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EDWARD BELLAMY, SOCIAL DREAMER

CHARLES A. MADISON

EXPLAINING the genesis of his extraordinary novel in the first issue of *The Nationalist* (May, 1889), Edward Bellamy remarked:

In undertaking to write *Looking Backward* I had, at the outset, no idea of attempting a serious contribution to the movement of social reform. The idea was of a mere literary fantasy, a fairy tale of social felicity. There was no thought of contriving a house which practical men might live in, but merely of hanging in mid-air, far out of the reach of the sordid and material world of the present, a cloud palace for an ideal humanity.

Bellamy's critics took him at his word. They assumed that he had merely stumbled on his plan of economic equality in his effort to write a romance of social fantasy. Even so friendly an admirer as William Dean Howells, who placed Bellamy's fiction alongside that of Hawthorne, was of the opinion that *Looking Backward* was pretty much of an accident. Following the author's modest self-appraisal, he paraphrased him as follows: ". . . he had come to think of our hopeless conditions suddenly, one day, in looking at his own children, and reflecting that he could not place them beyond the chance of want by any industry or forecast or providence; and that the status meant the same impossibility for others which it meant for him."¹

Yet the facts of Bellamy's life argue against this assumption. He had his roots deep in the melioristic environment of New England, having been born in 1850 in Chicopee Falls, Massachusetts, where his father served for many years as the minister of the Baptist Church. The moral atmosphere of his home

¹ *Atlantic Monthly*, LXXXII (August, 1898), 256.

helped to develop in him the ethical fervor characteristic of the idealistic puritan. He grew up eager to promote justice and mitigate poverty and suffering. It was this serious view of life that made him leave Union College at the end of his freshman year and go instead to a famous German university. The destitution and drabness of the continental slums only accentuated his dissatisfaction with the existing social system. "It was in the great cities of Europe," he wrote in his Journal,² "that my eyes were first fully opened to the extent and consequences of man's inhumanity to man." This humanitarian protest no doubt predisposed him to the socialism of Karl Marx, which was then erupting among the urban workers; it is equally probable that he followed the excited debates at the annual conference of the First International during his sojourn in Germany.

On his return home in 1870 he decided to study law, and a year later he was admitted to the bar. The more he learned about the ways of lawyers, however, the less he wished to be one of them. What he thought of them may be gathered from the hyperbole uttered by one of his characters in *The Duke of Stockbridge*, "I calc'late ye could cut five Tories aout o' one lawyer an' make a dozen skunks aout o' what wuz left over."³ As a man of principle he could not practice a profession he disdained.

Now fully "aroused to the existence and urgency of the social problem," the earnest youth of twenty-one found himself face to face with the brash rapaciousness of the Robber Barons of his day. The prevailing iniquitous wage system seemed to him no better than slavery. Had he had the opportunity, he undoubtedly would have taken an active part in reforming a society which permitted the existence of both grasping millionaires and penniless tramps. But there was then no organized reform movement; nor was he fanatic

² From unpublished papers of Edward Bellamy, quoted by Allan Seager, *They Worked for a Better World* (New York, 1939).

³ *The Duke of Stockbridge* (New York, 1900), 28.

enough to initiate a crusade. It was more in keeping with his character to express his dissenting views in a lecture with the telling title "The Barbarism of Society." One of the points he stressed was that "the great reforms of the world have hitherto been political rather than social. In their progress classes privileged by title have been swept away, but classes privileged by wealth remain."⁴ His logical conclusion was that wealth is at the root of all social injustice: "I ask only that none labor beyond measure that others may be idle, that there be no more masters and no more slaves among men. Is that too much? Not so, for nothing that is unjust can be eternal and nothing that is just can be impossible."⁵ Here in brief is the full kernel of the idea of equality which he later developed so persuasively in *Looking Backward*.

Unable to find a ready outlet for his ethical zeal, determined to begin earning his own living, already timidly nursing the ambition to become a writer, young Bellamy decided to obtain work on a newspaper. His first job was with the New York *Evening Post*. After about a year he left it to become an editorial writer and book reviewer on the Springfield, Massachusetts, *Union*. His successful career as a journalist ended suddenly some five years later, when he suffered a physical breakdown. As soon as he was able, he took a leisurely trip to Hawaii *via* Panama, and felt much improved on his return across the continent late in 1877. Loath to jeopardize his frail health, he thought it best not to return to a newspaper desk but to try to write salable fiction. His first novel, *Six to One: A Nantucket Idyl*, was completed within a year and received with considerable favor. *Dr. Heidendorff's Process* and *Miss Ludington's Sister* were published in 1880 and 1884 respectively, and the leading periodicals accepted his short stories. He combined a fertile inventiveness with a gentle realism to create a whimsy world of his own, and when his setting was not in the realm of fancy it was located

⁴ *Edward Bellamy Speaks Again* (Chicago, 1935), 218.

