science fiction, he also employed an extreme form of realism. That is, he was committed to the era he lived in, and he weaved social criticism and observation into his fiction; his novels were, therefore, both realistic and utopian. It was in this way, from an early age, that he became the most famous writer of his time.

The Rights of Man should not be seen as a text written by an elderly writer who was nearing the end of his life, full of anxiety caused by World War II, trying to give advice to humanity. No, this book was the natural continuation of Wells' orderly and coherent world of thought, which spanned his lifetime. It follows most closely *The War That Will End War*,* written twenty-six years previously, at the beginning of the First World War, in which Wells expressed his desire

to contribute directly to the reform of the world, to develop art and politics, creative writing and social writing together.

Art is involved in life indirectly, not directly. It expresses itself in a language that resembles another dimension, set apart from other disciplines and everyday language. In seeking to shake off the time-honoured structures of language, the artist looks for ways to have an impact on others. Alongside his novels, Wells also wrote a great many non-fiction books, which came from a desire to play with the rhythm of everyday life. And he was able to do just that.

In the first half of the twentieth century new forms of writing were emerging. In this period, which could be called the Age of Manifestos, writers tried to solve the problems of the world, to explore art and philosophy concepts that spanned the ages, through short texts. In what was perhaps one of the earliest examples of this trend, Leo Tolstoy attempted to condense the Gospels into a short handbook named *The Gospel in Brief*; Ludwig Wittgenstein tried to answer the problems of three thousand years of philosophy in a seventy-page book, *Tractatus*; and myriad writers published documents of only a few pages in length, manifestos such as *Manifesto of Futurism* and *Surrealist Manifesto*, which aimed to define the future of art and humanity. All of these writers attempted to reform the world through short-form texts.

The ten-paragraph declaration Wells wrote, setting down rules that would enable people to live in harmony and equality, can be seen as a reflection of this writing form: an intention to solve big issues with comparatively few words. Other declarations of the rights of man prepared by the Cambridge Peace Aims Group and the Ligue des Droits de l'Homme in France were similar in form.

The brevity of the text should not be considered a weakness, but rather a representation of its simplicity and intensity. As a matter of fact, within a decade it inspired important socio-political structures such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights,* adopted by the United Nations in 1948, and the European Convention on Human Rights, prepared by the Council of Europe in 1950.

Men were problematic; Wells knew this to be true in both the past and the present, because in the plural men formed governments, started wars, oppressed one another. On the other hand, Wells, who believed in the good of the individual man, envisioned a future based on collectivism and common values, allowing this goodness to spread throughout the world. In a society filled with corrupt systems, men were also corrupted; so a new worldview was needed – one that would secure man's rights and bring about a new system that would uphold common values. Otherwise no war would be 'the war to end war'.

In a conversation with his friends just before he died in 1778, in response to someone saying 'Men are wicked', Jean-Jacques Rousseau is credited as saying, 'Men may be wicked, but man is good'. The singular good versus the plural evil expressed here struck a chord with Wells, who clearly thought this to be the key to a better future.

Liberation was only possible through revolution – not a revolution of barricades and destruction, but rather one of steady progress. Wells' conception of progress – though too much tied to the word Revolution – was that of Fabian socialists, patiently and stubbornly developing, rather than a French-style revolution. It was based on the gradual realisation of social developments; but he wanted the success

PREFACE

§1

In this compact booklet, it is proposed to tell the story of a manifesto which its authors believe could be made a very useful and important document at the present time. It is a piece of associated writing of which the present writer is to be regarded as the editor and secretary rather than the author, and it first took shape in the form of two letters to the *London Times*. Therein we have the first statement of an idea that has developed in substance and importance with the impact of other experienced and critical minds. We believe that to many readers this gradual crystallisation step by step of a definite politico-social creed may prove much more stimulating and interesting than the mere formal statement of the creed. To them this book is dedicated.

The original *Times* letter ran as follows.

WAR AIMS
THE NEED FOR LIMITLESS CANDOUR

To the Editor,

The Times

SIR,

I have been following the correspondence upon War Aims in your columns with considerable attention. In many respects it recalls the War Aims Controversy of 1917–18 when the Crewe House organisation did its unsuccessful best to extract from the Foreign Office a precise statement of what the country was fighting for (see Sir Campbell Stuart's *Secrets of Crewe House*).* No such statement was ever produced, and the Great War came to a ragged end in mutual accusations of broken promises and double crossing.

