

An Intellectual Titan of our Modern Renaissance

Havelock Ellis and the Progressive Tradition

All advance in social reform, even when it involves surgery,
is, and always has been, effected by heroic pioneers who are ready to act,
and even, if need be, to become martyrs.
They slowly win the world to their side. The law limps behind.¹

These people only desire partial revolutions...
in politics there is only one thing that avails...
to revolutionise people's minds.²

Most of those who recognise the name Havelock Ellis will think of him as a writer on human sexuality. Of those who know something more, perhaps most will associate him with that group of progressives somewhat uneasily defined as ethical reformers. Historians of the intellectual left in Britain have, for reasons not difficult to understand, made a great deal of that moment in 1883 which saw Sidney Webb, Bernard Shaw and others grow impatient with the search for self improvement and moral uplift and break away from the Fellowship of the New Life to form the Fabian Society. Ellis is seen as one of that rump of vegetarians, sandal wearers, rural utopians and the like, derided by self-consciously political radicals as well-intentioned souls fiddling along on the fringes of progressive endeavour. The fact that Ellis's fiddling was in the areas of human sexuality and gender difference has guaranteed him a degree of attention that others of his kind are denied yet the residual impression is of an apolitical figure in self imposed exile from the mainstream of social change. This is an impression which Ellis's latest biographer did nothing to dispel:

It is difficult to establish precisely what Ellis's views were, particularly as he took almost no interest in politics in later life. He always described himself as a socialist, but there is no evidence of his practical advocacy of any single measure.³

Such a view, I will argue, has not only created a misleading impression of Ellis's work but has perpetuated an over restrictive view of the progressive tradition itself. While there were certainly differences between Ellis and figures such as Sidney Webb and Shaw they were nothing like so clear cut as contemporary political progressives and their intellectual heirs have insisted. Ellis, I shall suggest, was more central to the progressive tradition than is now usually realised and a better guide to its intellectual character than many of those who have constituted the staple diet of intellectual historians.

The present moment, I suggest, is a propitious one to reexamine the tradition. When virtually all the political means of social transformation which have exercised an appeal during the last hundred years or so - political trade unionism, the use of 'bourgeois' institutions for socialist objectives, even dictatorship for 'historically justifiable ends' - have lost plausibility it should be useful to look again at the broader context in which they emerged in their modern form. Such a reexamination of the progressive tradition might also suggest an answer to that question as to why the left in the USA and Europe, in its current adversity, should not only have failed to slink off the stage but to have reappeared, without a pause, in a hundred forms.

Havelock Ellis's reputation has diminished so greatly since his death in 1939 that it is difficult to understand how a contemporary could have regarded his first major work, *The New Spirit*, as 'among the most important books published in the last years of the 19th. Century.'⁴ There is a similar problem with the *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* itself. On publication it was greeted as 'a great foundation stone for a new era' and its author celebrated as 'an intellectual Titan of our modern Renaissance.'⁵ Bertrand Russell, in recommending it to Ottoline Morrell, rejoiced: 'It is full of things that everyone ought to know, very scientific and objective, most valuable and interesting.'⁶ In his later years, especially in the United States, Ellis was afforded an almost totemic status. Calverton and Schmalhausen's *Sex in Civilization*, from 1929 contained not only an introduction by Ellis and testaments to his achievement but a photograph, the only one in the book, of the master at his most serene and inspirational, 'the greatest exponent of the woman question'.⁷ Margaret Sanger wrote: 'To Havelock Ellis we owe our concept of that Kingdom of God within us', and compared him with St. Francis of Assisi.⁸ Radclyffe Hall wrote in similar vein: 'I rejoice yet more that I have dared to put my pen at the service of the unfortunate of this world, thus following in the footsteps of my betters, namely Havelock Ellis and his wife.'⁹

Ellis's reputation did not diminish immediately on his death: he was being cited as an authority on sexual differentiation in sociology text books of the 1960s,¹⁰ and even more recently an historian of the study of human sexuality commented 'no man alive or dead contributed more to the tradition of sexual enlightenment.'¹¹ In general, though, the fall has been considerable and most precipitous in the progressive circles which Ellis would have regarded as his natural constituency. For those developing the new left orthodoxies in the 1970s he was a deeply unsympathetic figure; for Jeffrey Weeks Ellis had developed only 'bourgeois' theories of sexuality and his work on gender differentiation was 'one of the most reactionary aspects of his work'. Paul Robinson similarly consigned Ellis to the heap labelled 'sexist'. Many current feminist writers use Ellis as an example of the very thing they are destined to oppose.

Criticism has also been directed at Ellis's character. Ellis can be held partly responsible for while he did not choose the title 'Artist of Life' which supporters conferred on him, he was prepared, as befitted a Nietzsche enthusiast, to present his life as a work of art. He clearly intended his unconventional marriage to serve as an ornament of his philosophy: 'a simple, but daring step in the direction of liberated love - a thing of beauty', as a supporter put it. Others have been less captivated. Calder Marshall argued that the sexual and emotional freedoms Ellis allowed himself drove his wife to distraction.¹² Grosskurth's judgment, that the 'tragic failure' of the marriage was to a large extent attributable to his naivete and ignorance is more sympathetic to Ellis the man, but devastating to the 'Philosopher of Love'.¹³ Latter day feminists have been contemptuous of the notion that the marriage was the fulfillment of a special personal mission.¹⁴ A recent judgment however, readmits a note of ambiguity. Although Anne Summers warns her audience that there is much that they should find unpalatable in Ellis, she still cannot avoid the suspicion of residual virtue. In spite of the 'objectively reactionary stance of his writing on women', a tendency to take biology seriously, and the suspicion that he cast a shadow over his wife's brighter light, there remained 'a recondite and furtive spiritual radicalism'.¹⁵

While there can be no justification for restoring Ellis to his former eminence there are two objections to the modern view. Firstly it offers no plausible account of the range of his work as there is little appreciation of the consistency of vision behind the apparent diversity. Ellis was, emphatically, a 'hedgehog', one of those who know 'one big thing'. Secondly, there is nothing which explains his celebrity. By the end of his life Ellis enjoyed an international reputation and a popular notoriety; his books

graced the bookshelves of progressives of two continents and he had become a comedian's bye word for all things sexual.