⁵ *Edward Bellamy Speaks Again*, 220–221.

in the small-town environment which he knew well. His characters were drawn with the clarity and acuteness of sympathetic understanding. Reviewers in this country and in England appreciated his imaginative style of writing, and more than one spoke of him as a lineal descendant of Hawthorne. In the meantime he had married and became the father of two children. It was after the birth of his second child, in 1886, that his thoughts turned to a romance in which injustice and insecurity were known only as a part of the abolished capitalistic system.

Bellamy had not, of course, shuttered his vision of a better world during the previous fifteen years. Time had, indeed, merely accentuated his repugnance to the poverty and greed which, to his thinking, blighted the progress of our great economic development. Only, like many other different men of good will, he lacked the zeal to initiate a crusade for social reform. Fiction became his chief outlet, and a number of his characters were endowed with intrinsic goodness and a predilection for the right. Very early in his career as a novelist, moreover, he gave free vent to his social indignation in *The Duke of Stockbridge: A Romance of Shays' Rebellion*, one of the first American novels to treat the problem of the class struggle with the directness and passion of the ardent reformer. Since he depended on his writing for a livelihood, however, he was loath to see it published at that time. After it had appeared as a serial in the obscure *Berkshire Courier* in 1879, the novel remained in his drawer until it was issued in book form in 1900, two years after the author's death.

The Duke of Stockbridge has its setting in the western part of Massachusetts. In 1786 the acute economic depression which followed the Revolutionary War drove the impoverished populace to desperation. Hard money was practically unobtainable, so that commerce was almost at a standstill. High taxes and harsh creditors were subjecting the farmers to beggary and incarceration by the cruel process of foreclosure. Throughout Massachusetts "men talked of nothing

else but the hard times, the limited markets and low prices for farm produce, the extortions and multiplying numbers of lawyers and sheriffs, the oppression of creditors, the enormous grinding taxes, the last sheriff's sale." The more vocal of the villagers insisted that "the only work that pays nowadays is picking the bones of the people."⁶ Since many of the sufferers were yeomen who had fought in the war to establish their inalienable human rights, they could not but feel themselves exploited by a greedy gentry. In their wrath they defied the authorities and stopped the courts from victimizing them; and although they were cowed into submission before very long, they forced a frightened government to institute appropriate reforms.

Bellamy chose this historic incident because it enabled him to stress the deep social gulf between the hard-fisted squires and the destitute farmers. In his research and reflection preparatory to writing the novel he was distressed to discover that the inequality between the two classes showed no signs of abatement during the century in which the wealth of the country had multiplied manifold. His sympathy with the poor is seen in the pithy expression which his yeomen give to their rightful grievances. One of them, referring to the tenfold rise in taxes at a time when money is unobtainable, remarks sarcastically, "It seems darn curis, bein' as we fit ag'in the redcoats jest to git rid o' taxes." The same villager says on another occasion, "Wal, we licked the redcoats, and we got lib'ty, I s'pose; lib'ty to starve,—that is, if we don't happen to git sent to jail fust."⁷ At still another time he speaks his mind, Yankee-fashion, to one of the powerful squires: "They said, ye'd got no more compassion fer the poor than a flint stun . . . an' would take a feller's last drop o' blood sooner'n lose a penny debt. They said, them fellers did, that

⁶ *The Duke of Stockbridge*, 14 and 18.

⁷ *The Duke of Stockbridge*, 23 and 26.

yer hands, white as they look, wuz red with the blood o' them that ye'd sent to die in jail." ⁸

The gentry are equally outspoken in their insistence on their God-given right to govern the country for their own good. Many of them think of their indigent townsmen as a team of horses which they can use at will. At the first sign of rebelliousness they crack the whip. One of them expostulates: "This presumption of the people to talk concerning matters of government is an evil that has greatly increased since the war, and calls for sharp castigation. These numskulls must be taught their places or 't will shortly be no country for gentlemen to live in." Another squire is equally frank: "We must look to it, gentlemen, or we shall find that we have ridded ourselves of a king only to fall into the hands of a democracy, which I take it would be a bad exchange."⁹ When we consider that the sentiments of these men, some of them about to draft our federal Constitution, are quoted from their own writings, we can appreciate Bellamy's warm compassion for their debt-ridden victims.

