

John Maynard Keynes, H.G. Wells, and a Problematic Utopia¹

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Abstract

John Maynard Keynes's 1930 essay 'Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren' is celebrated today as both an important transitional work in his economic theory and for its famously optimistic prediction of a distant future age of leisure, made against the backdrop of the Great Depression. Despite the essay's acclaim and subsequent scholarly analysis of its arguments, comparatively little attention has been given to the history and context of its composition.

In this paper we explore the intellectual origins of 'Economic Possibilities' by introducing evidence of its parallels to a similar utopian message in H.G. Wells's obscure didactic novel, *The World of William Clissold* (1926). Drawing upon archival evidence from Keynes and Wells's own contemporary exchanges, we bring to light a largely unnoticed intellectual dialogue between the two authors that took place from roughly 1926 to 1934 through their published works, letters, and public and private conversations. The context provided by this dialogue sheds light upon the authors' shared interests in the "scientific" ordering of society, and in particular a vision of the future that relied heavily upon proactive eugenic planning. These findings point to an under-acknowledged eugenic dimension to Keynes's essay that emerges more openly from his contemporary exchanges with Wells as well as in several unpublished works and letters by both men. In addition to contextualizing a number of the intentionally vague predictions and prescriptions in 'Economic Possibilities,' these findings establish deeper eugenic commitments in Keynes's beliefs than previously thought and extend them into the mature phase of his economic writing.

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On March 17, 1928, John Maynard Keynes delivered a short lecture to a group of boarding school students at Winchester College outlining a vision of a distant economic future. The presentation, which he later published as an essay under the title ‘Economic Possibilities for our Grandchildren,’ contained a century-long prediction about humanity’s arrival at a state of leisure and economic stability. In the coming age of abundance, he foretold, “We shall do more things for ourselves than is usual with the rich today, only too glad to have small duties and tasks and routines...Three-hour shifts or a fifteen-hour week may put off the problem for a great while.”² The future would yield an age of unprecedented leisure.

This particular essay ranks among Keynes’s most familiar short articles, both on account of its fantastical vision and its position as a turning point in his thought that anticipated several themes of his master work, the *General Theory*. It is the subject of a sizable body of interpretive scholarship concerning Keynes’s futuristic claims, and is held in high esteem as one of his most stirring and quotable works.³ As Keynes’s biographer Robert Skidelsky describes it, ‘Economic Possibilities’ is “the most eloquent expression of his utopianism” as well as one of his most extensive psychological forays into a recurring subject of his attention, the “love of money” in the human psyche.⁴

² Keynes, John Maynard. "Economic possibilities for our grandchildren (1930)" *Essays in Persuasion*. 1933, pp. 348-373.

³ 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. Donald Moggridge captures the exceptional characteristic of the essay as the only place that Keynes “set his view out in any detail” on the means of attaining a certain state of “efficiency” in which a permanent affluence could sustain the “absolute” needs of humanity. This in turn would free man’s energies to resolve higher concerns of a moral nature. See D.E. Moggridge. *Maynard Keynes: An Economist’s Biography*. Routledge, 1992. pp. 454-55.

⁴ Skidelsky, Robert. *John Maynard Keynes. Vol. II: The Economist as Saviour, 1920-1937*. (1992) p. 234

Despite the discussion this celebrated essay has generated, the context in which Keynes developed ‘Economic Possibilities’ has largely escaped scholarly attention. The essay appeared in Keynes’s self-edited collection *Essays in Persuasion*, published in 1931 at the peak of the Depression even though it had been written in much healthier economic times. Keynes selected this essay as the final chapter of the book, placing it under the heading of “the Future.” In doing so he paired it with a second essay that has gone all but ignored in the vast literature on Keynes’s life and thought – an obscure book review that Keynes wrote about H.G. Wells’s equally forgettable 1926 fictional work, *The World of William Clissold*. While most readers breeze past Keynes’s unusual enthusiasm for a book that most Wells scholars rank among the worst works in the novelist’s canon, he actually linked this review with ‘Economic Possibilities’ under a common heading by design.⁵

As we show in this study, Keynes likely intended for ‘Economic Possibilities’ to be read in the context of the accompanying book review and, more importantly, the broader intellectual exchange that produced both essays. The paired chapters were actually products of an ongoing public dialogue between Keynes and Wells that has been hiding in plain sight for almost a century and that similarly extends to the pages of the long-neglected *Clissold*. When resituated in the context of this dialogue, the