Setting Course

There was little in Ellis's suburban home background to suggest or facilitate an intellectual career. From the first, though, he was evangelical. As a child he delivered sermons to his sisters and when, as a seventeen year old, he sailed to Australia, on the ship of which his father was master, his self assigned project was 'The future of man on earth'. A loss of Christian faith did nothing to restrain the desire to preach. Later Ellis did complain of a period of doubt but the quality is as undetectable here as elsewhere in his writing. Ellis seems to have managed his encounter with Darwinism more comfortably than most, and emerged with a vision of the universe even more coherent and purposive. At eighteen, while an elementary school teacher in the outback of Australia, he refined his mission to rescue humanity from its sexual miseries. This he conceived as his part in the work of general transformation which was the ordained duty of his generation. His returned to London and undertook a medical training, not with any intention of becoming a working doctor, but as a means to this higher purpose.

Back in London Ellis began to discover an audience prepared to take him at or near his own estimation. In that world structured by little societies and impecunious magazines that was progressive London in the 1880s Ellis found the friends and connections which were to sustain him for the rest of his life. In a few years he managed to limp through his medical exams, edit a collection of plays, begin his collaboration with A.J. Symonds on the study of 'sexual inversion', even while publishing articles.

1890 saw the emergence of his first books, *The Criminal* and the *New Spirit*. The first was a work of progressive penology, very much in the rationalistic manipulative mould, and the second essays on, among others, Whitman, Tolstoy, and Ibsen presented as a radical manifesto for the times: 'all things connected with social organisation have become matters of the most vital interest to those who are really alive to the time in which they live.'¹⁶

Two years later he produced *The Nationalisation of Health*, a work even more difficult to equate with current views of Ellis. Here, in the style of Chadwick, science was celebrated as the modern approach to social organisation and the statistician rather than the doctor identified as the hero of

health improvement. There was a striking argument for preventive medicine:

An organism badly born and badly bred, always placed under unwholesome conditions and slowly saturated with disease, finally breaks down and is gradually brought to the doctor to be drugged into health.

What was necessary was a new national health regime and a new type of doctor; a trained scientist and a salaried employee of the state. Ellis's state was conceived as a benevolent force offering the doctor a 'disinterested serenity' to promote that 'wider view of the new horizons of medicine'.¹⁷ The parallel with Fabian yearnings was underlined by Ellis's insistence that his opponents were misguided, led astray by selfish interest or an inability to comprehend the way the world was inexorably evolving.

Twenty years later Ellis published *The Task of Social Hygiene*, in which he argued that all was on course; social reform was proceeding by 'mutual action and reaction between science and practice'.¹⁸ The only new element was eugenics but this too was presented as a natural extension of existing principles. 'All that is happening', Ellis wrote, is that 'our sense of social responsibility is developing into a sense of racial responsibility'.¹⁹

Ellis's practical proposals were integrated into a theory of social change. The socialist principle, he traced back to the 'primitive need of mutual help', as embodied in the family:²⁰ The individual was always, in practice, dependent on other people. In this sense, socialism was 'merely the formal statement of this ultimate social fact.' Socialism conceived as 'a great national co-operative association of which the Government is the board of managers' was inevitable.²¹ Society, however, was still composed of individuals: 'The individual is born alone; he must die alone.' Essentially there was no contradiction between socialists and individualists; 'So far as I can see they are both absolutely right.'

While we are socializing all those things of which we all have equal common need, we are more and more tending to leave to the individual the control of those things which in our complex civilization constitute individuality. We socialize what we call our physical life in order that we may attain greater freedom for what we call our spiritual life.²²

Ellis's work thus offers support for historians who have recently challenged the long standing wisdom that the last two decades of the nineteenth century witnessed a shift from individualism to collectivism. Here we find an irreducible individualism coexisting with an equally fervent collecti-

vism, suggesting, not that the latter was replacing the former, but that both were undergoing significant redefinition.²³

Ellis was quite as capable of skating over difficulties as more systematic socialists. He suggested that the conscious selection of partners, which the discipline of eugenics demanded, was no more than a matter of tutoring 'the wholesome instincts of wholesome lovers'.²⁴ For those unlikely to regain contact with their wholesome instincts such as 'higher grade feeble minded', Ellis recommended isolation 'in special institutions and colonies' where they would be 'reasonably safe from the risk of propagating their kind.' If they were to be 'left to roam', 'simple and harmless ways' should be used to stop them breeding. Many such individuals, Ellis assured his readers, would actually welcome such measures and, in any case it was important to remember that they were to be made 'eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven's sake' and not as a punishment.²⁵

Similarly, Ellis's celebration of human variety had absolutely nothing to do with any inherent respect for diversity. Intractable dissenters were by definition misguided, even unnatural, and their criticisms could be dealt with accordingly. The earnest and sincere expression of the genuine individuality of each human being could only lead to greater harmony and the happiness of all. It was not necessary to live with conflict and there was certainly no need to institutionalise it.

Gender

Gender difference is the area where Ellis's work has attracted the greatest criticism. Far from regarding him as a pioneer in a radical tradition present day feminists have identified his 'different but equal' formulation of the respective capacities of men and women as an attempt to justify a subordinate role for women. His elevation of motherhood is taken as indicative of a general reactionary approach. His claim that in his personal relationships he exemplified the appropriate conduct for the 'new man' now provokes derision.²⁶

While it is possible to argue that there is a single satisfactory approach to the 'woman question' it is clear that no such golden thread informs the history of feminism. Though women's movements have sometimes found it difficult to openly debate their differences they have been no more exempt from divisions over fundamentals than other human organisations. The position which Ellis maintained is little favoured now but it is only by ignoring important elements of context that it becomes possible to present it as an inherently reactionary one.

Ellis, it must be remembered, enjoyed close relationships with leading feminists of his time. For Olive Schreiner he was the man who persuaded her that the salvation of women did not depend on 'woman alone'.²⁷ While they had their differences, Ellis and Schreiner were in perfect accord on fundamentals: suffrage campaigns did not go far enough for the ultimate objective must be to harness the distinctively female virtues to transform society. Ellen Key, the Swedish feminist, with whom Ellis had a close association, worked on similar assumptions.²⁸ For Key, as Ellis, it fell naturally to women to ensure that 'new life must be born in love and purity, in health and beauty, in full mutual harmony, in a complete common will, in a complete common happiness.'²⁹ The mother bore the primary responsibility for creating the better future by protecting the child against the depredations of the old society.