The novel does not hold up to the end. The narrative begins well, the thesis is stated with pointed clarity, and the characters are limned sharply against a realistic background. But the development of events gradually becomes lost in the thickening layer of conventional romance, and the progress of the rebellion gives way to the mawkish love story in the latter half of the book. To the very end, however, there is no mistaking the author's zeal to abolish the causes of human distress.

Although Bellamy's social conscience appeared to have become quiescent after its crusading spree in *The Duke of Stockbridge*, he was too much the humanitarian not to be deeply troubled by the rapacious activities of an aggressive industrialism. The existence of a group of multi-millionaires

⁸ *The Duke of Stockbridge*, 196.

⁹ *The Duke of Stockbridge*, 45 and 52.

who manipulated the economic life of the nation for their private advantage was to him the negation of democracy; nor was he underestimating the angry mutterings of millions of workers who were groping blindly yet with increasing insistence for the means of a better livelihood. He had learned that "wealth is power in its most concentrated, most efficient and most universally applicable form"¹⁰—and he abominated the greed which it engendered. Exploited labor, on the other hand, he envisaged as a dormant giant capable of great eruptive strength—and he dreaded the wanton destructiveness of social revolution. As he observed the two antagonistic forces girding for battle—and the bloody strikes of the period seemed a mere prelude—he became convinced that unless a way was found to eliminate the evils of capitalistic exploitation, the nation was certain to be involved in another civil war that would shake it to the roots.

Looking Backward, completed in 1887, presented Bellamy's way out. The book treats with prophetic effectiveness the new social order based upon the system of cooperative equality. Yet it is not merely another story of elusive utopia. Indeed, the great appeal of the novel is due to the fact that although it was essential to its basic theme to advance the time to the year 2000 and to describe almost unimaginable scientific and social advancements such as the radio, the airplane, television, paper clothing, and complete economic equality, Bellamy emulated Defoe in his deliberate effort to keep within the bounds of credibility. "*Looking Backward*," he tells us in a later postscript, "although in form a fanciful romance, is intended, in all seriousness, as a forecast, in accordance with the principles of evolution, of the next stage in industrial and social development of humanity, especially in this country; and no part of it is believed by the author to be better supported by the indications of probability than the implied prediction that the dawn of the new era is already near at hand,

¹⁰ *Edward Bellamy Speaks Again*, 53.

and that the full day will swiftly follow.”¹¹ His one excursion in legerdemain—Julian West remaining in a perfect state of suspended animation for 113 years—is so obviously a permissible *tour de force* bridging the gap between the two eras that we tend to overlook it in our eagerness to learn about the future of our society.

Bellamy evolved the social system of the year 2000 naturally and logically out of the destined desuetude of the contemporary order. He begins with the premise that monopolistic capitalism, which in his day was spreading its financial tentacles in every direction and rapidly gaining control of the nation's entire economy, was strangling the mass markets on which its existence depended and thereby making possible the final merger of all trusts into one Big Trust. The unification of all the means of production and distribution under the aegis of the government must, of course, be brought about gradually and by the will of the people. This economic transformation, once begun, will be consummated more rapidly than at first seemed possible. For instance, if the majority of the voters were persuaded of the advantages of public ownership, what was to stop them from directing the government to take over and operate the large utilities for the benefit of the people? Why could not the railroads, practically bankrupted by watered-stock manipulations, be taken over and run on the same basis as the postal service? And if once these utilities were managed for the benefit of the entire nation—including the army of employees—rather than for the profit of a few millionaires, would not the collapse of capitalistic enterprise become inevitable? Once the industrial system was nationalized—in control of a single owner, the people, instead of irresponsible monopolistic trusts,—the subsequent program of equalization was certain to eliminate the current social ills and transform the country into a veritable earthly paradise.