⁵ This intentional pairing has almost entirely escaped scholarly notice. Skidelsky (1992, p. 234) notes the importance of historical context to understanding ‘Economic Possibilities’ and links it closely to both impressions derived from Keynes’s 1925 visit to the Soviet Union and to his intellectual engrossment with the psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud, yet makes no reference to the much more proximate context of Wells or *Clissold*. A handful of passing references note similarities of themes found in the two essays, albeit usually while contextualizing of Keynes’s work among other thinkers such as Charles Darwin or even Samuel Taylor Coleridge. See, e.g. Kennedy, William Francis. *Humanist versus Economist: The Economic Thought of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*. University of California Press, 1958, p. 88; Laurent, John. "Keynes and Darwin." *History of Economics Review* 27.1 (1998): 76-93; Laurent, John, and John Nightingale. *Darwinism and Evolutionary Economics*. Edward Elgar Publishing, 2001, p. 72; Mini, P.V. “Keynes’s ‘microeconomics’: some lessons” in Dow, Sheila C., and John Hillard, eds. *Keynes, Uncertainty and the Global Economy: Beyond Keynes*, Volume Two. Vol. 2. Edward Elgar Publishing, 2002, p. 41. One of the only essays to examine the review of *Clissold* in any depth uses the piece to present a Marxist interpretation of Keynes, but does not explore its link to ‘Economic Possibilities.’ See Katiforis, George. "Keynes as a bourgeois Marxist" in Philip Arestis and Malcolm Sawyer, eds. *The Rise of the Market: Critical Essays on the Political Economy of Neo-Liberalism*. Edward Elgar, 2004.

famously abstract 'Economic Possibilities' gains new grounding in the particulars of Keynes's shared interests with Wells at the time.

One unavoidable subject that emerges from this context is the two thinkers' closely related interests in eugenics.⁶ In fact, the exchange over *Clissold* reveals that the widely observed utopianism of Keynes's 'Economic Possibilities' was not only shared with Wells's novel, but also contained several overtly eugenic presuppositions of its own. Given his student audience for the particular lecture, Keynes developed these themes obliquely in 'Economic Possibilities' through abstractions on the changing patterns of population demography in the United Kingdom. They appear more directly though in the context of *Clissold*, and were brought into the open during the little-studied remarks of both Keynes and Wells at a 1927 dinner meeting of the Malthusian League. On this occasion, falling almost exactly midway between the publication of *Clissold* and the delivery of 'Economic Possibilities,' both men overtly linked the themes of their respective works to the predicted ascendance of eugenic reasoning as a social science.

Noting a growing body of scholarly interest in the role of eugenics in the history of economic thought, albeit with an American focus, we accordingly extend this line of study to the forgotten public dialogue that played out between Keynes and Wells between roughly 1926 and 1934.⁷ Our findings

⁶ Keynes's involvement in eugenics also remains an acknowledged but lightly-touched subject as a result of both inattention to the issue and disagreement over its importance to his economic thought. Skidelsky (1992) largely downplays the subject as a passing and eventually abandoned fancy of Keynes's early career, and Moggridge (1992) confines his discussion to Keynes's formative writing on population and Malthus. A more thorough treatment appears in John Toye's (2000) work on Keynes's theories about the economics of population, with Toye designating 'Economic Possibilities' as a likely point for Keynes's alleged abandonment of eugenics, or at least its more aggressive variants. See Toye, John. *Keynes on Population*. Oxford University Press, 2000. An alternative view stressing the persistence of eugenicism in Keynes's thought may be found in the following works: Fishburn, Jeffrey. "Keynes and the Age of Eugenics" *The Age*, June 2, 1983, pp. 3-5; Singerman, David Roth. "Keynesian Eugenics and the Goodness of the World." *Journal of British Studies* 55.03 (2016): 538-565; Magness, Phillip W., and Sean J. Hernandez. "The Economic Eugenicism of John Maynard Keynes." *Journal of Markets and Morality*, July 2017.