For Marie Stopes, whose *Married Love* contained a great deal of respectful quotation from Ellis, mothers and wives were also agents of beneficial social change.³⁰ The 'Victorian tradition' could only be broken by the adoption of the female view of sexuality.³¹ Erotic monogamy and efficient contraception would ensure that children arrived according to the woman's timetable. Progressive motherhood would achieve its highest end in enabling female qualities to percolate society.

Margaret Sanger was in perfect sympathy with Ellis. She associated herself with H.G. Wells's condemnation of 'spare time motherhood' and saw contraception as the means of transforming childbirth into a deliberate creative act. Mutuality in the relations of the sexes was again both the means of progress and its most desirable end.

Ellis's enthusiasm for progressive motherhood was only qualified by a spirited defence of those women who chose not to bear children: 'Perhaps they perceive that the work they have chosen in life is absorbing, or of such a nature, that they would hardly be justified in undertaking the work of parenthood which is in itself, if adequately performed, almost a profession.'³²

Even in that later edition of *Man and Woman*, where according to Flavia Alaya, he was more specifically working on different roles for men and women, and assigning women to inferior roles, there was an emphatic rebuttal of arguments on 'the alleged inferiority of women': 'We may regard all such discussion as absolutely futile and foolish.'³³ In the preface to his sixth edition he argued that 'The sexes are perfectly poised; men and women are at every point different and at all points equivalent. There is no reason why men should be anxious to do everything that women do, or women be anxious to do everything that men do; but there is likewise no reason why each sex should not be absolutely free to develop all the

possibilities within its own proper nature, even when the development is on exceptional lines.³⁴

These considerations will not of course convince anyone that Ellis's views were correct but they must call into question any suggestion that Ellis was an inherently anti-feminist ideologue. It is possible to show that Ellis subscribed to some opinions which have led others, in a different context, to assume women were inferior, but wrong to assume he ever countenanced such conclusions. It is certainly possible to argue that his model progressive marriage was in the end no more than a novel means of pursuing male self interest but it seems clear, and significant, that in deceiving his quarry Ellis was undoubtedly also deceiving himself. There is no need to question the sincerity of his belief that the only good future course for society must involve its feminisation. Motherhood was indeed elevated but not as a retreat into private life but as the highest public function. The home was the front line of the new struggle. The 'Modern mother' was the agent of the coming higher civilisation; the practical realisation of a sound eugenics and a harmonious and hygienic society depended upon her.³⁵

Sex

One historian of sexual science, Edward Brecher, wrote of the *Evolution of Modesty*, 'It remains today the best introduction I have found to the scientific study of sex.'³⁶ For Masters and Johnson, Ellis was in advance of Freud in recognising the sexuality of children, a pioneer of the notion of the normality of female sexual desire, and responsible for the recognition of masturbation as a widespread and relatively harmless practice in both sexes.

Ellis's work in this area might seem out of line with the interpretation of his work advanced here yet, as one of its recent historians points out, the disciple of sexual science has been quite as concerned with challenging what it identifies as unacceptable ideological convictions as it has with observation.³⁷ Always implicitly, and often explicitly, it has set itself the task of encouraging a 'value neutral' discussion of sexuality and of promoting a permissive attitude to consensual sexual activity. Even allowing for this, Ellis's famous *Studies* are still noticeably unsystematic; a hotch potch of fact, opinion, and anecdote; the product of obsession; more akin to an undisciplined encyclopaedia than a treatise. While they bristle with implicit ideological assumptions they contain little recognisable as theory. The discoveries which have been credited to Ellis, for instance the capacity of

women to experience sexual pleasure or the ubiquity of masturbation are far less matters of scientific fact than social ideology; more to do with what is acknowledged rather than what is done. In any case Ellis had neither means nor inclination to pursue them as scientific questions. His 'facts' were not organised around an hypothesis but were assembled as uncomfortable fragments of reality to be thrust under the noses of those who would prefer to ignore them. Such 'facts', once released, were intended to rip apart the straight jacket within which the respectable sought to constrain human sexuality. The point of the *Studies* was not so much what they said or how they said it but that they said anything at all. They stood as a statement that sexuality needed to be retrieved from the dull compulsions of convention; that there was nothing threatening in variety and that everyone had much to gain from the ending of secrecy. Ellis's contribution was, above all, to turn sexual enlightenment into an ideological *casus belli*; on the one side the repressed and repressing under the banner of hypocrisy and privacy, on the other the allied of the tormented and enlightened under the banner of sincerity.

Weeks's description of Ellis's sexual theories as 'bourgeois' was particularly inappropriate and ahistorical. Ellis, as a leader, of the wave of anti-Victorian reaction of the 1880s set his face specifically against what he asserted were the beliefs and practices of the middle classes. 'Double standards', 'false monogamy', the bourgeois 'art of separation', were all objects of his scorn. Ellis had no more time for public private divisions in sexual matters than in social ones. While his work might have proved useful for liberals attempting to establish a zone of toleration for private acts Ellis's own ideal required everyone to enjoy their 'love raptures' in the open. In Camus' classification Ellis was no mere rebel but a thorough-going revolutionary; critical of the present but with a clear vision of a new, all-encompassing, order. After the hygienic dawn nothing would be left to chance. The adolescent child would be placed in the hands of teachers whose function would be to overcome the prevailing 'silent obscurantism' and 'the conventional morality which grew out of that silence': 'The only object of education is to conform the child's reason.'³⁸ Sexual hygiene involved 'the right of the child to control the education of the parents'. By this Ellis did not mean that the child should exercise a choice but that it had a right to a parent who had already been brought into contact with the truth. Freedom was a matter of liberating individuals to do what was necessary. In a parsonical parable Ellis wrote of the new mother who had 'familiarised her little daughter of six with the elementary facts of sex and the origin of babies' but still had to counter the tales that the child picked up at school. The outcome, in this instance, was satisfactory with the child