The great appeal of Bellamy's plan lay in its cogent presen-

¹¹ *Looking Backward, 2000–1887* (Boston, 1888), 334.

tation as an accomplished fact. The reader is confronted not with an imaginary social scheme which is obviously impracticable but with a perfected way of life based on the existing industrial system. Dr. Leete, who is Julian West's mentor in the new society, informs him that the change from monopolistic capitalism to cooperative equality occurred early in the twentieth century. At that time "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. . . . There was absolutely no violence. The change had been long foreseen. Public opinion had become fully ripe for it, and the whole mass of the people was behind it. There was no more possibility of opposing it by force than by argument."¹²

Once the country's economy became nationalized and the profit motive was eliminated, the prime function of the government became the protection of the people from "cold, hunger and nakedness" rather than from foreign aggression. To this end it divided the total national income equally among all citizens. Unemployment vanished as if by magic. "When the nation became the sole employer, all the citizens, by virtue of their citizenship, became employees, to be distributed to the needs of industry." Indeed, everyone of a certain age had to work—work or starve. Service to the state was made a necessary concomitant to the equality of income. "To speak of service being compulsory," Dr. Leete explained, "would be a weak way to state its absolute inevitableness. Our entire social order is so wholly based upon and deduced from it that if it were conceivable that a man could escape it, he would be left with no possible way to provide for his existence. He would have excluded himself from the world,

¹² *Looking Backward*, 56–57.

cut himself off from his kind, in a word, committed suicide.”¹³

In its efforts to provide work for everyone and thus to bring about the greatest possible productiveness, the government found it convenient to adapt the plan of military service to its civil needs. The reasoning was that even as every able-bodied young man owed his country a term of service in the army for the protection of all from an outside enemy, so every citizen of the cooperative state is required to work for a definite period to insure a common abundance of the necessities of life. Experimentation led to the decision that twenty-four years of work would suffice for the lifetime well-being of all. Since the period of youth is required for education and that of late maturity “sacred to ease and agreeable relaxation,” the interim of service begins on one’s twenty-first birthday and ends on the forty-fifth. On every October 15 those who have served twenty-four years are mustered out, to be called back only in emergencies, and all youths of twenty-one are enlisted for their term of service.

In the new society the hit-or-miss way of doing things under capitalism was replaced by a system based upon scientific skills and certainties. The greatest possible caution is exercised in guiding each individual in the development of his capacities and aptitudes. “The principle on which our industrial army is organized,” Dr. Leete pointed out, “is that a man’s natural endowments, mental and physical, determine what he can work at most profitably to the nation and most satisfactorily to himself.”¹⁴ Children are carefully trained by both parents and teachers, and all are thoroughly familiarized with all kinds of trades and occupations. As a consequence young men and women know what they prefer to do long before they are mustered into service and are only too eager to begin working. To avoid overcrowding in some occupations and a shortage of applicants in others, the administration seeks “constantly to equalize the attractions of the trades,

¹³ *Looking Backward*, 62 and 63.

¹⁴ *Looking Backward*, 65.

so far as the conditions of labor in them are concerned, so that all trades shall be equally attractive to persons having natural tastes for them. This is done by making the hours of labor in different trades differ according to their arduousness.”¹⁵ Since this apportionment of work-time will not necessarily eliminate the greater appeal of certain occupations, everyone is required to develop a second or even a third choice, so that if one’s first preference is unavailable, one “can still find reasonably congenial employment. This principle of secondary choices as to occupation is quite important in our system.”¹⁶

First, however, one has to undergo a period of hardening and leveling. To make sure that work of a necessary but unpleasant nature is performed as needed, everyone is required to devote the first three years of service to common labor. With the advance of science and without the check of the profit motive it has become possible to reduce the distastefulness of much of this work to a minimum; even sewers have lost their offensive odors, and ditch-digging has become a relatively simple mechanical task. At the completion of this period of service a young man is free “to choose, in accordance with his natural tastes, whether he will fit himself for an art or profession, or be a farmer or mechanic.” If he wishes to prepare himself for a profession, and if his previous record favors such preparation, he enrolls in the school offering the required course. Should he prove himself unable to keep up with his class, he is required to leave the school and obtain employment of a less taxing nature. He is permitted, however, to apply for special training up to the age of thirty.

Under capitalism, with business being conducted by “irresponsible individuals, wholly without mutual understanding or concert,” there were various kinds of egregious waste: mistaken undertakings, cut-throat competition, periodical gluts and crises, strikes and lockouts, any one sufficing to keep a

¹⁵ *Looking Backward*, 67.

¹⁶ *Looking Backward*, 69.

nation economically inefficient. In the cooperative society, with all industry under unified control and with the proficiency of every worker developed to the utmost, production exceeded all expectations. It soon became possible for the administration to provide each citizen, in return for his twenty-four years of labor, with a lifelong annual income of about \$4000 in addition to many free services. As a consequence "no man any more has any care for the morrow, either for himself or his children, for the nation guarantees the nurture, education and comfortable maintenance of every citizen from the cradle to the grave."¹⁷

Bellamy defended this guarantee of complete equality of income on two grounds: our common humanity and industrial efficiency. In the first place, since civilization is our common inheritance, the fruits thereof should be shared by all alike. From the days of our savage ancestors, when no man acquired more than his essential needs, to our own time with its marked discrepancy of income, all that a man earns above his bare living he owes to the accumulated skills and inventions of the past. By himself even the most successful capitalist would soon relapse into savagery.

