

# Looking backward at 2000



RONNIE DUGGER

Oct 1, 1999

Utopia, from the Greek, means “not a place.” Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward*, in contrast, was his visualization of a real and better place, the society he thought Boston and the United States should be in the year 2000. At the time he was writing, the millennial year was 113 years in the future: He was looking forward and imagining what it would be like to look back. Now, as we prepare ourselves for the actual 2000, reading or re-reading *Looking Backward* (perhaps along with his sequel to it, *Equality*) can plunge us into engrossing meditations on the passing century and the structures of society, meditations that are as likely to be dour as they are to be ethically challenging, as likely to be nourishing as they are appalling.

The novel is nearly forgotten today, but by 1897 about 400,000 copies of *Looking Backward* had sold in the United States. Bellamy clubs formed in America and other countries. In Russia, Tolstoy called *Looking Backward* “exceedingly remarkable,” heavily marking his copy, Lenin’s future wife read the book, Gorky claimed that every student was acquainted with Bellamy’s ideas, and 50,000 copies were sold before 1917. Clement Attlee told Bellamy’s son that the socialist government in England was “a child of the Bellamy idea.” In 1934 John Dewey, Charles Beard, and Edward Weeks all listed Bellamy’s novel second only to *Das Kapital* as the most important book published after 1885.

---

In 1850 in Chicopee Falls, a village on the Connecticut River in western Massachusetts that was becoming a mill town, Edward Bellamy was born to a devout Calvinist woman and the pastor at the town’s Central Baptist Church. At 14, after a religious epiphany, Edward joined his father’s congregation. Denied entrance to West Point, Edward enrolled for special studies at Union College in Schenectady, reading, at his option, literature, political science, history, and political geography. During a student trip to Europe he perceived, he wrote later, “the inferno of poverty beneath our civilization.” Apprenticing in a law office in nearby Springfield, he qualified to be a lawyer, and with his education and his angular handsomeness might have become a public figure, but he quit the law after one case, saying he would not be a “public blood hound.”

His father was said to have his doubts about religious dogmas. For whatever reason he was required to stand down as pastor, and his son withdrew from the church. At 20 Edward recorded in his journal his loss of religion; at 24 in an unpublished writing he set down his new one, “The Religion of Solidarity,” meaning the human kind, based on Christian love and on putting the greater human interest ahead of the individual self, the greater good ahead of one’s individuality.

Writing for the *Springfield Daily Union*, and brooding about pallid young children he saw working in the dark mills, Edward editorialized that “a great wrong exists somewhere among us.” Continuing to read, and reviewing books as well, he became familiar with the classical writers and with serious modern literature, Dickens and Hugo, Turgenev and Thackeray. He must have stored away in the recesses of his mind, too, such concepts as the social fund, the labor theory of value, and economic equality, as he acquainted himself with the ideas of John Stuart Mill (whom he had started reading at 17) and of Comte, Owen, St. Simon, Proudhon, and Marx and Engels. He was successful as a fiction writer, publishing short stories and four novels. In the 1880s waves of industrial workers’ strikes and the agrarian populist movement broke among his fellow citizens, just as the unsettling ideas of the Social Gospel movement were causing excitement, too. In 1886, the year that the Supreme Court without explanation assigned personal constitutional rights to corporations, Edward Bellamy began writing his fifth novel. *Looking Backward* was published two years later, and first tens of thousands, then hundreds of thousands, and finally millions of copies swept through the country and the rest of the world.

---

Living as we do in the closing year of the twentieth century,” Bellamy begins his tale.... But how, writing in the late 1880s, could he say that? The story is this. On the night of May 14, 1887, Julian West, a rich and educated Bostonian, barely 30, who had inherited his money and did no useful work, and who was betrothed to a similarly situated beautiful and graceful lady, was sequestered in his personal hideaway in the basement room, sealed against water seepage, of his Boston mansion. For the second night running he couldn't get to sleep, so he permitted a quack mesmerist, using dangerous methods, to put him into a deep slumber. Julian awoke 113 years, three months, and eleven days later, in the solicitous care of a Dr. Leete, and the doctor's daughter.