solemnly promising her mother 'I will never believe anything but what *you* tell me'.³⁹ Advice, though, was never enough. A doctor might warn a young couple not to procreate but there would be no effect 'if the young man and woman find (...) that their acquaintances are prepared to accept all these risks.' What was essential was 'not merely a reform in the class-room, it is a reform in the home, in the church, in the law courts, in the legislature.' Ellis's ideal was the 'savage': 'held in the path of duty by a much more united force of public opinion than is the civilized man.'⁴⁰ Like many progressives of the 1920s Ellis's found the new anthropological studies of 'primitive' societies entirely irresistible. Samoa as constructed by Margaret Mead challenged the assumption that modern developed societies represented the highest form of social organisation and insinuated that it was possible to have a happy and disciplined society without repression or politics. Emma Hadfield's account of life in the Loyalty Islands showed that spontaneous pleasures could co-exist with 'high moral qualities'. Ellis seized on the fact that none of the Islanders wore clothing until the age of twenty-five or thirty as proof that clothing was a distortion of civilization. Spontaneous co-operation was the rule. Warfare had been reduced to a rough game and work interspersed with opportunities to 'loungue or ramble, sleep or talk'. Ellis noted also, apparently quite seriously, the strand of magic which ran through the civilization: 'so great is the eloquence of the people that they employ oratory to catch fish.' Even their 'occasional' cannibalism was acceptable. The only threat was the Christian missionaries: 'simplicity and confidence are passing away.'⁴¹

Utopia

In 1900 Ellis published *The Nineteenth Century, A Dialogue in Utopia* which took the form of a conversation between two superior beings from a future age over the deficiencies of the 19th century. A leading theme was inevitably the horrors of nationalism. From the vantage point of Utopia nations could be seen in their true light: 'artificial units' whose sole objective had been 'to cheat other nations'.⁴² Victorians had had an insatiable appetite for conflict. Popular journalism had stimulated a "perpetual fermentation of opinion" and encouraged meddling in "all sorts of matters which we deal with both more quietly and more effectively."⁴³ Instead of entrusting the destinies of the nation to its 'best men', the Victorians preferred 'any pert young scion of the nobility, any pushful manufacturer, or idle barrister.' The winner was always the 'most pugnacious, the most thick skinned, the most hypocritical'.⁴⁴ In the courts:

"Instead of quietly investigating the circumstances of the case (...) and submitting the criminal as speedily as possible to the most appropriate treatment, they took sides and fought a battle over him with a judge as umpire." Experts were sometimes used but "instead of being regarded as final, their decisions were quite commonly treated with contempt."⁴⁵

In Utopia the sources of conflict had been eliminated. 'The whole material part of life' had been put on a 'scientific' basis. Commerce had become a 'merely mechanical' state function and had ceased 'to absorb the best energy and enterprise of the world': "we do not think about it any more than we think of the air we breathe."⁴⁶ There was no more careless talk about liberty: Victorian 'liberties' had meant no more than "servitude with payment in money" and "at worst the freedom to starve and die." Democracy, similarly, had amounted to no more than the freedom to pursue 'slavish instincts': "the enfranchised are capable of running in a brainless and compact mob after any man who is clever enough to gain despotic influence over them."⁴⁷

Women were exempted from responsibility for the evils of the old order. They had been its principal victims but had survived their oppression unblemished: "The sweetness of their women alone redeemed the evil influence of England in the world."⁴⁸ They had suffered from a sexual order ruled by an ignorance born of the superstition that it was 'impure to ascertain the laws by which human beings are attracted to one another.' The inhabitant of Utopia reacted with frank incredulity: "I do not see how sex could have been impure to people who have lived among flowers."⁴⁹ In the new world the horticultural potential of human sexuality had been released and sex become a source of guiltless, if largely sterile enjoyment, with no requirement for privacy.

In Ellis's Utopia the proletariat was only conspicuous by its absence, but this was no more cause for regret than the departure of the hypocritical middle class. Neither group had any place in a world which now rested on the eternal truths of individual and social life, and embodied an order which was deep, unchanging and uncontested.⁵⁰

While Ellis was not a conventional political animal he was no mere philosopher, content to understand the world. He had no taste for popular politics and a haughty indifference to the issues as defined by the existing political class, but he did have an agenda for political and social change and maintained it with remarkable consistency throughout his career. His approach was not one which endears itself to everyone but is quite recognisable. He stood in that tradition which holds that there are tangible political truths and a means of reconciling conflicts according to principles which can be discovered by an intellectual process. Such principles would

deal with both individual and collective grievances for there was no inevitable distinction between collective and individual good. Ellis was happy enough with Arcadia; where life was lived according to laws which lay in every human heart, and ritual and reverence tied up the loose ends: happy also with his Utopia, where turmoil had been banished, and the true liberty of compliance with natural laws reestablished. It was present turmoils which were uniquely unpleasant and unsustainable.

Given this it was natural enough that Ellis should have little time for the ordinary means of political life. Politicians were not, as they claimed, drawing order from conflict but only perpetuating the confusion. He derided the notion that one could improve societies and individuals by legislative means. Such attempts to deal with prostitution, alcohol and homosexuality stemmed from an alliance of 'the Philistine and the hypocrite (...) with the simple minded idealist.' Ellis's opposition did not, of course, stem from reticence about interference with individual liberty. What was wrong about traditional political methods was not that they controlled too much but that they were likely to control too little. If it was necessary 'to wage a constant war with the law-making tendency', it was because such an approach could only 'injure and stain' the 'sacred and intimate impulses' on which worthwhile reform would have to be based. The object was 'to breed a firmly-fibred, clean minded, and self-reliant race of manly men and womanly women' which would not require 'an army of police to conduct it homewards at 9 p.m.'⁵¹

Change would begin with the 'unique personality' who, by searching his own soul, could uncover the secrets of all souls; 'Every poet and artist is only giving expression to the secret feelings and impulses of his fellows.'⁵² The seer's gaze could pass through surface turbulence to a level where disagreements could be seen as mere surface froth: 'The high class man is he who disciplines himself to the service of great ends. He possesses the creative mind to raise society above the commonplace.'⁵³ He should not legitimate false politics by his participation, but withdraw and construct a life that radiated calmness, certainty and beauty. Others would thereby be inspired to discover their own potential. The new ideal society would develop as 'a slowly growing conviction - first among the more intelligent members of the community and then by imitation and fashion among the less intelligent members.' Ellis therefore addressed himself to a half imagined community of intellectual middle men and, of course, middle women, who could retail the message in the form that was most appropriate to their respective charges. Enlightened minorities were after all, the stuff on which all great civilisations had been founded. His 'New Mothers' could be more effective agents of change than politicians. Real reform, his

wife had written, was 'done in kitchens, nurseries, and in the silent, ordinary life of everyman and everywoman.'⁵⁴ Similarly intellectuals did not need to desert their desks, studios, or cafes.