⁷ The connection between the economics profession and the eugenics movement has become a subject of increased scholarly attention in recent decades, particularly as it concerns shared affinities for the deployment of "scientific" planning to human affairs. Thomas Leonard's work in particular has explored and documented this pattern within the early 20th century American economics profession. See, e.g. Leonard, Thomas C. "More Merciful

show the distinct imprints that each thinker left upon the other, as well as pronounced commonalities between their respective beliefs about population, heredity, and the role of scientific planning in shaping the course of human affairs. Although both Keynes and Wells differed in style and politics, they exhibited a shared utopianism that appears in both the novelist's neglected *Clissold* and the economist's celebrated essay. These findings add an important context to one of Keynes's most famous works, linking it to the growing body of literature on economic eugenicism in the United States. They also lend credence to the persistence of eugenic beliefs in Keynes's thought, bridging his youthful interests in Malthusianism to the economic system of his mature years.⁸

A Pathway to Economic Bliss

Perhaps the most famous – and explicitly utopian – theme to emerge from 'Economic Possibilities' is Keynes's 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. This state of "economic bliss," as Keynes put it, depended not only upon a coming productive abundance but also on a radical shift in societal beliefs. According to Keynes:

and Not Less Effective: Eugenics and American Economics in the Progressive Era." *History of Political Economy* 35.4 (2003): 687-712; Leonard, Thomas C. *Illiberal Reformers: Race, Eugenics, and American Economics in the Progressive Era*. Princeton University Press, 2016.

⁸ The exact relationship between Keynes's eugenic beliefs and his economic contributions is also a matter of some disagreement, with several earlier works debating whether, or to what extent, the former exerted influence upon the latter (see in particular Toye 2000; Singerman 2016; and Magness & Hernandez 2017). It is generally agreed that the clearest instances of this connection relate to Keynes's longstanding interest in the population theories of Thomas Malthus, although this subject is more closely associated with the less ethically fraught question of "quantity" in terms of the posited resource strains of the Malthusian diagnosis. As we argue in the following section with reference to its attestation in archival findings from his exchange with Wells, 'Economic Possibilities' coincides with a shift in Keynes's attention to more explicitly eugenic concerns over the "quality" of the population stock after the liberalization of birth control laws and signs of Britain's demographic stabilization in the late 1920s. Demographic stability, in turn, is identified by Keynes as a prerequisite condition for the mature iterations of his broader macroeconomic framework. See in particular Keynes, John Maynard. "Some economic consequences of a declining population." *Eugenics Review* 29.1 (1937).

“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.”⁹

The pathway to this utopia was neither clear nor easy, and Keynes was almost intentionally vague on how to reach this destination. He nevertheless maintained an optimism in his prediction. Or as Philip Auerswald has described it, "a bumpy ride along the way to the steady-state bliss point was to be expected, but not feared" by Keynes.¹⁰

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.” The prescriptive charges that follow contain the closest that the essay comes to mapping out a route to the bliss of abundance. As Keynes specified, these conditions entailed: “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.”¹¹

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

⁹ Keynes, ‘Economic Possibilities’

¹⁰ Philip E. Auerswald *The Coming Prosperity: How Entrepreneurs Are Transforming the Global Economy*, p. 19

¹¹ Keynes, ‘Economic Possibilities’

population pressures, and expressing dire concerns that the famous Malthusian devil would reemerge in coming years as a recurring strain on resource consumption.¹²

Demographic patterns led Keynes to embrace the birth control movement in the early 1920s as a means of countering the anticipated pressures of unconstrained population growth. It also formed the basis for much of Keynes's 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 and economic 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 consolidation 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 problems. "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."¹³

Keynes's 'Economic Possibilities' lecture in 1928 struck a somewhat different tone on population. Although he included the aforementioned caveat of population stability as the first of his four preconditions, 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

¹² Keynes, 'Economic Possibilities'

¹³ 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>.

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.”¹⁴

This remark revealed Keynes’s engagement with the empirical reality of an ongoing demographic stabilization, at least in the two named countries. Its significance to Keynes’s larger body of work has been the subject of a fair amount of scholarly discussion. John Toye reads a subtle yet crucial “recantation” of Keynes’s earlier neo-Malthusian beliefs into this passage, though this likely pushes the evidence too far in light of Keynes’s later statements on Malthus. Interpreted in another light, it likely reflects Keynes’s confidence in the triumph of birth control and related positions he had been advancing for the better part of a decade.¹⁵

Keynes’s 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,” 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.”¹⁶

Despite this emphasis at a time where fears of runaway population growth loomed large, 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

¹⁴ Keynes, ‘Economic Possibilities’

¹⁵ Toye (2000) p. 187; Magness and Hernandez (2017).