Every man, however solitary may seem his occupation, is a member of a vast industrial partnership, as large as the nation, as large as humanity. The necessity of mutual dependence should imply the duty and guarantee of mutual support. . . . The right of a man to maintenance at the nation's table depends on the fact that he is a man, and not on the amount of health and strength he may have, so long as he does his best.¹⁸

By making the measure of income "one's humanity and not one's ability," Bellamy maintained logically that all human beings—the sick and the inferior as much as the well and the able—are entitled to an equal share of the nation's income. This ethical principle he fortified by the appeal of general

¹⁷ *Looking Backward*, 90.

¹⁸ *Looking Backward*, 132–133.

economic advantage. Under capitalism, competition and greed tended to dissipate efficient production. Economic equality, on the contrary, stimulates industrial combination and increases production. Thus, "even if the principle of share and share alike for all men were not the only humane and rational basis for a society, we should still enforce it as economically expedient, seeing that until the disintegrating influence of self-seeking is suppressed no true concert of industry is possible."¹⁹

One of the first victims of the new order was money. Under capitalism it was an essential commodity—the key to all doors in the hands of the wealthy and the whip over the poor. With economic equality the use of money became superfluous. Buying and selling are considered anti-social transgressions, encouraging "self-seeking at the expense of others." Nor is there any need for trading. Direct distribution from national storehouses, with branches in every inhabited locality, has completely replaced the private stores and shops. In these public depositories an individual orders what he needs by means of a credit card. "A credit corresponding to his share of the annual product of the nation is given to every citizen on the public books at the beginning of each year, and a credit card issued him with which he procures at the public storehouses, found in every community, whatever he desires whenever he desires it."²⁰ It may not be amiss at this point to mention that our wartime experience with rationing cards is a reminder of the feasibility of the plan.

Bellamy stressed the encouragement of individual differences in his equalitarian society. He pointed out that the cultivation of personal taste is one of the features of the new order, since everyone can use his ample credit card in any way he wishes. Indeed, the aim of education is to develop a child's special capacities to their highest degree, not only for his own sake but also for the pleasure of those with whom he

¹⁹ *Looking Backward*, 244.

²⁰ *Looking Backward*, 87.

comes in contact. Women are likewise given the same opportunities as men in order that they may exercise their particular talents to the advantage of the entire nation. These and other aspects of the perfected social system are described with such matter-of-fact plausibility that one is favorably prepared for Dr. Leete's assertion that "in the time of one generation men laid aside the social traditions and practices of barbarians, and assumed a social order worthy of rational and human beings. Ceasing to be predatory in their habits, they became co-workers, and found in fraternity, at once, the science of health and happiness."²¹

Looking Backward was published in January, 1888, and was immediately recognized as a work of extraordinary significance. Many Americans were at the time painfully perturbed by the combination of capitalistic aggrandizement and industrial conflict. They were vaguely aware of the new economic speculation abroad, but preferred an American expression of it. The new utopia, describing a system of reform at once appealing and seemingly practicable, served as a clarifying catalysis. Bellamy knew this. "A work of propaganda like *Looking Backward*," he explained, "produces an effect precisely in proportion as it is a bare anticipation in expression of what everybody was thinking and about to say."²² A few conservative critics scorned the book as a fantastic concoction; several learned economists proved it fallacious and impertinent; but many thousands of enthusiastic readers, thoroughly dissatisfied with capitalistic inequality, were ready to use the novel as a blueprint for the new society. Ten thousand copies were sold in 1888, 200,000 the year after; and about a million copies in all were in active circulation during the early 1890's. Frank B. Tracy, writing in *The Forum* of May, 1893, stated, "Copies of *Looking Backward* are in every community. Probably every village has at least one man who is a thorough Nationalist, while hundreds of

²¹ *Looking Backward*, 285.

²² *Edward Bellamy Speaks Again*, 137.

his neighbors are in sympathy with its principles." Measured by its phenomenal popularity as well as by its propagandistic effectiveness, the volume is undoubtedly one of the most influential books ever published in this country. It ranks with *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Progress and Poverty*.