Taken to the belvedere at the top of the house they were in, Julian saw the utterly transformed city of Boston. Only then did he believe what had happened to him. Gradually, in conversations across many days and weeks, Dr. Leete and his appealing daughter describe to Julian the transformed American society that his trance has borne him into. While at first incredulous, Julian always approves the new system despite his previous status as a minor plutocrat. In time, romance blooms between Julian and the daughter, who is connected to his life in the 19th century, it turns out, in a special way.

Much of the power of *Looking Backward* comes from the eloquence and ethical passion with which Dr. Leete, his daughter, and, eventually, Julian condemn the now-dead system of industrial corporate capitalism. The basic counter-ethic, though not so identified, is Marx's theory that economic value is created only by work and that capitalists appropriate (that is, misappropriate, steal) part of the workers' earned value, calling it profit. Dr. Leete teaches that in a private economic system workers should get not only the results of their own labor, but also their share of the earnings enabled by and coming from the operations of the accumulated social and technological inheritance of society—the social fund. In Boston in 2000, according to Dr. Leete, everyone realizes that people who, under the lash of their want and need, had to work for capitalists and their corporations were not free. Did not have liberty. That the wages system (as the Knights of Labor were also teaching in the 1880s) was ethically akin to the old master-slave relationship. Dr. Leete and Julian come to agree that the extraordinary wealth of a few and the misery and wretchedness of the masses was the natural outcome of capitalism.

Dr. Leete declares that because of the great aggregations of concentrated capital, the individual worker and farmer were “reduced to insignificance and powerlessness over against the great corporation.” Small businesses were failing, becoming mere parasites on the great corporate monopolies, or existing in tiny niches like “rats and mice, living in holes and corners.” Syndicates, pools, and trusts crushed all competition except for their struggles with combinations equally vast.

Dr. Leete informs Julian that Americans early in the 20th century adopted, in a peaceful revolution, a system eerily premonitory, to us now, of the fascist and communist solutions that dominated, or sought to dominate, much of the 20th century. In analysis prefiguring the structural similarities between corporate capitalism and state socialism, Dr. Leete describes the United States as accepting the economic efficiency of private monopolies, but replacing them with one public monopoly, thereby ending the operation of the business of the country by “a set of irresponsible corporations and syndicates of private persons at their caprice and for their profit” in favor of “a single syndicate representing the people, to be conducted in the common interest for the common profit.”

“The nation, that is to say,” Dr. Leete explains to the throw-forward from the 19th century, “organized as the one great business corporation in which all other corporations were absorbed...the sole employer, the final monopoly.... The people of the United States concluded to assume the conduct of their own business, just as one hundred-odd years before they had assumed the conduct of their own government, organizing now for industrial purposes on precisely the same grounds that they had then organized for political purposes.” Bellamy later called this “industrial self-government as the people's only escape from plutocracy.”

Bellamy advocated “industrial self-government as the people's only escape from plutocracy.”

---

Bit by bit, with much mock argumentation that is simply Bellamy's form of persuasion, the society he imagined for the United States next year comes into view. Its controlling features are the all-producing federal government, which did find equivalents in the USSR and its satellites, and economic equality, a standard and system which has not been practiced or aspired to, as far as I know, in any modern nation-state.

Everybody who works receives exactly the same annual share of the national output in the form of a credit recorded on a card. In Bellamy's new America there is more than enough for all because the quest for profit does not inhibit production, wasteful competition is gone, and everyone works with a patriotic will. Poverty, personal economic insecurity, and wealth are over, provided you work.

No part of the annual share each American receives is transferable. The people spend their credits for services or for goods of uniform quality at pleasant and conveniently situated government stores, which receive their stocks from the government-run manufacturers or providers in a national system of direct distribution. Because of a much higher standard for what is deemed to be an acceptable abode, housing has spread across the countryside, and Boston, for instance, has just a fourth as many people as before.

People still have personal property, but the federal government owns and operates all the means of production; there are no private businesses, no merchants. The government is hierarchical, as an army is, and organizes all work and public activities and provides for all the physical and mental needs of the citizens. Doctors work for the government and they are all qualified. The government spends surplus wealth to enhance the livability of cities, improve parks, or protect the environment.