Ellis's interest in reform by example was reflected in a lifelong fascination with model ethical communities. The Fellowship of the New Life itself was just such a community adapted for the enlightened in paid employment. Sandal wearing, simplicity of dress, vegetarianism, nakedness, artistic interior decorations to offend the suburban soul, amateur animal husbandry and the rest were a means of announcing a moral ascendancy, the means by which superior souls could demonstrate to others, and to themselves, that there was an alternative to the hypocrisy and complexity of modern life; a means of getting back to 'reality'.

It is not difficult to find in Ellis's work political judgments which must now seem unfortunate. Grosskurth cites his refusal to support the publication of a book outlining Nazi atrocities on the grounds that 'it will be freely read outside by those on whom its action can only be mischievous, or at best unnecessary' as a glaring incidence.⁵⁵ Equally worrying was his determination to find an element of good in the Eugenic Law of 1934 on the grounds that it was based on a 'scientific' motivation and if properly administered 'need not become mixed up in the Nordic and anti-semitic aspects of Nazi aspiration'.⁵⁶ Allowance must be made for hindsight but Ellis had surely passed that line where careless pontification becomes culpable negligence. However it must be questioned whether such statements separate him clearly from the more self consciously political intellectuals of his day. If he was too overwhelmed with his own enthusiasms to honestly confront the difficulties inherent in the relationship of any state with its most powerless subjects; if his imagination failed to the extent that he reduced all politics to the dimensions of a progressive parlour game; if he saw no virtue in actual or theoretical distinctions between public and private spheres, if he placed the disinterested intellectual high above the practitioners and subjects of political life, and if he took refuge in the illusion of an evolutionary tide carrying society to exactly where he wanted it to go, he was in a company which went well beyond ethical circles.

Ethicals and Politicals

The division between ethical and political reformers can now be better represented as a continuing debate within a camp rather than one between camps. An analogy may be drawn with the use of utopian as a category of

socialism. That definition, with its implication of persons with a vision of New Jerusalem but no notion of how to get there, only made sense on the assumption that there actually was a fairly obvious means of transforming the word into flesh. Without this the distinction loses force and utility. The case of the ethical and political progressives is similar. Differences, it must now seem, were never as great as the contemporary protagonists felt they were. Even styles were less dissimilar than the more austere politicals have claimed; there was more in their souls than could be found in blue books. Wallas wrote, when well beyond the hot flushes of youth, that it was 'hardly possible for anyone to endure life who does not believe that they will succeed in producing a harmony between themselves and their environment far deeper and wider than anything we see today.'⁵⁷ Beatrice Webb thoroughly disapproved of Ellis's public outpourings but her diaries revealed a very similar yearning for wholeness.⁵⁸ Lowes Dickenson's studies of international politics were rooted in a determination to reveal essential unities: 'In the *real* things' he wrote 'the interests of all the people of the world are the same.'⁵⁹ Shaw's dismissed *Seedtime*, the journal of the Fellowship of the New Life, as 'an adolescent phase of negation and rebellion'⁶⁰ and his depiction of the parting of Fabians and the New Lifers is much quoted.⁶¹ Yet in 1898, fifteen years after the split, he advised the Fellowship that should it harness Ibsen and Nietzsche and engage with 'the really new idea of challenging the validity of idealism and duty, and bringing Individualism round again on a higher plane' it might still 'repeat on the ethical plane the success of the Fabian Society on the political one.'⁶² The Fabian Arts Group pleaded with their elders for 'a platform for the discussion of the more subtle relationships of man to society which had been brought to the front in the works of such modern philosopher-artists as Nietzsche, Ibsen, Tolstoy and Bernard Shaw.'⁶³ While Fabian elders talked politics they saw no more intrinsic merit in actual political processes than Ellis himself. Both camps defined democracy in terms of ends rather than means; neither could see popular politics as anything more than a distasteful necessity. Both embraced an outsider's disdain of political process. Values were to be derived from moral abstraction and solutions from disinterested research; excursions into the political processes were solely for purposes of implementation. Although the agendas of ethical and political progressives were not identical there were large overlaps: the emancipation of women, the feminisation of society, the moralisation of sexual conduct, the rule of experts, the sanitization of social life up to and including the level of eugenics found supporters in both camps. At the deeper level politicals and ethicals were unanimous in their rejection of the existing liberal society: the precondition

of progress was the abolition of the competitive insecurities of political and commercial life.

It was of course the political, rather than the ethical strand of the progressive intellectual community which became more prominent in Britain. The Labour movement, its size and solidity offering the tantalising myth of an ordered working class available for an assault on the old society, had much to do with this, as did the persistence of a certain deference in public life. It was no accident that Ellis found himself more revered in the United States, where the populist logic of the political market place was quickly enthroned and politics had become an affair of professional politicians and brute voters, largely beyond the reach, and often beneath the contempt of men and women of sensibility and reforming purpose. There, the progressive imagination had to content itself with single issue ethical campaigns, direct assaults on the social question, exemplary experiments in higher living, and the cultivation of a community of self-consciously virtuous sentiment.⁶⁴ Excursions into the real world of politics were no more than brief episodes of hope in a desert of experience. In Britain, there was a comfort zone within which patrician discussions between practising politicians and political intellectuals might seem mutually worthwhile.