¹⁶ John Maynard Keynes, “The Underlying Principles,” *Manchester Guardian Commercial Supplement*, January 4, 1923

concern itself with the size of the population just as much as with the size of the army or the amount of the Budget.”¹⁷ His early writings reflected a time of growing population pressures and developed their prescriptions to this circumstance. As Keynes explained though in a 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.”¹⁸

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 1923.¹⁹ In another comment from the same period, directed at an American audience during their debate over the restriction of immigration into the country, Keynes hinted that the attainment of demographic stability would be followed by the “not less important problem of the quality of those who are bred up.”²⁰ Three years later and with the earliest signs of a stabilization underway in Britain, 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.”²¹

With the stabilization well apparent by the time of its composition, ‘Economic Possibilities’ could accordingly be interpreted as Keynes’s earliest blueprint for a world in which the Malthusian devil had been successfully tamed by the largely-successful birth reform controls of the previous decade. A

¹⁷ Keynes, “Am I A Liberal?,” *Essays in Persuasion*, 1933

¹⁸ Keynes, “The End of Laissez-Faire,” *Essays in Persuasion*, 1933

¹⁹ John Maynard Keynes, “The Underlying Principles,” *Manchester Guardian Commercial Supplement*, January 4, 1923

²⁰ “Greetings from Abroad,” *Birth Control Review*, December 1923, p. 321

²¹ Keynes, “The End of Laissez-Faire”

stabilized demographic pattern was not a cause for abandoning earlier views, but rather a vindication of those reforms and with them the first of the necessary preconditions for an age of leisure.

Here the intellectual kinship between Keynes's 'Economic Possibilities' and H.G. Wells's *The World of William Clissold* emerges as an important contextual point for interpreting the unelaborated gaps along Keynes's mapped pathway to economic bliss. Expressing similar visions of an abundant and leisurely future, Wells's *Clissold* was itself a product of a common intellectual circle in which the two thinkers moved. Keynes published his review of Wells's novel shortly before writing 'Economic Possibilities,' and the two men privately conversed about its themes and subjects. Indeed, 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. By taking a didactic form though, the novel was its own way for fictionalized variants of Wells's philosophy to converse with Keynes over matters that simultaneously occupied their shared attention – and respective futuristic visions - in real life. Those visions would take center stage in mid-1927 at an event falling almost evenly between Keynes's published review of *Clissold* and his composition of 'Economic Possibilities.'

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.²² Drysdale was also the heir to the organization his father created, the Malthusian League, in the wake of the prosecution to lobby for the liberalization of Britain's birth control laws. These included the removal of restrictions on publishing "obscene" materials such as his father's pamphlet, as well as expanding general contraceptive education and clinical treatments.²³

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. The event also provided a common gathering space for several leading figures in the 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 program, 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.²⁴

Keynes's remarks survive in a set of written notes in his personal papers, the contents 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.²⁵ His toast functioned as both a historical retrospective and – like 'Economic Possibilities' – a futuristic projection with intimate ties to population theory. Structured as a

²² The elder Drysdale authored an updated medical commentary on contraceptive techniques, attached to a reprint of Charles Knowlton's 1832 pamphlet 'The Fruits of Philosophy.' See Drysdale, C. V. "The Birth Control Movement after a Century's Agitation." *Current History and Forum*. Vol. 30-3, 1929.

²³ 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

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Exceptions include Singerman (2016); Magness & Hernandez (2017); Bashford, Alison. *Global population: history, geopolitics, and life on earth*. Columbia University Press, 2014.

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' population theorem as the instigating idea behind the dinner's occasion, Keynes transitioned into the subject of birth control. Malthus himself opposed contraception for ethical and religious 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 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."²⁶

The specific nod to Place, who, as dinner guests were told, "we should also remember to-day with Malthus," presents another uncharted 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. But Keynes had only recently begun his own exploration of Place's writings due to ongoing correspondence with the American economist and eugenicist Norman E. Himes.²⁷ About a month prior to the Malthusian League event, Himes sent Keynes a copy of Place's 1822 text *Illustrations and Proofs of the Principle of Population*, hoping to nudge the Royal Economics Society into financing a modern reprint.²⁸

²⁶ In Piam Memorium, JMK PS/3/109

²⁷ Himes' own later interests in the historical emergence of eugenics in the United States shared a number of parallel themes to Keynes's recounting of the same in Britain to the Malthusian League. See Himes, Norman E. "Eugenic thought in the American birth control movement 100 years ago." *Eugenics*, No. 2 (May 1929), pp. 3-8.

²⁸ Himes to Keynes, June 24, 1927; Keynes to Himes, July 1 and July 4, 1927, in Norman E. Himes Papers, Harvard University. At the time, Himes was also working on a history of the Knowlton pamphlet at the center of the Bradlaugh-Besant trial. Himes, Norman E. "Charles Knowlton's Revolutionary Influence on the English Birth Rate." *New England Journal of Medicine* 199.10 (1928): 461-465.

