

When Wells Imagined a Pandemic...Reading *The Stolen Bacillus* in 2021

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Abstract: With many enduring themes H. G. Wells' Science Fictions have stood the ravages of time and continue to fascinate the reading public. *The Stolen Bacillus* is a prophecy on biological weaponry and the possible threat it poses in the public domain. In an era when many of the imaginations and inventions of H. G. Wells, predicted 150 years ago, has proven to be possible, there is a compelling necessity to reread his works reflecting on the happenings in the present world. He narrates a nightmarish incident of a rogue getting access to the deadly culture of cholera bacteria. He warns society of the possible dangers in the potentialities of science before a disaster strikes. If the world nations were to engage in a biological warfare the consequences could be disastrous and irreversible. The story reminds of the toxicity and virulence of microorganisms and their capability to wipe out the human race. A reading of the work, in the present day is inevitable as we sail through testing times to reach ashore amidst the grip of the Covid-19 pandemic.

IndexTerms: bioterrorism, H.G Wells, warfare, pandemic

The *Stolen Bacillus* is a wonderful piece of imaginative fiction that calls our attention to the unprecedented dangers and the terrible ramifications that lie ahead for a population that explores science and technology in a tearing hurry. Scientific development has changed the very nature of human society beset with fears and apprehensions of the future. The world which has already witnessed the carnage of two great wars can realize the contemporaneity of Well's reflections and thoughts. The story evokes an anticipation of the probable threat to the future of mankind posed by the incessant new discoveries that are launched ever since the industrial revolution. Well's scientific works, often glancing into the future, are fantastic and thrilling rendered in a realistic framework strictly circumscribed by rationality. Published in 1895, Wells revels in the scientific romance, while at the same time embedded in the story is a prophecy of the future, the horrible dangers of bacterial warfare. Even when romanticizing the potential benefits that technology can reap, he conveys a lurking fear of their dark side.

In an era when many of the imaginations and inventions of H. G. Wells, predicted 150 years ago, has proven to be possible, there is a compelling necessity to reread his works reflecting on the happenings in the present world. Wells has been "identified as one of the 'founding fathers' of science fiction" (McLean, 2011). He laid out his visions of genetic engineering in *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1896), through the human-animal experiments conducted by the madman doctor while In *The War of the Worlds* (1898), there is a mention of a heat-ray, capable of annihilating the human race, comparable to the radiation weapons and other militaries that are incorporated in recent warfare. It is in *The World Set Free* (1913), that he narrates a devastating war, introducing the concept of atomic bombs. In the words of Gunn (2000), he was the "first futurologist, the man who invented tomorrow".

The *Stolen Bacillus* is set in late nineteenth century when Britain had already been alarmed by a few instances of anarchist terrorism. Well's choice of an anarchist is attributed to the many acts of terrorism that threatened Britain in 1881 and 1892 (Hashimoto, 2003). The work explains the lethal impacts of biological weapons that are difficult to control, and that causes devastation on a global scale, if it leaks into the human ecosystem. Standing at this juncture of time petrified by the casualties that a bio-organism could trigger, we cannot ignore but appreciate the foresightedness and prescience of the novelist. The potential of a microbe as a weapon, its

communicability and virulence are always feared by humans, even at this time when we master and control the planet Earth. In 2001, when five envelopes containing *Bacillus Anthracis* spores caused inhalational anthracis, we realized the ability of such agents to cause mayhem blocking the functioning of the United States government (Casadevall and Pirofski, 2004). Now we can understand that the anxiety staged in the story is not overstated as we get to see the medical personnel worldwide, struggling to combat the microorganism, covid-19 that spreads exponentially.

In the story, we meet an enthusiastic bacteriologist speaking eloquently of the dead tiny germs on the glass slide to a strange visitor. The protagonist personifies the scientific temper that dawned on human civilization from the Enlightenment age. Encouraged by his visitor's interest who looked at the culture of living cholera bacillus with a sort of morbid pleasure, he got on describing the untold destruction it would cause. Irrespective of classes, rich as well as poor, would meet a terrible end. Moving and multiplying quickly among the host species, and gnawing on the vitals, it is described as being immensely potent, to spare none. The bacteriologist even explained how the contents of the tube dropped into the main water-supply of a city would thrive and multiply so fast that the whole community would die of cholera. Finally, the bacteria would be everywhere, to be a menace to the existence of humans. The visitor stood dazed and impressed by the great destructive power of the bacteria.

