

Capitalism and Morality

LOOKING BACKWARD: A LOOK INTO SOCIALISM

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Edward Bellamy creates a Utopian society in his novel, *Looking Backward*. The book begins in Boston in 1887 in a tumultuous period of labor issues and definitive gaps between social classes. Mr. Julian West is a young gentleman in the nineteenth century, who attempts to follow the guidelines society and capitalism have set for the people of the upper classes. He has recently become betrothed to Miss Edith Bartlett and is anticipating their union in the near future.

Mr. West is afflicted with a very peculiar sleeping disorder. He is unable to sleep for any normal amount of time without the aid of hypnosis. Somewhat shamed of this procedure, he doesn't inform anyone but his butler and the doctor who performs the procedure. Julian also prefers to sleep in a fireproof underground chamber in order to ensure that nothing interrupts his much valued sleep. On one such night, Dr. Pillsbury informs Mr. West that he is leaving Boston and would no longer be able to his services to him. Mr. West bids him goodbye and instructs his butler, Sawyer, to wake him up the next morning at the appointed time.

When Mr. West awakens he finds himself in the year 2000 in the home of Dr. Leete's. Much to Julian's surprise, he discovers that his home had burned and because no one knew he was in the underground chamber, he was left undisturbed to sleep for 113 years. The Boston he awoke to was nothing like the city he had gone to sleep in. After recovering from his initial shock, Mr. West meets Dr. and Mrs. Leete and their daughter, Edith.

Over the course of many discussions and diatribes, Mr. Leete begins to explain the differences between the twentieth and the nineteenth centuries. In the span of a century, America had become a socialist country. Mr. West found this statement incredulous at first, but the Leete family allows him to explore their society and discover the truth firsthand. Julian comes to the conclusion that the societal changes are not due to a change in human nature, but the equalization of all members of society.

Mr. Leete begins to explain about the industrial army and how no labor issue exists due to the fact that everyone is paid the same amount, are all educated, and individuals are persuaded to serve in whatever capacity their talents and skills are best suited. Edith then enlightens Julian about the distribution process and takes him to one of the warehouses to view it firsthand. After much explanation, Julian decides once and for all that a socialist community is by far better than a capitalistic one. In the midst of these discoveries, Julian falls in love with Edith only to find that she is the great-granddaughter of his beloved Miss Bartlett. Edith had been told of the romantic love story that occurred between her great-grandmother Miss Bartlett and Julian. Having heard these past down tales she had fallen in love with the idea of Julian long before she had the incredible fortune of meeting him herself. Looking back,

Julian knows that he is privileged to have slept through all those horrible years of selfish capitalism and wholeheartedly embraces the socialist ideals.

Edward Bellamy creatively takes a subject that may have been taboo in his time and puts it into the form of a novel for everyone to read and consider as a realistic idea. The concept of writing a novel 113 years in the future is quite an undertaking and requires an extreme amount of imagination. Being in the twentieth century, readers can appreciate Bellamy's creativity and his ability to accurately predict some of the social changes as well as technological changes.

While creative in itself, the storyline immediately gives the reader a sense of an unrealistic situation. The reader begins to have doubts about the plausibility of the whole book upon finding a man waking up 113 years later unharmed from being asleep for over a century. Bellamy deserves credit for developing such a creative transition to the future, but it harms the credibility of the book as it later tries to convince the readers of the positive aspects of socialism. The perfect utopia that Bellamy creates also serves to make the reader doubt the ability for such a dramatic change in the country. Although socialism may be a credible path to pursue, no form of government can be one hundred percent perfect to where there are no problems, especially if this system had only been implemented less than a century ago. Transition periods are critical and Bellamy does not elaborate on the problems or issues that occurred during this time.

The characters in *Looking Backward* were as expected. Julian appears to be a cultured gentleman who is capable of sleeping a century without letting it affect him to any certain extent. Within a week he is fully sold on socialism and ready to marry Edith. This ability gives Julian almost inhuman traits and allows him to act as superhuman.

Dr. Leete is a retired physician with the answer to every question possible from Julian. While Dr. Leete is a well-mannered Bostonian, he likes the fame he garners from the public by having Julian in his household. Bellamy suggests that Dr. Leete brags to the other individuals of society that he is responsible for waking Julian and for providing for him. With Edith Leete having the same name as Julian's former fiancé, the reader immediately surmises that she is a reincarnation of Edith Bartlett in the new century. One difference in Edith Leete is that although she shows the genteel qualities of a woman, she also exhibits some more forward traits indicating Bellamy thought women would become more equal to men in a Socialistic society.