Keynes replied to Himes in a letter dated two days after the dinner, informing his correspondent in the United States that he had spent the previous several 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 medical analysis, 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.²⁹

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 directed his audience’s attention to 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

²⁹ 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*, and a bound supplement that he edited on themes in economic history. See Himes, Norman E. “Bentham and the Genesis of Neo-Malthusianism” and “Benjamin Franklin on Population: A Reexamination with Special Reference to the Influence of Franklin on Francis Place” in Keynes, John Maynard, ed. 1940. *Economic History: A Supplement of the Economic Journal*. 4 Vols. (January 1926-February 1940), Royal Economics Society.

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.”³⁰

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 sexual norms as a social taboo. An additional crossed out line in Keynes’s notes resolves any uncertainty about his meaning though. His concerns indicated that in terms of human heredity, “[q]uality must become the preoccupation” after the demographic stabilization, through the aid of liberalized birth control laws, had been achieved.³¹

The concluding message of Keynes’s 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’s 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’s 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

³⁰ In Piam Memoriam, JMK PS/3/109

³¹ Ibid.

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.³² As with Keynes, a celebration of man's role in righting the course of historical progression and, with it, optimistic hint of utopia capped the toast.

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

Keynes and Wells had known each other for several years at that point, with population, birth control, and eugenics serving as primary uniting 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 this author espoused an elaborate eugenically-infused theory of climactic determinism and its relationship to human racial characteristics. Keynes recommended Huntington's works as a "fascinating commentary on Universal History," suggesting they may complement Wells's own book project at the time, *The Outline of History*.³³

The two men continued to collaborate on a number of birth control causes throughout the 1920s. Wells, along with Keynes's close associate and Bloomsbury member Lytton Strachey, volunteered

³² R.B. Kerr, "After Fifty Years – 1927" *Birth Control Review*, September 1927, p. 238

³³ Keynes to Wells, January 10, 1920, H.G. Wells Papers, UIUC. Wells's 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. For the works specifically referenced by Keynes, see Huntington, Ellsworth. *Civilization and Climate*. Yale University Press, 1915; Huntington. *World Power and Evolution*. Yale University Press, 1919.

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's papers attest to his own involvement in the defense of Sanger, including communications from the courtroom apprising him of Wells's attempt to introduce favorable testimony in court.³⁴ 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.³⁵

Wells personally enlisted Keynes to comment upon a draft of *Clissold*, and several clues indicate the two men viewed the work as a point of philosophical common ground. Wells's *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 ideas about politics, society, and a sweeping prognostication about human civilization. Like Keynes's 'Economic Possibilities,' it envisions an openly utopian future of leisure and abundance, subject to favorable population patterns and contingent upon societal deference to 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" of the text. Reflecting on the novel's poor reception with the public, in part due

³⁴ Russell to Keynes, January 30, 1923 and February 3, 1923, and Cox to Keynes, February 9, 1923 in JMK SS/3/3, 4, 8. Keynes was formally listed on record as a surety for the defense, while Wells, Cox, and Drysdale formally testified in court. Sanger, Margaret. "The English Birth Control Case," *Birth Control Review*, April 1923, p. 85.

³⁵ 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.

to its odd style, Keynes dismissed the “tedious” complaints of other reviewers. Wells’s critics had missed “something of immense talent and life, and so interesting” on account of its form.³⁶ In a second letter, Keynes likened the book’s critical reception to Wells’s public feud with Hilaire Belloc a few years prior in which the former’s remarks provoked a backlash over their allegedly anti-Catholic sentiments. Wells took parting shots at Belloc in *Clissold*, which appear to have enjoyed Keynes’s approval. Keynes also apparently shared the novel with his uncle Sir Walter Langdon-Brown, who then wrote Wells to convey his appreciative assessment that “William Clissold appear[s] to have approved” of his economist nephew.³⁷

During the course of their private exchanges, Keynes volunteered to advocate for *Clissold* publicly and hinted to its author that he would soon publish a friendly 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 marital world.”³⁸

True to his promise, Keynes simultaneously published his favorable review essay on *Clissold* in Britain’s *Nation and Athenaeum* and in the *New Republic* in the United States a few months prior to the authors’ joint appearance at the Malthusian League dinner. Keynes’s 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.³⁹ The prediction was only the beginning of the similarities, though, with Keynes’s own futuristic vision in ‘Economic Possibilities.’ As

³⁶ Keynes to Wells, October 11, 1926, H.G. Wells Papers, UIUC

³⁷ Brown to Wells, November 4, 1926, H.G. Wells Papers, UIUC. Brown was married to sister of Keynes’s father John Neville Keynes, as well as a physician with active involvement in the British Eugenics Society.