Almost at once *Looking Backward* became a focal point for the Nationalist groups which sprang up everywhere with the sole aim of propagating the new social system.²³ The first Nationalist club was organized in Boston shortly after the book first appeared. Within two years, more than 150 similar clubs were in active existence, most of them west of the Mississippi, without any aid or stimulation from any central source. These groups published periodicals, conducted discussion forums, participated in political campaigns, and appeared a genuine threat to the capitalistic order. They called themselves Nationalists because their aim was "to nationalize the functions of production and distribution," to bring "the entire business system of the country under the same popular government which now extends only to a few comparatively trifling functions called political."²⁴ In the Presidential campaign of 1892 they united with the Populists and exerted a considerable influence among the Western farmers and organized labor.

The great popularity of *Looking Backward* forced upon Bellamy the role of a leader and reformer. Shy man that he was, and afflicted with "weak lungs," he found himself drawn into the public arena. As the acclaimed head of a vigorous social crusade he had to lecture before Nationalist audiences, reply to belligerent critics, and write expository articles for popular periodicals. During 1891-1893 he also edited *The New Nation* and gave to it much of his time and thought. In addition, since he was not a professional economist and

²³ See G. H. Franklin, "Edward Bellamy and the Nationalist Movement," *New England Quarterly*, XI (December, 1938), 739-772.

²⁴ *Edward Bellamy Speaks Again*, 148.

yet had to cope with academic adversaries, he found it necessary to make a thorough study of economic theory.

On the platform and in his writings he excoriated the cankerous evils of capitalism and urged the need of economic reform. On the masthead of *The New Nation* he repeated weekly the following credo:

The exercise of irresponsible power, by whatever means, is tyranny, and should not be tolerated. The power which men irresponsibly exercise for their private ends, over individuals and communities, through superior wealth, is essentially tyrannous, and as inconsistent with democratic principle and as offensive to self-respecting men as any form of political tyranny that was ever endured. As political equality is the remedy for political tyranny, so is economic equality the only way of putting an end to the economic tyranny exercised by the few over the many through the superiority of wealth. The industrial system of a nation, like its political system, should be a government of the people, by the people, for the people. Until economic equality shall give a basis to political equality, the latter is but a sham.

One of his first demands in behalf of Nationalism was the public ownership of the railroads, the telephone and telegraph systems, the express companies, the coal mines, and the essential municipal utilities. He insisted that "the brute principle of competition" must be replaced by "the nobler principle of association"; that "the nationalization of industry presents the logical, conclusive, and complete form of evolution from competition toward combination which is now in progress."²⁵ It was his belief that, if no unforeseen reaction set in, all business in the United States would become the property of the state early in the twentieth century and that responsible public agents would operate it for the benefit of all the people.

Again and again he took pains to point out that he was no Marxian and that he abominated the ideas of either violent

²⁵ *Edward Bellamy Speaks Again*, 44.

revolution or the dictatorship of one group over all others. Nationalism was to him synonymous with “economic democracy”—a principle implicit in the Declaration of Independence and rooted deep in the heart of every true American. “We seek the final answer to the social question not in revolution, but in evolution; not in destruction, but in fulfilment,—the fulfilment of the hitherto stunted development of the nation according to its logical intent.”²⁶ He was obviously no Marxian, even when he expounded socialistic doctrines. His quest for economic equality was in truth an attempt to bridle a colossal industrialism with the reins of Jeffersonian democracy.

Bellamy lacked the indomitable zeal of the fanatic leader. Although he had implicit faith in the principles he advocated and would gladly have given his life to abolish the existing inequalities, he was wanting in the driving energy and political shrewdness to force his will upon the nation. As it was, he failed to harness the tremendous popular enthusiasm generated by *Looking Backward* for the purpose of voting Nationalism into power. His “principle of human brotherhood,” coming at a moment of national economic crisis, appealed greatly to the oppressed farmers and exploited urban workers. They flocked to his standard eager for the benefits of his panacea—only to lose heart when they found nothing tangible to get their teeth into, nothing to gird them for conflict. The passing of the panic of 1893 and the new spurt of industrial expansion swept the Nationalist movement into oblivion.

By nature a dreamer rather than a doer yet unable to accept defeat, Bellamy thought he could bolster Nationalist sentiment by strengthening and enhancing the edifice he had erected in *Looking Backward*. To this end he wrote *Equality*, a more thorough exposition of the economic and ethical principles which formed the pillars of the new society. This second book, while lacking the spontaneous imaginative appeal and

²⁶ *Edward Bellamy Speaks Again*, 48.

emotional warmth of the earlier volume, is replete with cogent accounts of every aspect of economic equality. A good part of it is also concerned with an incisive criticism of capitalism. It was his strong belief that a more comprehensive report of his proposed social order could not but persuade all persons of normal intelligence and good will.