If there are any exceptions to the public monopoly of business, such as, say, for small business, or family farmers, or worker-owned businesses, or co-ops, or working for one's self and one's own family, Dr. Leete doesn't mention them. Everybody works for the nation. Presumably the press, prophetically characterized as having been dominated in the private system by self-serving plutocratic owners and corporations, is now government-owned, too, but Dr. Leete states there is no censorship, activating, as often he does in a present-day reader, disbelief in the plausibility of his tale.

Schooling through university and professional training until one reaches 30 are free. Work is universal and guaranteed to everyone from 21 to 45 and "there are no idlers." Workers are classified into three grades according to their abilities. After a three-year period of doing whatever work they are assigned, they migrate, "if fit," to jobs they choose as their grades and the needs of the nation permit. "Everybody is a part of a system with a distinct place and function." There is an Inspectorate that can track poor work or "dereliction of any sort" back to the worker or industrial officer guilty of it.

Citizens obey the commands of the industrial officers. Unions are nowhere in sight. Judges forbid overbearingness or rudeness by superiors to workers, but "the efficiency of industry requires the strictest discipline in the army of labor." If a man will not work he is ostracized for seeking to live off the work of others and denied a share of the national output—Dr. Leete says such a creature would be "left with no possible way to provide for his existence. He would have...in a word, committed suicide." After having danced fandangos around the question of whether work is compulsory, Dr. Leete finally says to Julian West, "A man able to duty, and persistently refusing, is sentenced to solitary imprisonment on bread and water till he consents." People cannot vote until after the age of 45. Women hold one among a dozen or so cabinet positions; they work just like men except when absent for maternal reasons; it is not clear whether they vote. The generals of the ten great workers' guilds are chosen by suffrage; Presidents are chosen by the industrial generals, the Supreme Court by the Presidents. The states no longer exist because they would get in the way of the uniform administration of the industrial army and there are so few functions left for government, anyway.

After 45, citizens are free to devote all their time to whatever they want to. They may realize their potentialities—participate in artistic, literary, intellectual, or civic affairs, travel, whatever. Music, theater, and public events are available to everyone on radio and television (the coming of which Bellamy prophesied) in the comfort of home.

Since capital is all publicly held, there is no market. Since there are no wholesalers or retailers, there is no buying and selling and no advertising. There is no money, so there are no bankers, and there can be no poverty or wealth beyond one's equal share. Since the law under the old order was a system of casuistry concerning property and relations of personal and commercial dependency and in the new society only a few simple legal maxims are needed, there are no lawyers. The other nations having followed the new American model of society, there are no wars, no military. There are no taxes—taxation was an excrescence of the capitalistic

system. And there are no jails. The few criminals who persist despite the guarantee of abundant maintenance are restrained in hospitals, although their punishment is doubled if they lie about their offenses. No defense lawyers? “If he is a criminal he needs no defense,” Dr. Leete intones.

---

I think Bellamy could not have attracted his millions of readers had he not practiced a mesmerism of his own to match the defiance of the laws of nature by the quack who put Julian in a trance for a century. To make his vision plausible Bellamy pictured an entirely contented, undissenting population. People have no individual antagonism and give gladly for what they take. None of the dogmatic religions survives, almost everybody is a rationalist and an altruist, almost nobody is a dominator, a liar, a hog, a zealot, or a libertarian, and nobody at all owns a farm or a business. There is no personal ostentation. There is no corruption or dishonesty, no stealing or lying, no blackmarket business or hoarding of produce. Everyone is glad to work for the nation until 45 at an assigned job for just what everybody else gets without having a vote and without envy or resentment. Honor, patriotism, “the inspiration of duty,” and “passion for humanity” have taken the place of selfishness and greed. Everything is so set and settled there is almost no legislation.

This is a fairy tale, but Bellamy sold it, not without some measure of plausibility, with the potion of the imaginable transformative power of a truly fair society. Julian remarks, “Human nature must have changed very much,” but Dr. Leete replies: “Not at all, but the conditions of human life have changed, and with them the motives of human action.” Human nature is not a set of givens, but a set of possibilities. Society, earlier founded on people’s worst propensities, was now founded on their best ones, and voila!—“it was for the first time possible to see what unperverted human nature really was like.”

Society, earlier founded on people’s worst propensities, was now founded on their best ones.

