

## 105. Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward* (1888)

Source: *Edward Bellamy, Looking Backward 2000-1887* (Boston, 1888), pp. 42-55, 262-63.

Even more influential than *Progress and Poverty* was *Looking Backward*, a novel by Edward Bellamy published in 1888. The book recounts the experiences of Julian West, who falls asleep in the late nineteenth century only to awaken in the year 2000, in a world where cooperation has replaced class strife and cutthroat competition. Inequality has been banished and with it the idea of liberty as a condition to be achieved through individual striving free of governmental restraint. Freedom, Bellamy insisted, was a social condition, resting on interdependence, not autonomy.

From today's vantage point, Bellamy's utopia—with citizens required to labor for years in an Industrial Army controlled by a single Great Trust—seems a chilling social blueprint. Yet the book not only inspired the creation of hundreds of Nationalist clubs devoted to bringing into existence the world of 2000 but left a profound mark on a generation of reformers and intellectuals. For Bellamy held out the hope of retaining the material abundance made possible by industrial capitalism while eliminating inequality. In proposing that the state guarantee economic security to all, Bellamy proposed a far-reaching expansion of the idea of freedom.

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"IN GENERAL," I said, "what impresses me most about the city is the material prosperity on the part of the people which its magnificence implies."

"I would give a great deal for just one glimpse of the Boston of your day," replied Dr. Leete. "No doubt, as you imply, the cities of that period were rather shabby affairs. If you had the taste to make them splendid, which I would not be so rude as to question, the general poverty resulting from your extraordinary industrial system would not have given you the means. Moreover, the excessive individualism which then prevailed was inconsistent with much pub-

lic spirit. What little wealth you had seems almost wholly to have been lavished in private luxury. Nowadays, on the contrary, there is no destination of the surplus wealth so popular as the adornment of the city, which all enjoy in equal degree."

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"What solution, if any, have you found for the labor question? It was the Sphinx's riddle of the nineteenth century, and when I dropped out the Sphinx was threatening to devour society, because the answer was not forthcoming. It is well worth sleeping a hundred years to learn what the right answer was, if indeed, you have found it yet."

"As no such thing as the labor question is known nowadays," replied Dr. Leete, "and there is no way in which it could arise, I suppose we may claim to have solved it. Society would indeed have fully deserved being devoured if it had failed to answer a riddle so entirely simple. In fact, to speak by the book, it was not necessary for society to solve the riddle at all. It may be said to have solved itself. The solution came as the result of a process of industrial evolution which could not have terminated otherwise. All that society had to do was to recognize and cooperate with that evolution, when its tendency had become unmistakable."

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"The fact that the desperate popular opposition to the consolidation of business in a few powerful hands had no effect to check it proves that there must have been a strong economical reason for it. The small capitalists, with their innumerable petty concerns, had in fact yielded the field to the great aggregations of capital, because they belonged to a day of small things and were totally incompetent to the demands of an age of steam and telegraphs and the gigantic scale of its enterprises. To restore the former order of things, even if possible, would have involved returning to the day of stage-coaches. Oppressive and intolerable as was the régime of the great consolidations of capital, even its victims, while they cursed it, were forced to admit the prodigious increase of efficiency which had been imparted to the national industries, the vast economies effected by concentration of management and unity of organization,

and to confess that since the new system had taken the place of the old the wealth of the world had increased at a rate before undreamed of. To be sure this vast increase had gone chiefly to make the rich richer, increasing the gap between them and the poor; but the fact remained that, as a means merely of producing wealth, capital had been proved efficient in proportion to its consolidation. The restoration of the old system with the subdivision of capital, if it were possible, might indeed bring back a greater equality of conditions, with more individual dignity and freedom, but it would be at the price of general poverty and the arrest of material progress."

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"It would seem to follow, from what you have said, that wives are in no way dependent on their husbands for maintenance."

"Of course they are not," replied Dr. Leete, "nor children on their parents either, that is, for means of support, though of course they are for the offices of affection. The child's labor, when he grows up, will go to increase the common stock, not his parents', who will be dead, and therefore he is properly nurtured out of the common stock. The account of every person, man, woman, and child, you must understand, is always with the nation directly, and never through any intermediary, except, of course, that parents, to a certain extent, act for children as their guardians. You see that it is by virtue of the relation of individuals to the nation, of their membership in it, that they are entitled to support; and this title is in no way connected with or affected by their relations to other individuals who are fellow members of the nation with them. That any person should be dependent for the means of support upon another would be shocking to the moral sense as well as indefensible on any rational social theory. What would become of personal liberty and dignity under such an arrangement? I am aware that you called yourselves free in the nineteenth century. The meaning of the word could not then, however, have been at all what it is at present, or you certainly would not have applied it to a society of which nearly every member was in a position of galling personal dependence upon others as to the very

means of life, the poor upon the rich, or employed upon employer, women upon men, children upon parents.

### Questions

1. Why does Bellamy's character Dr. Leete state that the meaning of the word "free" could not have meant the same thing in the nineteenth century as it does in 2000?
2. How does Bellamy suggest that the transition to a society of harmony and equality will take place?

## 106. Walter Rauschenbusch and the Social Gospel (1912)

Source: *Walter Rauschenbusch, Christianizing the Social Order (New York, 1912), pp. 41-44.*

The Baptist clergyman Walter Rauschenbusch, who began preaching in New York City in 1886, was a bridge between the Gilded Age and the Progressive era of the early twentieth century. Appalled by the low wages and dire living conditions of his poor parishioners, Rauschenbusch rejected the idea, common among the era's Protestant preachers, that poverty arose from individual sins like drinking and sabbath breaking. In sermons and, in the early twentieth century, in widely read books, he developed what came to be called the Social Gospel. Rauschenbusch insisted that devout Christians rediscover the "social wealth of the Bible," and especially Jesus' concern for the poor. Freedom and spiritual self-development, he argued, required an equalization of wealth and power and unbridled competition mocked the Christian ideal of brotherhood.

The Social Gospel movement originated as an effort to reform Protestant churches by expanding their appeal in poor urban neighborhoods and making them more attentive to the era's social ills. Its adherents