The visitor heard the account of the bacteriologist intently and remarked that the Anarchists were fools to use bombs when such a marvellous technique was available. The motive of the Anarchists in Britain in the nineteenth century was to rebel against the state authority which was to them obtrusive. They sought to liberate the individual from the exploitation and oppression of the state (James, 1980). The anarchist in the fiction, described as a pale faced man, expressed his wild joy when he had been told about the bottled cholera germs. The thought that the possession of such a lethal weapon transformed his manner to a curious mixture of joy and exultation. Its power of destruction seemed to fascinate him. He gloated over the fame he had sought all along, that would raise his fame to unattainable heights amongst his class. The story could be considered as a parody of the various cases of British radicalism which "were common during the late Victorian and Edwardian periods, and with this story Wells pandered to the popular construction of Anarchism as morbid irrationality" (Donghaile, 2011). On acquiring the weapon, he expressed an agitation and slipped out of the place before being stopped from the mission of causing unprecedented havoc.

The visitor's sole purpose was to create an outbreak of the pandemic that would disrupt the functioning of the society. It was only when he left, the bacteriologist discovered that the tube containing bacillus was missing. He had successfully deceived the scientist with a forged letter of introduction and was all equipped to bring death to numberless people. But the narrative has a culmination that makes us laugh as Wells was always in the habit of conveying a serious issue in an amusing manner. Though written in the late nineteenth century, Wells portends attacks through microorganisms by showing a simple instance of a possible threat of bioterrorism.

Bioterrorism is described as the utilization of biological agents by an interest group to achieve a political or ideological objective (Costa & Baños, 2016). The assessment of the bioterrorism threats and motives would prove that it is primarily aimed at creating casualties, terror, societal disruption, or economic loss, inspired by ideological, religious or political beliefs. Rather than the number of casualties being created, the success of bioterrorist attempts is measured by the degree of societal panic and disruption it creates (Jansen et al, 2014). The consequences of a biological warfare could be disastrous with the unknown number of frozen stocks of organisms that rogue politicians or terrorists can let loose on an unsuspecting public.

Biological weapons are "the poor man's atom bomb," (Block, 2001). It is not a new phenomenon but can be traced back to the times of ancient Romans and Tatars. Leveraging unconventional weapons and tactics, it offers an affordable way against the military superiority of powerful nations. In the way of equipment and infrastructure, the economic outlay for producing bioweapons is much less than a nuclear project. After the two World Wars, even though a treaty was signed in 1972, it failed in materializing its noble intentions when the superpowers of the world maintained constant silence on the ethics of producing bioweapons. On the contrary, it was understood that many of the signatories had been resuming their bioweaponry initiatives. It

is high time that the academic community brood on the possible measures against the proliferation of these lethal weapons.

Not a single day passes when there is no mention of violent acts of terrorism that occupies the international news headlines. The story throws light on the future, when the risks posed by various microbes as bioweapons are higher due to the increased instances of terrorism. The tremendous progress in biochemistry and biotechnology has levelled off the difficulty in acquiring the bioweapons and it has instilled an increased desire among the world powers to have them (Riedel, 2004). The shadowy science of bioweapon programs are believed to be active in many countries. The powerful nations have in stock these terrible weapons which can bring massive destruction from epidemic diseases. There are ongoing debates and investigations about the origins of the present COVID-19 pandemic too, and the questions will take time to get answered.

Through the fiction written nearly one and a half centuries ago, Wells has shown us how the impact of a bioweapon attack can cause gigantic and global scale of devastation. It proves to be cent percent credible as humanity is wading through the shuddering experiences of the Covid-19 pandemic. A story with a terrifying significance, that unfolds on its canvas the horrible dangers of bacterial warfare that can be detrimental to the existence of the human community. He presents a dangerous scenario in emphatic but easy terms. In spite of the ludicrous end of the story, the writer depicts how his imagination, predicting the potentialities of science and technology, warns of the dangers the future has on its cards. If man is to survive, there has to be a caution and restraint in devouring and employing the resources at hand. In the eighteenth century, the scientist Linnaeus gave man the title “Homo Sapiens” or “Man, the wise”. But now it's time to rethink whether humans are entitled to be called “wise”, endangering the prospects of existence for tomorrow.

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