

IX. PRE-SOCIALIST ECONOMICS: THE MARTINET ESTHETE AND THE AMAZON WORSHIPPER

"Watch the Rain-maker!" Tribe unknown

It seems truly negligent to look at the development of economic ideas but leave out two writers who seem to have had a peculiar rapport with the Future. Not their future, mind you, but definitely our future. If the first did not invent the new literary genre of Social Fiction he strongly influenced it. It may well be said that he did not change the concepts of Science Fiction to Social Fiction, but really in the sense of the work to a genre still quite dormant: the genre of Economic Fiction. Another bestseller writer writing at a time in which social problems became not only undeniably acute, but in which the means of communication had accelerated and improved to the point to spread not only far and wide but to be made to stick. We are talking about a journalist writer who had as much if not greater political impact for several decades after writing his main work as Upton Sinclair had half a century later with his muckraking bestseller *The Jungle* about the abuses in the turn of the 20th Century Chicago meat market industry.

We are talking about Edward Bellamy and his socially seminal *Looking Backward*. Again not to disacknowledge a personal spiritual debt the present writer was first exposed to the genre of Social Fiction, in fact to any kind of literature with a strong commitment to Social Justice and social improvement as a tender teenager when first being confronted with Bellamy. Of all the mundane thinkers and economic writers we have discussed in this book Bellamy may well be the strangest and the most contradictory!

Bellamy was born March 26, 1850 in Massachusetts as the son of a New England Baptist minister. It can be inferred that the ethical standards he was exposed to in his home were not low. At age 18 he had the defining experience of his life as a foreign student in Germany. Not only did he then and there get exposed to the severe plight of the urban poor, he saw the formation of the socialist movement around the First International in action. With Henry George and Harriett Beecher Stowe he became the leading bestselling author of the second half of the 20th Century when he published *Looking Backward 2000-1887* in 1888. He beat H.G. Wells another pioneer of both classic Science and Social Fiction by dozens of years in devising a time-traveler. Through a hypnotic experiment to cure his insomnia that misfires the hero of the novel Julian West loses his consciousness in his Boston home on May 30, 1887 but he doesn't wake up until September 2000.

A "Dr. Leete" shows him around in the Boston of the 21st Century and explains the astounding social changes that occurred in a mere 113 years or four and a half generations. The name of Julian West's benefactor is a play upon the word Lethe which designated in ancient Greek and Roman mythology one of the rivers of the underworld Hades which made all of those who drank from his waters forget their past lives. Reading this paradisaical sounding social piece of engineering makes one wish changes in the past four and a half generations had indeed been so beneficial! The utopian America visited by West is one of nationalized industries, equitable distribution of wealth, communal living, and the absence of stark social contrasts. Unpleasant works are done in a kind of conscripted "social army" for three years by everyone finished with his or her education, afterwards one is free to choose what line of work one wants to take. Bellamy's work spawned innumerable nationalist associations, not nationalist as in Pat Buchanan, but nationalist as in nationalize the economy. Included conveniently in the Bellamyian utopia is a second coming of his fiancée Edith who he unfortunately lost in the 19th Century. This built-in happy end Bernard Shaw found undignified for a social utopian and for that reason he recommended to stay away from *Looking Backward*.

Bellamy was a soft spoken dreamer who makes Marcel Proust look like Captain Blackbeard, but who nevertheless strangely endorses a society with military discipline in civilian matters organized through and through down to the last detail of personal life. It is quite possible that what he experienced in Germany was not just the starkness of social conflict ready to rip apart the dawning 20th Century he might have been taken in a tad too much by the legendary Prussian Militarism and discipline without having had a chance to stay long enough to learn about its civilian fall-out: the near-total loss of civilian liberties. The contradictions of his vision did not occur to Bellamy in the same starkness as occurred to him the real life contradictions of his century. But then he choose to take "Lethe" over life as he died of tuberculosis in his hometown at the age of 48.

Bellamy's mild-mannered and vague Socialism without gulags and polit-watchdogs, militarized though it was, was mirrored pretty much a Century later by Ernest Callenbach who published his *Ecotopia* in 1975. The scene has somewhat changed and to the great merit of Callenbach it has to be said that he factored in nature and the environment into the equation which is positively absent in *Looking Backward* as in most other socialist writings that were to follow. The mood is darker and the colors of the backdrop grimmer. The US has experienced a peaceful secession triggered by nuclear blackmail, pretty much if not quite corresponding to the red and blue state fault lines of the 2004 Bush-Kerry elections. The ecologists have abolished cars & the combustion engine and live in

a utopia with nature in full play and life being quite reminiscent of the socio-economic framework as laid out by William Morris and Henry George. The Old States journalist William Weston – no direct relation to Julian West – gets sent to the New Territories as the first person since the rupture. Amongst many astounding features with earth in the balance he finds that the New Territories are run by a cross between nature-goddesses and Amazons who keep men in subordinate flunkey positions. Fascinated Weston succumbs to getting practically raped in the hollow of a large Redwood tree. Where Bellamy carried over a Victorian Puritanism into his new utopia Callenbach finally amongst all the suggestive visions of a better tomorrow succumbs to an odd sexual fantasy-fear of a society of strong and independent females dominating poor and discombobulated males.