As it was easy for Bellamy to bedazzle his readers by visualizing, 113 years ago, an ideal America that nobody could affirm would not occur, it is easy for us now to take apart his optimism about the perfectibility of human nature in the light of all we have learned about human nature since his time. In fairness to him, then, we may wish to remember that he wrote before the British invented concentration camps in Africa, before the Turks massacred the Armenians, before Verdun, before Lenin, Hitler, Stalin, Kristallnacht, the Lubyanka, Wansee, Katyn Forest, and Auschwitz, before Dresden, Hamburg, Hiroshima, and Nagasaki, before the hydrogen bomb, My Lai, and Cambodia, before Rwanda, Burundi, and Kosovo.

If, as some authorities believe, Bellamy’s motivations were primarily religious, he might have been making the unconscious mistake of visualizing the better society as a place where everybody finally behaves the way the preacher thought they should. People are good in the future society because there is no sin in heaven. You dream up the good society, not for people as they are, but for people as they should be. You are inventing, not a new society, but a new humanity. Some such mistake was a source of great foolishness in *Looking Backward*. Bellamy was trying to visualize an actual better society, not another Utopia, but by peopling the place with paragons he made it noplac in spite of himself.

His motive in writing the book, he said later, was “entirely practical.” The year it came out he told William Dean Howells that no reform group could or should ever succeed in the United States that was not “wholly and enthusiastically American and patriotic in spirit and suggestions.” His long-surviving wife let slip to Professor Joseph Schiffman in the early 1950s that her husband served up his teachings in a “sugar-coated pill.” He was a Christian democratic socialist, and surely he was sugar coating the pill against imputations of communism when he called his socialism Nationalism. In *Looking Backward* he accused “the reds” of serving as hired provocateurs for the plutocrats. When communists joined some of the 150 or so Bellamy clubs that formed in the U.S. to promote his ideas he sought to have them expelled.

Returning the compliment, Marxists in Europe and Russia, while gratefully using his book to convert the masses, dismissed much of its substance, particularly his opposition to class war and violence and his visualization of the future society, as Utopian.

---

Bellamy's answer to his myriad critics, an extension of *Looking Backward* entitled *Equality*, published in 1897, was a somewhat tiring, almost twice as long continuation of the conversations and adventures of the first book.

Here, Bellamy introduces the idea that "democracy logically [means] the substitution of popular government for the rule of the rich in regulating the production and distribution of wealth." He advances through Dr. Leete the doctrine that property is a title, not to things, but to persons who are bound to things by bodily necessities. Dr. Leete declares that the three horsemen of capitalism—profits, rent, and interest—crippled people's buying power, and this was "the open secret of the poverty of the world." The doctor now defines the social fund as "the collective ownership of the economic machinery of the social system, and the absolute claim of society to the product."

It emerges that during each person's 20-year service in the army of labor, the work is only half of every day for half of every year. The policy-setting system in Bellamy's new country has changed toward direct governance by the limited electorate. Public officials are chosen for terms of convenience and can be thrown out by votes of their constituents. A constituency can change the vote of its representative on any matter, and to take effect, a law passed on any serious matter always has to pass a voters' referendum, too. The voters vote perhaps 100 times a year by telephone. "The people...actually govern. We have a democracy in fact."

Granting the prophet his corrections, his all-producing federal government is no longer a prefiguration of the totalitarian systems of the Nazis and the Bolsheviks. But there is no businessperson or farmer but the government, every person must be a worker, and Bellamy's industrial army, even working just half a day for half the year, is still slave labor.

Through Bellamy's work, though, we are induced to see and think about the fact that the distribution system for goods and services is or should be an ethical nexus, which immediately smacks us into the amorality of the distribution system that we have, prices and the market, and the vast immorality of its consequences. Harnessing his distribution system to literal economic equality, Bellamy was consciously appealing to the radical American belief in personal and political equality. In a message he sent to German admirers several years after *Looking Backward* appeared he put equality first, socialism second, saying that he advocated "the idea of economic equality, founded on a nationalized system of industry." Couching the argument as being "between the idea of democracy and the economic absolutism of private capital," he predicted that intensely democratic Americans would go for "nationalized industries with the guarantee of inalienable economic equality."