This book is ingenious in that it uses a classic love story and somewhat of a fairytale to interest the reader into learning about socialism. Bellamy finds a creative way to entice the reader to explore the benefits socialism can have on an economy all the while entertaining the reader. Even through Dr. Leete's long and sometimes arduous explanations, Bellamy is able to maintain the interest of the reader through his thorough details and explicit descriptions.

Looking Backward truly inspires the readers to examine themselves and determine if socialism would be better for the people and economy than capitalism. While Bellamy poses many enticing ideas and even formulates a perfect society, one has to wonder about certain aspects of socialism and if it would really be more beneficially than capitalism.

For instance, an innate characteristic of people is the drive to be individualistic. This show of freedom can be seen early in children rebelling against a school uniform. In capitalism, every man is for himself. He is able to work and live how he chooses. While Bellamy tries to insinuate that some individualism still existed in twentieth century socialistic Boston, reality proves to be different. In many socialist and communist countries, such as Russia, housing was uniform. However, the government allowed each person a very small plot of land that they could develop into whatever they wanted. While their living quarters were exactly the same, it was this free space that most devoted their free time to – where they

were able to be creative and express themselves as they pleased. These are qualities inherent in capitalism, not socialism.

Secondly, Julian inquires about the change in human nature. He believed this drastic change to socialism could not have occurred without some change in human nature. Dr. Leete insisted no such change has occurred. This fact is very interesting. In *Looking Backward*, it was as if every person had some innate national pride to be in the industrial army and to be the best citizen they could possibly be for the nation. But, in reality, it is much harder to imagine this concept being successful.

Everyone is motivated differently. The ability to progress through the ranks of a certain position and various awards were used as motivation in the novel, but what about the people who are only motivated by monetary compensation? Would they not perform better if they were receiving the type of monetary motivation they required? Furthermore, some people are naturally lazy and unmotivated to work at all. Education and a choice of what job a person wants is not enough to convince the reader that these types of people would willingly give up their lives of laziness and suddenly become a productive part of the industrial army. While it is noted that people are in some cases friendlier in a socialistic environment, it is hard to believe that it would solve all personality defects of individuals.

Bellamy suggests that crime is nonexistent because everyone receives the same wages and people don't need to steal to survive. Interestingly enough that does not explain how the greedy people suddenly do not care about gaining more money or prosperity. Even in a capitalistic society, occasionally individuals who are wealthy are greedy enough to commit crimes in order to make more money. Why should that be any different in socialism? While it may deter poverty, it cannot solve all problems of selfishness and greed instilled in some human beings without a complete and complex change in human behavior.

Capitalism offers a variety of goods and services that socialism cannot. By having one warehouse controlled by the government, the diversification of goods disappears. People can only buy what the government has established as necessary. This once again eliminates the ability for people to individuate their belongings. The clothing one person buys is going to be the same as several other individuals. The lack of competition allows the government to set any price they feel is reasonable for the goods and services. Who is to determine if this price is within the people's ability to pay? One would hope that the government would care about its people enough that it wouldn't take advantage of the monopoly over the goods sold, but if somehow that was the case, where would the checks and balances be?

The idea of a central dining room has many benefits and negative aspects. It allows the people to become even more dependent on the central government. They lose even the individuality of their food. Cooking to some is a creative endeavor and in a socialistic society they lose even that little aspect of freedom. The dining room does allow for social interaction and the ceasing of worrying about preparing meals. But what happens to the citizens who do not live in a city or even town. Bellamy suggests that no one is extremely far from a warehouse or dining room. But, in reality, how can farmers in the country be close when their closest neighbors may be several miles away. It seems that there would be a lot of wasted time going to and from meals for these particular individuals.

Bellamy makes a strong argument regarding the positive implications of socialism in his love story about Julian and his fantasy arrival in a century unknown to him. Many aspects of socialism are commendable, but there are also many potential problems and issues that Bellamy fails to address. Bellamy explains to the readers that capitalism breeds poverty, selfishness, and greed. But, perhaps some people are born with these innate characteristics. Socialism does not provide an answer as to how these individuals would fit into its society. The lack of individualism may be the most detracting feature of socialism. People naturally want to be their own person. A society that lumps them all into one group will

never work in the long run. Capitalism allows people to be anything they want to be without forcing them to fit some mold that they are actually incapable of fitting.

Clearly, *Looking Backward* is a creative piece of literature that should be hailed for its ingenuity and creativity but should also be regarded with some trepidation when considering the age-old battle of socialism and capitalism, for it is surely not the final voice on this debate.