³⁸ Keynes to Wells, October 15, 1926, H.G. Wells Papers, UIUC

³⁹ Keynes, “One of Wells’s Worlds,” *The New Republic*, February 2, 1927

Keynes would detail in his review, Wells advanced an 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 editorial decisions behind the unusual pairing in *Essays in Persuasion*. 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."⁴⁰ 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's 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 for a friendly but feisty conversation. 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

⁴⁰ "Mr. Wells's Three Decker Novel," *Manchester Guardian*, June 28, 1926

pseudoscientific book by F.G. Crookshank that attributed “inferior” racial characteristics to “Mongoloid imbecility,” and suggested their transmission into Caucasian heredity in the aftermath of the Golden Horde. “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.”⁴¹

The unusual and slightly frivolous encounter carried a secondary message of greater substance, as William then announced his hope that Keynes received the broader 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.”⁴² Judging by Keynes’s favorable reception of the book, the intended message indicated that a number of *Clissold*’s arguments emerged from Wells’s now-lost conversations and other 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, but in a few less guarded moments he espoused policies that reflected a belief in negative

⁴¹ H.G. Wells. *The World of William Clissold*, Benn Brothers, 1926, Book 5, Section 8. See also Crookshank, F.G. *The Mongol in Our Midst: A Study of Man and His Three Faces*. Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1924. We have found no specific reference to Crookshank in Keynes’s published works that might shed light upon the fictionalized conversation. Curiously, Crookshank was well-known to Keynes’s uncle Walter Langdon-Brown, recipient of a shared copy of *Clissold* from Keynes. Brown reviewed a revised version of the tract for the Eugenics Society’s in-house journal, stopping short of endorsing the work’s scientific claims but also seeing commonalities with it on eugenic grounds. See W. Langdon-Brown, “Review of *The Mongol in Our Midst*.” *Eugenics Review*, 23.1. 1931, pp. 251–253.

⁴² *Ibid.*

eugenics, or the use of the state to regulate reproductive rights and population patterns proactively.⁴³ He nonetheless avoided the inflammatory rhetoric that sometimes inhabited this area of politics, and generally tried to remain aloof of the internecine disputes that plagued the various birth control, Malthusian, and eugenic organizations of the time – even as he served as an honorary officer in several of them.⁴⁴

Far from speculative esotericism, Keynes left a direct clue about his cautious strategy in addressing these subjects in public settings. Immediately following the Malthusian League dinner in 1927, he sent a 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."⁴⁵ 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."⁴⁶

⁴³ To our knowledge, Keynes did not leave any record specifically elaborating a position on either voluntary or forced sterilization. This is likely a feature of his intentional use of guarded language on the subject, rather than avoidance of the questions such policies raised. That Keynes contemplated the issue frequently may be inferred from his aforementioned invoking of hereditary "quality" as a successor to "quantity" stabilization. Keynes's allusion to the "weapon of the preventive check" at the Malthusian League dinner supports an interpretation of these passages as evidence of his conceptual agreement with state-directed negative eugenics including sterilization.

⁴⁴ Keynes held a number of 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

⁴⁵ Keynes to Huxley, July 28, 1927, Huxley Papers, Rice University

⁴⁶ R.B. Kerr, "After Fifty Years – 1927" *Birth Control Review*, September 1927, p. 239

Keynes took his own advice in the published form of ‘Economic Possibilities,’ at least to a point. His intention 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 the essay. 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.”⁴⁷ 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.⁴⁸

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.⁴⁹ 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,

⁴⁷ Keynes, ‘Economic Possibilities’

⁴⁸ Wells, *Clissold*, Book 5, Section 2

⁴⁹ 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’s Worlds”

according to Wells, ultimately result in nothing less than a “metamorphosis of man” into a single world community.⁵⁰ 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.”⁵¹ This conspiracy – his 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.”⁵²

What would emerge would be a sort of 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

⁵⁰ *Clissold*, Book 5, Section 2.

⁵¹ Wells expanded this concept into a book length treatise two years after *Clissold*, drawing heavily from the concepts expressed in the novel. See Wells. *The Open Conspiracy: Blue Prints for a World Revolution*. Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1928.