Conclusion

Ellis had a sharp nose for the key ideas of his time, a remarkable capacity to blend them into congenial books and a near messianic commitment to his work, yet his fame requires additional explanation. While changes in intellectual fashion can never be entirely reduced to sociological factors it was clearly something more than a coincidence that the years which saw Ellis's rise to fame, say 1880-1920, were also significant in the rise of new middle class. Chesterton saw the 1890s as the moment when the hitherto solid mid-Victorian middle class had experienced a crisis of self esteem and split in two. Half, according to Chesterton, developed an ambition to get into 'society' and the other went after 'societies'; 'that is of the vegetarian, theosophical variety.'⁶⁵ Obviously it was only some within this stratum who were open to progressive ideas, and Ellis found readers in all social groups, yet nonetheless it was among the expanding ranks of workers by brain, effectively, if in many cases only recently, separated from the working classes by education and aspiration, but lacking the financial security and social confidence of the established middle class, that Ellis seems to have found his most sympathetic audience.⁶⁶ Evidence that

such a stratum represented Ellis's most attentive readership is to be found in the large volume of unsolicited correspondence which he began to attract in his later years. The quest of the insecure middle classes for a place in the world relied, of necessity, far more on ideological constructions of identity and self worth than those of more established groups. It was among such a group that Ellis had found his friends and his voice and it was fitting that he should do much to develop it as a body of prejudice, a wedge of ethical dissent in the broader society. Ellis's social philosophy was about changing society, but this did not mean that it could not also help individuals to find a place within it. For those who felt their consciousness was above that of ordinary men and women, were intellectually estranged from their home background yet could not aspire to the 'glittering prizes', it offered a version of the world in which their skills were valued, their prejudices ennobled and even their semi-detached social status acknowledged as a virtue. Ellis should be recognised as one of the creators of a particular mental living space in the midst of commercial society. Here was a dream of a new order to comfort those forced to live in a society where choice was displacing certainty; a philosophy which promised the believer, just as it had granted its creator, a much needed plateau of mental tranquillity.

Far from seeing Ellis as an apolitical figure we should acknowledge him as one of those engaged in a qualitative extension of public discourse to accommodate those who could not aspire to actual leadership but could never see themselves as the raw material of the historical process. Ellis was one of those who changed what it meant to be 'interested in politics'. The New Politics paid little heed to the business as it was understood by its smarter practitioners: the maintenance of order, the balancing of influence, the mobilisation of prejudice and the like. Its concerns were infinitely broader, its tone more earnest, its stance, idealistic and disinterested. Even where it could not ignore the more sombre facts of life it denied them any particular authority. The blueprint of the better future was more real than any current fact.

This politics was a matter of big ideas; politics, most emphatically, was something that could be learned from a book; abstraction was everything, experience nothing. Ellis's ignorance of and indifference to industry and commerce could do him no harm with this constituency. The New Politics inevitably extended the category of 'public things': the relationships of men and women, the rights of children, and the rights of homosexuals. Personal relationships, even the inner conscience, became political zones. In short Ellis's work recorded perfectly the complex readjustment of the private and the public that was taking place in the period, showing that

politics was being domesticated as private life was being politicised. The redefinition allowed the progressive doctor, the elementary school teacher chafing at the restrictions of the trade, and the 'modern mother', to discover a public dimension in otherwise private activities and thus, a greater purpose in the daily round. Ellis helped to establish a network which could rescue them from their sense of isolation. If they were an eccentric minority in their localities, their books and magazines conformed their membership of another world. If they were mistrusted by their working class clients and despised by the established middle classes they had the consolation of being aristocrats in the republic of enlightened sentiment.

Ellis's work on sexuality was quite as relevant to the New Politics as his social philosophy. He instinctively identified human sexuality as a realm of ambiguity and uncertainty where the carnal being constantly threatened the poise of the moral being, a zone of inconsistency and disorder. When his own relationship with Olive Schreiner was in turmoil, when intellectual differences had become tortuously entwined with sexual tensions, Ellis imagined a garden where sexual pleasures could be indulged without their earthly complications and conflicting desires diverted into a single even-flowing stream; a zone of perpetual serenity. His works were designed to show how others could take the same path. Ellis's peculiar gift to the progressive movement was nothing less than the promise of an end to another sort of history.

His books conferred a blessing on the under powered, insecure middle class and redefined issues so that they fell within their range. Ellis on the bookshelf was a sign of emancipation, of release from traditional authorities, an assertion of the right to know and make choices on one's own account, a reinforcement of the sense that even if one was not able to follow one's highest inclinations one was in touch with those who could.

Even in his contradictions Ellis offers insight into this constituency. His attitude to the working classes exemplified the dilemma of those caught between two increasingly self-conscious bodies of social sentiment. On the one hand they could still appear as the poor, a tax on conscience and a means of indicting the existing order of society, yet on the other they were the rabble, which had, in Ellis's phrase, 'outlived its usefulness', and stood more in need of elimination than enlightenment.⁶⁷ The city itself presented a similar contradiction. Was it a boundless pleasuredrome offering possibilities beyond the wildest fancies of rural idiocy or was it a source of unimaginable insecurity? Should one indulge in the new freedoms or should one devote oneself to the creation of a new order?

It is almost invariably wiser to avoid questions of parallels between past and present yet it is difficult to ignore the coincidences between Ellis's agenda and radical discussions of our own time. The implications of motherhood and the significance of biological differences between the sexes again appear as vital public issues. The feminisation of society is once more a familiar and widespread topic of debate and the rules of sexual conduct, even etiquette, are again public matters. Many progressives find a fitting object for their enthusiasms in public health crusades. Nietzsche is attracting attention on a scale which would have been unthinkable thirty years ago while Ibsen's depictions of the rotteness behind bourgeois facades never went away. Speculation on the demise of government as we have known it is rife.⁶⁸ A new generation of progressive politicians struggles with the 'new' ethical agenda. Only recently the First Lady put her name to a book on child rearing designed to enlist the community in laying the foundations of an acceptable social order.⁶⁹ Communitarian debate mirrors Ellis's belief that neither macro political adjustments nor formal legal intervention can provide a framework for a secure and satisfactory society.⁷⁰ In recent years, too, progressive discussions of the poor have increasingly come to echo the equivocation of earlier years: the poor are still seen as a symbol of the inadequacies of the existing political elites but also, and increasingly, agents of disorder and a case for radical treatment.

