

Mr. Bellamy's Utopia

By PAUL PEACH

During the past decade or so there has been a sharp revival of interest in the economic theories of Edward Bellamy. There have even been students of Henry George who, abandoning George, turned to Bellamy in the belief that the latter had something more to offer—something of a concrete, hard-headed, practical nature. It seems likely that questions about Bellamy will be encountered more and more often as time goes on. Serious students of political economy should, therefore, make themselves acquainted with this man's work; there is even a chance that Americans may be called upon, in the not-so-far-distant future, to accept or reject what is essentially a Bellamy society.

Edward Bellamy was born in the United States in 1850. The work upon which his fame chiefly rests, "Looking Backward," appeared in 1888. It gave rise to fairly animated controversy, and when Bellamy found that most of the objections to his plan followed a fairly uniform pattern, he incorporated his answers into a second book, "Equality," published in 1896. "Equality" is more serious in tone than "Looking Backward," and followers of Bellamy usually prefer to have his ideas judged by the later work; unfortunately, it is the earlier and somewhat frivolous "Looking Backward" that has maintained itself in print and is commanding an increasing readership today.

Both books are in the nature of fiction; there is a sort of quasi-romantic plot to act as mortar to hold together the politico-economic bricks. Julian West, a rich and cultivated Bostonian (as what Bostonian is not?) is troubled with insomnia, and builds himself a subterranean crypt where no sound can penetrate. Every evening a hypnotist comes below to put him to sleep, and every morning returns to wake him up. An accident interrupts the sequence, with the result that Mr. West sleeps

through a hundred years and wakes in the bosom of the family of Dr. Leete, still in Boston, but in the year 2000. Under the tutelage of Dr. Leete's lovely daughter Edith, he studies the economic system with which the new order has displaced the old. Between times, he sandwiches in a love affair with Edith, who, it turns out, is the descendant of his own love a century back. As a romance, the books have no claim to recognition; nor indeed did Bellamy intend to do more than provide a fragile thread of fiction upon to string his theoretical beads.

The community of Dr. Leete is socialistic. Following the Marxian pattern, the growth of private monopolies has eventuated in their being superseded by the greatest monopoly of all, a State Trust. All production and distribution are in the hands of the State. The State is the universal employer, the universal storekeeper, the universal landlord. Not only is private enterprise nonexistent; even private exchange is forbidden. If I have two cups, and my neighbor has two saucers, we may not exchange a cup and saucer without subjecting the whole transaction to State scrutiny, and only when adequate reason can be shown are such transactions permitted to take place. There is no money; every citizen is given a credit on the books of the State, which he may use as he pleases; he cannot, however, allow his credits to accumulate from year to year except in extraordinary circumstances, as perhaps to pay for something unusually expensive. Saving, except for some special purpose, is not permitted; at the year's end, one's unused credit expires.

All citizens receive equal credits; one shares in the social product, not because of anything peculiar to himself, but by virtue of being human. And upon each rests the obligation to work, to the limit of his capacities. Everyone receives the equivalent of a high school education and

some vocational training. At the end of the schooling period, the young man or woman spends three years in a labor army whose duty is to perform any job assigned; these are the hewers of wood and drawers of water. Invention and improvement have, however, reduced to a minimum the amount of necessary drudgery; thus, housecleaning is avoided by having everything waterproof, so that in order to clean a room one merely puts away anything that might be damaged by water, turns a valve, and in a jiffy the room is thoroughly hosed down; a current of warm air dries it, and it is ready for occupancy. The washing of clothes is a thing of the past; all garments are made of paper, worn once or twice, then thrown away. The whole strength of social intelligence is thrown into the battle to do away with those features of any job that make it dirty and unpleasant.

When the young citizen has completed his three years' service in the labor army, he may elect an occupation of his own choosing. The State fixes the number of teachers, doctors, engineers, etc., needed each year by the community. If the number of candidates for some profession is greater than the requirement; preference is given to those with good records; others have a second, third, and n-th choice. If the candidate wishes an assignment in a particular place, his wishes are given consideration; here again he may have to be content with something other than his first choice.

If for any reason the number of candidates for a particular occupation is insufficient to fill the quota, an effort is made to attract enough volunteers by adding extra inducements in the way of shorter hours. If necessary, working hours may be shortened to ten hours a day in a particular occupation, in order to secure enough volunteers to fill the

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quota. Except in the labor army, the selection of employment is on a purely voluntary basis; a man may not get his first choice, but he does always have a voice in determining what he shall do. However, he must do something if he desires to remain in the community. If he refuses, he is given a supply of seeds, some simple implements, and access to a plot of land upon which, if he wishes, he may lead an individualistic life at subsistence level.

Advancement is by the merit system, from the lowest to the highest grade. Politicians depend, not upon votes, but upon achievement records, which automatically determine their place in the social structure. There is no oppression, no imposition of uniformity; though goods of standard pattern are universally obtainable, nearly anything imaginable can be supplied custom made at a trifling cost. Authors, artists, and other creative workers are allowed to finance their own works; the public's acceptance or rejection determines whether these persons shall be permitted to devote their entire time to their arts. At nearly middle age everyone is retired from active service, while his share of the national

product continues the same as before; those who desire may retire earlier and accept a smaller portion.

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Because he alone of all recent Utopian writers has offered a detailed description of his Utopia, Bellamy enjoys a considerable following; theoretical generalizations in political economy may attract the student, but a good clear picture always catches the fancy of the layman. But Bellamy's picture is still too good to be true. He recognizes the right of the individual to live his own life—even to lead a completely unsocial life, if he so desires. He imposes upon the individual the obligation to contribute to the community to the extent of his ability, if he elects to share in those benefits which the community provides. With most of these concepts all men of good will may well agree.

But the experience of our own times demonstrates how impossible is this dream of actual fulfillment. Marx, and Bellamy too, felt that the huge trust or monopoly has always a necessary advantage over the small enterprise. How mistaken this view is was ably shown by William Leon, in his article on "The American Woolen Company" (*The Freeman*,

November, 1941). The fact is that beyond a certain point great size is a handicap and not an aid; just to the extent to which the head of a corporation gets away from its foot, to that extent is there a loss of elasticity and flexibility, a downhill plunge of efficiency. A private corporation, with all the incentive of a profit motive, finds it utterly impossible to expand beyond a certain point and remain efficient. But Bellamy asks us to accept a society that accomplishes the feat of maintaining a single monopoly, not in one field, but in all fields of production; a gigantic super-trust which shall include the whole of enterprise for the entire country. Nowhere in history do we find any evidence that such a thing is even remotely possible.

The ideal of Socialism, says Henry George, is grand and noble. Granted that government can be made pure (but what modern government is or ever was?) we may still refuse to believe that government can achieve omniscience. And nothing less will suffice to direct intelligently the endless intricacies of production in a highly civilized society.