Even then there was a worldwide feeling that a great revolution in human affairs was imminent; the phrase 'a war to end war'* expressed that widely diffused feeling, and surely there could be no profounder break with human tradition and existing forms of government than that. But that revolution did not realise itself. The League of Nations,* we can all admit now, was a poor and ineffective outcome of that revolutionary proposal to banish armed conflict from the world and inaugurate a new life for mankind. It was too conservative of existing things, half-hearted, diplomatic. And since, as more and more of us are beginning to realise now, there can be no more peace or safety on earth without a profound reconstruction of the

methods of human living, the Great War did not so much come to an end as smoulder through two decades, the fatuous twenties and the frightened thirties, to flare up again now. Now at a level of greater tension, increased violence and destructiveness and more universal suffering, we are back to something very like 1914, and the decisive question before our species is whether this time it will set its face resolutely towards that drastic remoulding of ideas and relationships, that world revolution, which it has shirked for a quarter of a century.

If that revolution is to be brought off successfully and give a renewed lease to human happiness and effort, it is to be brought off only by the fullest, most ruthless discussion of every aspect and possibility of the present situation. Nobody and no group of people knows enough for this immense reorganisation, and unless we can have a full and fearless public intercourse of minds open to all the world, our present enemies included, we shall never be able to establish a guiding system of ideas upon which a new world order can rest.

We have before us as an object lesson the great experiment of Russia. Whatever anyone may think of the outcome of the socialist movement which found its main embodiment in communism after 1848,* there can be little dispute now of the fundamental nobility of that conception of a worldwide international system of social justice, a world peace, from which the incentive of private profit was to be eliminated. But from the beginning this movement encountered repression. It could not say what it had to say plainly and fearlessly. It was universalism with an involuntary hole-and-corner flavour.*

The result of suppressing the full, free discussion of revolutionary proposals, even of the extremest revolutionary proposals, is to force them underground. This sort of thing does not save an outworn and decaying regime, but it drives the critics who are discussing a new order to conspiratorial methods, to terroristic secrecy, to unventilated dogmatism.

The revolution, when at last it arrived in Russia, was in the hands of men trained in underground methods, and the Soviet regime, * practically inexpert, with everything to learn, shut down on free discussion and free mutual criticism with the West, and degenerated into the masked, incalculable personal rule of today. That was revolution in the dark. Cannot our Western world, in its quite inevitable march towards a world collectivism, face its changes in the light, in an atmosphere of extreme candour and mutual toleration? The thing I am most terrified by today is the manifest threat of a new weak put-off of our aspirations for a new world by some repetition of the Geneva simulacrum. Last time it was the League of Nations; this time the magic word to do the trick is Federation. A real League of Nations might have turned the world into a new course in 1918–19; a real Federation of Mankind might do as much tomorrow. But if it is to be a real, effective federation of mankind, a genuine attempt to realise that age of worldwide plenty and safety that we have every reason to suppose attainable, then we have to discuss simply and sincerely and work out plans for the polite mediatisation of monarchies, * the competent socialisation of the natural resources and staple industries of the world, the revision and extension of our universities

and other knowledge organisations and the establishment of a worldwide rising level of common education. The war, under the auspices of ARP, is darkening everything.* Are we to have as much light as that in the streets of the world? If not; if we are to go on with this present regime of vague insincerities, mutual distrust and sabotage, I for one can see no hope for mankind. More of this sort of thing and worse to the end.

Yours faithfully,

H.G. WELLS

After some correspondence a second letter appeared in *The Times* to this effect:

To the Editor,

The Times

SIR,

You recently did me the honour of printing a letter upon the possibility of discussing the outcome of this war while it is still going on, in which I stressed the need for free and outspoken discussion. This letter produced a considerable response, and it has been reprinted extensively in America and elsewhere. I have been favoured by the views and comments of a number of very able people. With your permission I will give certain things that have become much clearer in this discussion as it has proceeded. The first is the extensive demand for a statement of 'War Aims' on the part of young and old, who want to know more precisely what we are fighting for, and the second is the practical impossibility of making any statement in terms of boundaries, federations and political readjustments at



PEN International is a worldwide association of writers, founded in London in 1921 to promote friendship and intellectual co-operation among writers everywhere. The two main pillars of PEN are promoting literature and defending freedom of expression.

PEN (which originally stood for Poets, Essayists, Novelists, but has now been expanded to Poets, Playwrights, Editors, Essayists, Novelists) was founded on the 5th of October 1921 by Catherine Amy Dawson Scott, with John Galsworthy as its first president, and its early members included Joseph Conrad, George Bernard Shaw and H.G. Wells.

PEN aims:

To promote intellectual co-operation and understanding among writers;

To create a world community of writers that would emphasise the central role of literature in the development of world culture;

And to defend literature against the many threats to its survival which the modern world poses.

For more information and to support PEN:

www.pen-international.org