⁵² *Clissold*, Book 5, Section 2.

meeting place. Further still, said Wells, “All the world is our court and our temple, our capital and our fair.”⁵³

Wells’s 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” - 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.⁵⁴ Indeed, a dramatically increasing population could still undermine future gains if untamed, hence its incorporation into Keynes’s four conditions of bliss.

Similarly, Wells found 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.”⁵⁵

It bears noting, though, that Wells’s 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

⁵³ *Clissold*, Book 5, Section 8

⁵⁴ Keynes, ‘Economic Possibilities’

⁵⁵ *Clissold*, Book 5, Section 12

Wells, the remedy to the “great slumifactions” was not “more white babies, but more civilisation.”⁵⁶ 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.”⁵⁷

Keynes, for his part, concurred with this feature of the conspiracy. In his 1927 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

⁵⁶ *Clissold*, Book 5, Section 12

⁵⁷ *Clissold*, Book V, Section 12

whom it now amuses to create a great business, that there lie waiting for him bigger things which will amuse him more.”⁵⁸

In Wells’s 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’s 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’s “open conspiracy” and Keynes’s pathway to bliss.

The Fate of Utopia

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

⁵⁸ Keynes, “One of Wells’s Worlds”

Keynes; it was the love of money. While this love might well have been unnecessary in the large, indeed even pointless in Keynes's 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 *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.⁵⁹

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

⁵⁹ 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.”⁶⁰ [emphasis added]

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 the breakdown in “effective demand” that he placed at the center of the Great Depression. Particular circumstances of macroeconomic policy intervention became possible in times of stationary population patterns. One passage showed striking similarity to Keynes’s earlier vision from ‘Economic Possibilities’ and its predicted displacement of the “love of money as a possession.”

“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

⁶⁰ Ibid.

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.”⁶¹

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. The notion of a population “balance” is key to understanding how Keynes wedded both iterations of Malthusian interpretation to his economic theory, and specifically his conceptualization of the long-term horizons of economic growth. As he explained in the conclusion of his Galton lecture, “a stationary or slowly declining population may, if we exercise the necessary strength and wisdom, enable us to raise the standard of life to what it should be, whilst retaining those parts- of our traditional scheme of life which we value the more now that we see what happens to those who lose them.”⁶² Here again was the pathway to the “destination of economic bliss” Keynes first presented in his lecture to school boys at Winchester College almost a decade earlier. While Keynes continued to speak in guarded language about the specific policy instruments that might be utilized to this effect, his intended audience for this message places its objectives comfortably within the eugenic framework of his earlier intellectual exchanges with Wells.

Keynes’s 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

⁶¹ Keynes, “Some economic consequences of a declining population.”

⁶² *Ibid.*

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."⁶³ To save Wells himself from greater charges, he conceded the fictional character's quaint impracticalities.

Keynes appears to have wanted to shield Wells from Shaw's scorn, but his enthusiasm for the aloof idealism of the novel's titular character 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. Despite this acknowledgement, Keynes still gave the upper hand to Wells, directly reiterating the shared theme of deference to scientific expertise in public life from 'Economic Possibilities' and *Clissold*. Shaw, and Stalin for that matter, were relics of an earlier economic way of thinking that accepted the witnessed human conditions of the 19th century as either "true and inevitable" or, in their own respective cases, "true and intolerable." Keynes answered with "a third possibility—that it is not true."⁶⁴

In its place, Keynes appealed to an approaching scientific turn that would permit the "substitution for" the old 'standard system of economic thinking with "a sounder economic theory, which is as obviously applicable to our problems as electrical theory is to the practical problems of the electrician." Where Shaw and Stalin had failed to foresee this scientific turn, "Wells's peculiar gift of imagination" offered it an opening. That gift, Keynes noted, "lies in his creative grasp of the possibilities and ultimate implications of the data with which contemporary scientists furnish him." To be certain, Wells was still "a social and political dreamer" but to Keynes, this feature derived from "Wells's misfortune...to belong to a generation to whom their economists have offered nothing new." Wells understood this though, and advanced his utopian ideas with the expectation that a scientifically

⁶³ "Mr. Keynes replies to Mr. Shaw," *The New Statesman and Nation*, 10 November 1934

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

invigorated economics of a future date would give it a necessary and tempering foundation.⁶⁵ Keynes, no doubt, perceived himself as uniquely suited to that future task of charting a scientific reformulation of economics, just as he perceived Shaw's socialism as being mired in a backward-looking malaise.