Havelock Ellis's career is more remarkable and broadly pertinent than has usually been recognised. Although Ellis saw himself as the representative of a 'New Age' he appears at his richest and most interesting when seen as a transitional figure struggling to come to terms with a pivotal moment in social and cultural development. While he wished to associate himself with the modern and progressive there is still much to link him with the past. There are, for example, unmistakable traces of Matthew Arnold's nostalgia for the era destroyed by middle class cultural dominance; that same sense that moral improvement had not kept pace with material progress.⁷¹ Yet a brief outline of his range of interests; criminology, the feminisation of society, human sexuality; and his flirtations with cultural relativism and Nietzschean moral reversal seems to link him with the most fashionable of current concerns. If his rejection of 'general doctrine' in favour of 'human sympathy' seems to refer back to George Eliot it could equally be seen as a harbinger of modern feminist suspicions of the public sphere.⁷²

What does seem clear is that it is a mistake to deal with Ellis solely in terms of any one of his interests. As we have seen his project as an eighteen year old had been the 'future of men on earth' and all his future producti-

on betrayed signs of a similar ambition. Friends and followers initially praised him in terms which, if not fully convincing, at least matched his intention, but later critics have missed the scope, unity and purpose of his work. Ellis sought to create himself as the evangelist of an alternative mental kingdom and the founding father of a new state of mind; the provider of a mission for a clerisy in waiting. As the century of political socialism fades and its ideals come to be regarded as points of ethical reference rather than the foundation stones of the new order, his importance for the progressive tradition can only become clearer.

Notes

1. Havelock Ellis, *Questions of Our Day*, (London, 1934) p. 24.
2. Havelock Ellis, *New Spirit*, (London, 1890) p. 157.
3. P. Grosskurth, *Havelock Ellis*, (London, 1980) p. 61.
4. Oscar Wilde commented in the Pall Mall Gazette, 'The New Spirit - not intoxicating'.
5. The first quotation is from a letter of Edward Carpenter to Ellis, Ellis Papers and Correspondence in the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, The University of Texas at Austin (which I shall subsequently refer to as HRHRC), the second Isaac Goldberg, *Havelock Ellis. A Biographical and Critical Survey* (London, 1926).
6. Bertrand Russell to Ottoline Morrell 30 Jan. 1916. Bertrand Russell, *Autobiography*, (London, 1991) p. 285.
7. Calverton V.F. & S.D. Schmalhausen (Eds.) *Sex in Civilization*, (London, 1929).
8. Margaret Sanger, *An Autobiography*, (London, 1939) p. 138.
9. Radclyffe Hall. Letter to H.E. (HRHRC).
10. R.M. Maciver & Charles H. Page, *Society. An Introductory Analysis*, (London, 1964) (First Edtn. 1950) p. 243 and Kingsley Davis, *Human Society*, (New York, 1965) p. 187.
11. Edward Brecher, *The Sex Researchers*, (London, 1970) pp. 3-49.
12. The adulatory view of the marriage is that of Joseph Ishill. Havelock Ellis, *The Unpublished letters of Havelock Ellis to Joseph Ishill* (Intro. Joseph Ishill) (Berkeley Heights, New Jersey, USA, 1954) p. xxv.
13. 'He simply did not know what he was talking about when he elevated affectionate comradeship above passion in their theoretical discussions.' Grosskurth, *Havelock Ellis*, p. 145.
14. Ruth Brandon, *The New Women and the Old Men*, (London, 1990) pp. 95-132.
15. A. Summers, 'The Correspondents of Havelock Ellis', *History Workshop Journal* 32, Autumn 1991, 167-183, p. 181.
16. Havelock Ellis, *The New Spirit* (London, 1890), p. 9.
17. Havelock Ellis, 'The Nationalisation of Health' in *Essays in Wartime*, (London, 1916) pp. 138-147, p. 142.
18. Havelock Ellis, *The Task of Social Hygiene*, (London, 1913) p. 3.
19. Havelock Ellis, *The Task of Social Hygiene*, (London, 1913) p. 16.
20. Havelock Ellis, *The Task of Social Hygiene*, (London, 1913) p. 386.
21. Havelock Ellis, *The Task of Social*

Hygiene, (London, 1913) p. 389.

22. Havelock Ellis, *New Spirit* (London, 1890) p. 19.

23. See in particular J. Harris, *Public Spirit, Private Lives*, (London, 1994).

24. Havelock Ellis, *The Task of Social Hygiene*, (London, 1913) p. 205.

25. Havelock Ellis, *The Problem of Race Regeneration*, (London, 1911) pp. 66/67.

26. See, for example, Cynthia Russett, *Sexual Science, The Victorian Construction of Womanhood*, (Cambridge, USA, 1989), and Ruth Brandon, *The New Women and the Old Men*, (London, 1990).

27. Olive Schreiner to HE, HRHRC.

28. See Ellen Key, *Love and Ethics* (NY, 1912) and *The Century of the Child* (NY, 1909).

29. Ellen Key, *The Century of the Child* (New York, 1909) p. 51.

30. In Marie Stopes, *Married Love*. (London 5th edition Sept 1918) [the First edition was brought out earlier in the same year] I can find 8 mentions of Ellis and many direct quotations, including a whole page on the subject of [male] sexual restraint. The significance is all the greater as the book was short and its author not much inclined to share her glory. In *Enduring Passions*, of 1928, she still described his *Studies in the Psychology of Sex* as 'classical', as well she might, considering how much she drew from them. Marie Stopes, *Enduring Passions*, (London, 1928) p. 168.

31. William Leach, *True Love and Perfect Union*, (London and New York, 1981) pp. 38-63.

32. ms The Problem of Childless Marriage HRHRC n/d.

33. Havelock Ellis, *Man and Woman*, (London, 1930) p. 521. Ellis can sometimes been misunderstood because it is sometimes difficult to avoid investing his statements with more complexity than they warrant. Women are closer to chil-

dren he suggests. This is inflammatory but by this however he seemed to mean only that the men's transition from childhood involved more changes (more bodily hair, deeper voice etc) rather than some position, as might now be assumed, on the 'ontogeny recapitulating phylogeny' scale. He specifically quotes to this effect: "Each sex" asserts the anatomist Professor Giuffrida-Ruggieri, "is perfectly adult in all its characters". Preface to fifth edition *Man and Woman* (London, 1930) p. xiii.

34. Havelock Ellis, *Man and Woman*, (London, 1930) p. x. Again here we find a near total consistency over the years. In 1885 Havelock had written to Olive Schreiner: 'You are quite right in insisting that women are human beings first and women afterwards. If you are also rather inclined to underestimate the distinctions between men and women that is certainly at present a mistake on the right side.' HE to OS 22 March 1885 HRHRC.

35. Havelock Ellis, *The Task of Social Hygiene*, (London, 1913) p. 78. Ellis wrote introductions to two of Ellen Key's books.