Among many lessons learned during this century closing, one is that economic systems that disregard personal incentives don't work well. In the Soviet system, where no citizen had a real vote and there was not even a plausible sham of self-government, state ownership and control of the means of production and all-but-compulsory labor effectively institutionalized workers' laggard performance and their routinized theft of state property.

But the wisdom and utility of personal incentives hardly mandates an economic system that altogether disregards fairness in rewards for work. Today we have a ratio between the incomes of big-time CEOs and their firms' average workers of 419 to 1. The average salary of professional football players is \$1 million a year. Bellamy's vision of economic equality drives us to reflect upon the irrationality, not to say the ethical insanity, of our anarchic compensation patterns, just one of the sets of consequences of our prices-and-markets distribution system.

Like Marx, whom he could have been tracking without attribution on such matters, Bellamy did not foresee the resiliency of capitalism, the emergence of stabilizing, potent middle classes, and the overwhelming comparative material prosperity of capitalistic democracies compared to the rest of the world. But if Bellamy himself had slept 113 years and was among us now he would not be letting us forget that transnational corporations are eviscerating and in effect superceding the nation-states, that Bill Gates is worth \$73 billion all by himself, and that, as the United Nations informs us, two billion people in the world have no schools and no toilets and one out of every three people on earth has no access whatsoever to medical care.

Change-minded persons of Bellamy's sort these days tend to agree that we need to decentralize power and more fairly distribute wealth and power. There is an almost reflexive focus on community-based economies, self-sustaining communities, the small-is-beautiful mantra. As far as these reflections go they are well taken, but they do not go far enough. The question most assiduously avoided by societal reorganizers these days is what we are going to do about the enormous abundance-producing power of massed central technologies? Decentralize them if possible, of course (for example, decentralize energy by having solar power sources in neighborhoods). But turn against that abundance, let these systems rust, if they cannot be decentralized? Hardly.

In my opinion, the unsolved, unaddressed problem that has the most to do with the welfare of the miserable billions of the world's underclasses is how can we democratically control the operation and the distributions from massed central technology. If we cannot trust conventional democratic states and officials or transnational corporations with all the power inherent in wielding control over these central technologies, then it follows that we need to invent new kinds of governing systems that achieve for us what delegated or privatized authority has failed to achieve. Otherwise, we are saying to the world's poorest and most helpless people, what you need is community, autonomy, and sustainable local economies. That is not what they need to hear—just now, anyway. What they need now is the means to survive. If we are to help in time those who are in such desperate need around the world our first problem is devising a new way to govern the already-available central sources of abundance and the distribution of some of that abundance to those who must have it or perish.

Bellamy risked himself profoundly, clambering out on a limb 113 years long just to get us to think about the reorganization of society.

---

Bellamy risked himself profoundly, clambering out on a limb 113 years long just to get us to think about the reorganization of society. "He often seemed disturbed, concerned with a heavy problem. And he simply wouldn't eat," his wife told Professor Schiffman in 1950. "I am sure he was haunted by thoughts of other people's problems, especially the poor. And that's something that fills me with wonder. Why did he feel such things so deeply when he himself had been comfortably raised and had never wanted?"

The Bellamys had few friends, and Edward discouraged visitors, sometimes telling his wife to turn off the light in the hall for fear people would see it and call on them. Mrs. Bellamy told Professor Schiffman: "He seemed to want all his time for reading, thinking, or just sitting quietly at home with the family....Mostly he wanted to be alone, reading, or just sitting lost in thought. He kept most of his ideas to himself. Even I was surprised at discovering what *Looking Backward* contained."

According to Bellamy's son Paul, his father read a lot of Scripture in his last few years, always emphasizing to Paul and his little sister "the social and humanistic side of the teachings of Jesus," discouraging them from going to church because those teachings were not emphasized there. His father was "quite sure," Paul said, "that the all-important thing was how we treated our fellow men."

Edward Bellamy died at 48, of tuberculosis, 101 years ago, in 1898. He is buried in Chicopee.

*Ronnie Dugger, biographer of Presidents Lyndon Johnson and Ronald Reagan and long-time publisher of The Texas Observer, is now co-chair of the Alliance for Democracy, a national populist, anti-big-corporate organization headquartered in Waltham, with about 55 chapters in the country.*