Wells's novel dropped from Keynes sight after the 1934 debate over Shaw's critical assessment, and its reputation drifted to its present state of obscurity. In the coming years Wells's own attention shifted to other matters beyond *Clissold*, foremost among them the composition of his internationalist manifesto *The Rights of Man*. The public exchange between the novelist and the economist did not cease though. In a 1936 lecture to the Royal Institution of Great Britain, Wells credited Keynes, through the latter's prescient critique of the Versailles settlement in 1919, as "one of the first to open our eyes" to the "world-wide intellectual insufficiency" of a political leadership that failed to grasp the scientific dimensions of "social and economic realities."⁶⁶ Constantly adapting and improving scientific tools, applied to economic design and drawing their direct genesis from Keynes, remained the primary instrument of Wells's utopianism.

A crucial theme of the late 1920s conversation similarly persisted in Keynes's mind, suggesting he was not ready to relinquish all of the utopian theorizing that had characterized his public dialogue with Wells. 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's 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.

⁶⁵ Ibid. Wells left an earlier literary clue strongly suggesting his own recognition of this assessment in his 1925 novel *Christina Alberta's Father*. Keynes' name comes up in a conversation about Russian Bolshevism between the adopted title character and her hereditary father Wilfred Devizes, with the latter serving as another didactic manifestation of Wells. When Christina Alberta suggests that Keynes does not truly appreciate the "scientific" basis of Marxist class theory, Devize defends the economist. "Keynes builds up slowly a conception of a scientifically organized exchange system," whereas the Russians "don't seem capable even of realizing that such a thing is necessary." Wells, *Christina Alberta's Father*. Macmillan, 1925. p. 299.

⁶⁶ Wells, H.G., 1936. "The Idea of a World Encyclopaedia." *Nature*, Vol. 138, pp. 917-924.

Writing to Margaret Sanger in 1936, Keynes revived an old theme from Wells's *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 their shared encounters in the fight to remove censorship and regulation from the provision of contraception in Britain and the United States. 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."⁶⁷

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's shift toward matters of hereditary quality now indicated.

Distinct parallels to Keynes's notion of a shifting focus appear in Wells's own tackling of birth control from the time of their exchange. 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 in 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

⁶⁷ Keynes to Sanger, June 23, 1936 Margaret Sanger Papers, Library of Congress

of life” in Wells’s 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.”⁶⁸

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 organizations.⁶⁹ Significantly, Keynes’s involvement with the broader eugenics cause did not follow the same path as the narrower birth control movement. 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 and language 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” by way of public education and policy incentives. The Society similarly claimed an assortment of “scientific” interests in the effects of “race mixture” and promoted the continued study of this subject “the eugenic results of cross-breeding” in the wake of the war’s effect of increasing global mobility.⁷⁰

Keynes’s association with the Eugenics Society’s brand, evident shortly before his death, was itself an extension of his earlier forays into futurist theorizing, tempered by evidence. His ‘Economic

⁶⁸ Clissold, Book 5, Section 12

⁶⁹ 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

⁷⁰ Eugenics Society, Statement of Principles, 1945, Alexander Carr-Saunders Papers, LSE

'Possibilities' was published in 1931, but clearly written in the same period as 'One of Wells's Worlds,' his review of *Clissold*, and linked thematically by the Malthusian League dinner. The themes that emerged in 1927-28, as depicted through his interactions with Wells on the one hand, and his forward-looking 'Economic Possibilities' on the other, set the trajectory of Keynes's thought on population and heredity until his death in 1946. The only significant change, a move from stressing the need for birth control to stressing the need for eugenics, occurred some time between the earliest signs of Britain's demographic stabilization in 1926 and his 1936 letter to Sanger.

In that exchange, Keynes used the same line of inquiry that defined his earlier population concerns, but this was informed by the reality that the move to stabilize Britain's birth rate appeared to have succeeded. The shift of focus was, for Keynes, obviously warranted. Birth control of various kinds was necessary in the end, but insufficient given his closely linked goal of refining and bettering a static population. Addressing the quantity of the population was only the first step. Once achieved, it would necessarily give way to the ongoing project of addressing the quality of the remainder. Wells's creature, the fictional William Clissold, of course, was in complete agreement. The goal, to separate "the newer conception of life from the old," was clear from at least 1927 forward, even if the means of achieving it came with some preconditions and lingering political ambiguities.

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."⁷¹ The rocky

⁷¹ John Maynard Keynes, and Alexander Carr-Saunders. "The Galton lecture, 1946: Presentation of the Society's Gold Medal." *Eugenics Review* 38.1 (1946). p. 40

pathway to economic bliss, it seems, was still firmly wedded to notions of hereditary planning and design, at least as far as he could see at the time.