36. First quotation. Masters and Johnson, *Human Sexuality* (Boston, Mass., 1986) p. 18. Second E. Brecher, *The Sex Researchers*, (London, 1970) p. 3. The Evolution of Modesty became the first volume of later editions of the *Studies*.

37. Vern L. Bullough, *Science in the Bedroom: A History of Sex Research*, (New York, 1995).

38. Havelock Ellis, *The Task of Social Hygiene*, (London, 1913) p. 249.

39. Havelock Ellis, 'The New Mother' in Havelock Ellis, *More Essays of Love and Virtue*, (London, 1931) p. 16 (Ellis's italics).

40. Havelock Ellis, *The Task of Social Hygiene*, (London, 1913) pp. 250-259.

41. Havelock Ellis, *The Dance of Life*, (London, 1923) p. 17.
42. Havelock Ellis, *The Nineteenth Century. A Dialogue in Utopia*, (London, 1900) p. 32 He wrote an article on the development of an international language for the *Progressive Review* in 1896 and devoted a chapter to it in the *Task of Social Hygiene*.
43. Havelock Ellis, *The Nineteenth Century. A Dialogue in Utopia*, (London, 1900) p. 25.
44. Havelock Ellis, *The Nineteenth Century. A Dialogue in Utopia*, (London, 1900) p. 26 The comment on the idle barrister recalls Beatrice Webb's dismissal of Asquith as one who could argue a brief but not develop an idea.
45. Havelock Ellis, *The Nineteenth Century. A Dialogue in Utopia*, (London, 1900) pp. 28-29.
46. Havelock Ellis, *The Nineteenth Century. A Dialogue in Utopia*, (London, 1900) pp. 16-17 & p. 40.
47. This had been a constant theme: 'If we test the intelligence of the enfranchised by examining the persons whom they elect as their representatives, we soon realise the trifling character of the step.' Havelock Ellis, *New Spirit*, (London, 1890) pp. 13-14.
48. Havelock Ellis, *The Nineteenth Century. A Dialogue in Utopia*, (London, 1900) p. 150. Ellis could not resist throwing in one of his favourite topics: 'a few eloquent people would say that all progress for women consisted in ignoring child-bearing and becoming as much as possible like men; and then again, other people, equally eloquent and solemn, arose, who said that for women nothing mattered but child bearing.' p. 163.
49. Havelock Ellis, *The Nineteenth Century. A Dialogue in Utopia*, (London, 1900) p. 119.
50. In an earlier work Ellis had laid out his plan for the post-industrial future which embodied the colonist's vision of Britain as 'a remote land of glamour and tradition, a land of sacred associations and strange old world customs': 'we may already trace the development of England as a museum of antiquities and as a Holy Land for the whole English-speaking world.' Havelock Ellis, *New Spirit*, (London, 1890) pp. 24-25.
51. Havelock Ellis, *The Task of Social Hygiene*, (London, 1913) p. 310.
52. Havelock Ellis, *Task of Social Hygiene*, (London, 1913) p. 396.
53. Havelock Ellis, 'The New Aristocracy', in *My Confessional*, (London, 1934) p. 159.
54. Mrs. Havelock Ellis, *Attainment*, (London, 1909) p. 278.
55. See for example Ellis's grounds for refusing to support the Brown Book: 'it will be freely read outside by those on whom its action can only be mischievous, or at best unnecessary.' Havelock Ellis, *Questions of Our Day*, (London, 1936). For discussion see P. Grosskurth, *Havelock Ellis, A Biography*, (London, 1980) pp. 414-415.
56. Havelock Ellis, *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, (London, 1937) p. 488.
57. G. Wallas, *Great Society*, (London, 1914), pp. 71-72.
58. She dismissed the Ellis autobiography as 'mostly self-exhibition in his love affairs', N&J MacKenzie, *The Diary of Beatrice Webb, Vol 4 1924-1943, The Wheel of Life*, (London, 1985) p. 448.
59. C. Wolff, *Magnus Hirschfeld - A Portrait of a Pioneer in Sexology*, (London, 1986) p. 137.
60. Shaw quoted in David S. Thatcher, *Nietzsche in England 1890-1914*, (Toronto, 1970).
61. 'If we had to wait for the attainment of personal perfection we would be waiting for a very long time indeed.' Quoted in: S. Pierson, *British Socialism: The Journey from Fantasy to Politics*. (Cam-

bridge, Mass. 1979).

62. Shaw in the *Eagle and Serpent* No. 2 (April 15 1898) p. 21, quoted in David S. Thatcher, *Nietzsche in England 1890-1914*, (Toronto, 1970) p. 187.

63. 'Fabian Arts Group', *Fabian News* XVII Feb, 1907, p. 20.

64. See in particular Christopher Lasch, *The New Radicalism in America 1889-1963. The Intellectual as a Social Type*, (New York, 1986).

65. G.K. Chesterton, *Autobiography*, (London, 1936)

66. Ellis, like other intellectuals of the time, attracted a vast correspondence. The correspondents appear to have been drawn predominantly from this broad social stratum. His last books consisted of the letters of correspondents with his replies. See for instance Havelock Ellis, *Questions of Our Day*, (London, 1934) See also A. Summers, 'The Correspondents of Havelock Ellis', *History Workshop Journal* 32, Autumn 1991, 167-183 p. 181.

67. 'For as at Rome the rabble clamoured for bloodshed in their circuses, so they yelled two thousand years later in

their newspapers for another nation to be slaughtered and its liberties extinguished.' Havelock Ellis, *The Nineteenth Century. A Dialogue in Utopia*, (London, 1900) p. 9 and for rest as above p. 79.

68. See for example G. Mulgan, *Life after Politics. New Thinking for the Twenty First Century*, (London, 1997).

69. Hilary Clinton, *It Takes a Village*, (1996).

70. Etzioni has even resurrected Ellis's proposal for two forms of marriage; one for childless unions and another, weightier, variant for couples with children, in order to inculcate an appropriate sense of moral responsibility. A. Etzioni, *The Spirit of Community: Rights, Responsibilities and the Communitarian Agenda*, (London, 1996).

71. Matthew Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, (London, 1932) pp. 12-13, and see also Basil Willey, *Nineteenth Century Studies*, (London, 1973).

72. See for instance Carole Pateman, *The Disorder of Women: Democracy, Feminism and Political Theory*, (Cambridge, 1989).