Equality discusses the evils of capitalism with satiric effectiveness. Julian West is treated to a classroom analysis of the economic system of the nineteenth century which demonstrates its irrational basis. One of the best chapters in the book is the Parable of the Water Tank, which epitomized the senseless economy in which a few aggressive men exploit the necessities of life for their private gain without regard to the suffering of the mass of mankind. Equally effective in the re-examination of the inefficiency of capitalism, in which the profit motive tends to curb the very mass markets on which industrialism depends. Nor does Bellamy overlook the chicanery of businessmen. "The desperate rivalry of the capitalists for a share in the scanty market which their own profit taking had beggared drove them to the practice of deception and brutality and compelled a hard-heartedness such as we are bound to believe human beings would not under a less pressure have been guilty of."²⁷

Much more than in the earlier book, capitalism is indicted as undemocratic. Dr. Leete quotes statistics on the grave inequality of wealth towards the end of the nineteenth century and argues that the possession of political freedom without economic equality is like the occupation of the outworks without taking the citadel. "The Revolution came when the people saw that they must either take the citadel or evacuate the outworks. They must either complete the work of establishing popular government which had been barely begun by their fathers, or abandon all that their fathers had accomplished."²⁸ This combination of political democracy with

²⁷ *Equality* (New York, 1897), 174.

²⁸ *Equality*, 23.

economic equality is stated again and again as the basic principle of Nationalism. "The primal principle of democracy is the worth and dignity of the individual. That dignity, consisting in the quality of human nature, is essentially the same in all individuals, and therefore equality is the vital principle of democracy." Since capitalism is obviously anti-democratic, it is necessary to overthrow it by a peaceful revolution which will destroy "the last vestige of the system by which men usurped power over the lives and liberties of their fellows through economic means."²⁹

Equality described the transition period in full detail. Once the efficiency of public ownership was demonstrated to the satisfaction of the majority, the people themselves insisted that the government take over all possible types of industries and services. This initial step both decreased unemployment and enhanced the standard of living. When scrip was given to government employees in lieu of cash and made the only means of purchasing goods at the public stores, it soon "became a currency which commanded three, four, and five hundred per cent premium over money which could only buy the high-priced and adulterated goods for sale in the remaining stores of the capitalists."³⁰ Before long the value of money disappeared entirely and the rich found it advisable to give up their useless wealth to the government and become members of the new economic order. At this point the state was able to "assume the responsibility of providing for all the people." Wages ceased to be paid, and every citizen began to receive an equal share of the total annual income. Poverty and ostentatious wealth disappeared simultaneously as if by magic.

Those who feared that the lack of a money incentive would destroy initiative and slacken production were soon convinced of their error. The people were so enthusiastic over their new sense of security and their improved living conditions

²⁹ *Equality*, 26 and 330.

³⁰ *Equality*, 357.

that they tripled the total product of the country during the first full year of the new order and doubled that amount during the next year. In time, Dr. Leete assured Julian West, "the hunger motive died out of human nature and covetousness as to material things, mocked to death by abundance, perished by atrophy, and the motives of the modern worker, the love of honor, the joy of beneficence, the delight of achievement, and the enthusiasm of humanity, became the impulses of the economic world."³¹

In reply to earlier criticism on this point, Bellamy maintained that his plan provided for full individual initiative. Under capitalism, he argued, a man is driven by dire need. Yet fear, the lash of want, is "on the whole the weakest as well as certainly the cruelest of incentives." Even under the wage-system, moreover, a well-provided employee is a more efficient worker than he who has to worry over his next meal. Nationalism, giving each person an equal share of the total income and rewarding special effort with prized degrees of rank and prestige, is certain to develop a healthy and desirable kind of initiative.³²

He answered with equal force the objection that Nationalism would abolish private property. He stated that his plan would not eliminate private property but would only equalize it among all citizens. "The Revolution made us all capitalists," Dr. Leete observed. It merely destroyed private capitalism. The direction of the business of the nation was taken away from irresponsible individuals and given to carefully chosen public agents. True enough, the few rich were thereby deprived of their wealth; but this change made all citizens equal partners in the riches of their country. "The change created an entirely new system of property holding, but did not either directly or indirectly involve any denial of the right of private property."³³ Indeed, Nationalism placed the

³¹ *Equality*, 381.

³² *Equality*, 389 and 56.

³³ *Equality*, 91 and 116.

private and personal property rights of every citizen on a basis incomparably more solid and secure and extensive than they ever before had or could have under capitalism. For by this pooling of property into one Big Trust, Dr. Leete told Julian, each individual became "entitled not only to his own product but to vastly more—namely, to his share of the product of the social organism, in addition to his personal product, but he is entitled to this share not on the grab-as-grab-can plan of your day, by which some made themselves millionaires and others were left beggars, but on equal terms with his fellow capitalists."³⁴

When *Equality* appeared in 1897 the crucial Presidential campaign of the previous year had become a part of American history. Mark Hanna and his Big Business henchmen had succeeded in befuddling enough workers, fearful of unemployment and tempted by the promise of a full dinner pail, to insure McKinley's election. And with Bryan's defeat went the hopes of millions of poor men who had voted for him to keep the country economically free. The blow was fatal to the disconcerted army of Populists and Nationalists. The wave of reform, thus blocked, was thereupon completely broken by a new industrial expansion that included billion-dollar trusts and initiated an imperialist drive which led to the war with Spain and turned the United States into a world power. For a few years prosperity made any attempt at social melioration a futile undertaking.

Bellamy's loyal followers received *Equality* with great enthusiasm. Ten thousand copies were quickly bought and studied and discussed with sanguine appreciation. But the book failed to attain the mass popularity of *Looking Backward*. The interval of a decade had completely altered the propitious atmosphere which had welcomed the earlier novel. For all its solid worth and felicitous message, *Equality* did not reach the millions of readers for whom it was written.

For a long time in frail health, Bellamy had contracted

³⁴ *Equality*, 91.

tuberculosis while writing *Equality* and went with his family to Colorado as soon as he had finished the book. His lungs were by then too much ravaged by the disease to benefit from the salubrious climate, but he was greatly cheered by the praise from his simple admirers on the farms and in the mining towns of that part of the country. In the early spring he knew his end was near and decided to return to his home in Chicopee. He died on May 22, 1898, in his forty-eighth year.

Edward Bellamy, small-town editor, writer, and dreamer, was an outstanding American reformer. He possessed a social conscience characteristic of a long line of New England puritans—from Roger Williams to Wendell Phillips. He was not of those who accepted the world for what it was and busied themselves feathering their own nests. As a true believer in the teachings of both Jesus and Jefferson he felt impelled to cry out against oppression and inequality, to expound “the principles of human brotherhood—the enthusiasm of humanity.” He did this in the way he knew best: by writing *Looking Backward* and *Equality* and by dedicating his life to the realization of his equalitarian society. He envisioned a world in which all men were equal: in which hunger was non-existent, greed a forgotten evil, and complete education the birthright of every child; in which criminals were unknown, drones were an anomaly, and inordinate luxury was impossible; a world in which intelligence reigned and every man lived to his fullest capacity. It was a beautiful mirage: a utopia so vivid and noble, so cleverly woven out of the warp and woof of daily life that it could not but fascinate those who perceived it with him.

Uncounted thousands the world over, in want and fearful of the days ahead, read *Looking Backward* and were ready to join the new millennium. But they soon discovered that panaceas were possible only in the imagination and scurried back to their meager fleshpots. Yet a half century later we have greater equality than the skeptics of Bellamy’s day

thought possible. Many of the evils of that time are now forgotten or greatly mitigated and a number of the reforms then considered fantastic are now embodied in the law of the land. In Soviet Russia the communism of Lenin has marked resemblance to the social order outlined in *Equality*; and although Stalin's regime is generally pointed out as a horrible example of what happens when the capitalistic order is tinkered with, that country, freed from the fear of external enemies and fully industrialized, may yet realize the economic equality of Bellamy's dream. Today global war is changing the face of civilization before our very eyes. Who knows what reforms it will bring or what the world will be like a half century hence? All we can say with certainty is that much of the advance made by society is the result of new social ideas percolating to the minds of the majority of the people. These ideas are mostly the visions of such dreamers as Bellamy. Ida M. Tarbell, referring to *Looking Backward* in a recent article in *The Forum*, has placed its author among the leading social dreamers: "Of all Utopias which men, revolting against the bitter world in which we live, have created to stir the imagination and raise the hopes of the people of the earth, none has ever been so substantial, so realistic, so seemingly practical. A dream—yes—but a dream built upon materials in our hands."³⁵

³⁵ Ida M. Tarbell, *The Forum*, xcii (September, 1934), 139.