

Capitalism and Morality

ATTEMPTED SOLUTIONS TO SOCIAL UNREST: *LOOKING BACKWARD* BY EDWARD BELLAMY

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Edward Bellamy attempts to solve social unrest in his fictional novel, *Looking Backward*, by creating a socialist utopian society. In 2000, the utopian society is a logical outcome of nineteenth century's rapid industrialization. Bellamy imagines a society that is based on collaboration, where competition and poverty do not exist. He gives his readers a solution to economic inequality by eliminating the gaps between the rich and the poor by their socialist working environment where everyone is equal; "he wanted not only to show that a viciously competitive economic system is wasteful, unjust, and degrading to all concerned, rich and poor alike; he also prophesied that it could evolve into a cooperative society with more dignity and self-fulfillment for everyone" (Miller V). Bellamy creates a society that changes from capitalism to socialism where social classes are removed and citizens are economically equal, yet with equal class and income, competitive motivation is eliminated and within the utopian society competitive sports, religion and women's rights are not or barely mentioned.

Within Bellamy's socialist society, the divide between social classes is eliminated. Once Julian West awakes from his hypnosis to Dr. Leete. Dr. Leete attempts to explain that he has been asleep for over 100 years, but Julian thinks that this is a joke that his friends are playing on him. But Dr. Leete assures Julian that it is the year 2000 and that he is not joking. He tells Julian that he discovered his secret underground chamber when he began to build his new laboratory. He found Julian in a deep sleep and tells him of the fire that happened on May 30, 1887 and that he must have been protected from the flames in his secret chamber.

After Dr. Leete explains all of this to Julian, Julian still is not convinced that it is the year 2000 until Dr. Leete takes him out into the city of Boston. Julian is surprised by the city of Boston's appearance. He says, "At my feet lay a great city. Miles of broad streets, shaded by trees and lined with fine buildings, for the most part not in continuous blocks but set in larger or smaller enclosures, stretched in every direction. Every quarter contained large open squares filled with trees" (25). Dr. Leete explains that the government had this opportunity when the nineteenth industrial evolution solved itself when "all the society had to do was to recognize and cooperate with that evolution, when its tendency had become unmistakable" (32). Julian then states that after seeing the change in Boston's appearance from the nineteenth century he knew that he had "been told the truth" (25).

Julian notices that the twentieth century has made many other changes besides broad streets and planted trees like the elimination of class status. Dr. Leete tells Julian that now, "there is no destination of the surplus wealth so popular as the adornment of the city, which all enjoy in equal degree" (28). Julian describes the divide in the nineteenth century between the rich and the poor to a "prodigious coach." The rich sat on top out of the dust enjoying the scenery, while the poor gathered dust in their eyes on bottom.

In the capitalist society everyone's goal was to secure "a seat on the coach for himself and to leave it to his children after him" (7). But unlike the nineteenth century, in the twentieth century everyone received the same amount of social treatment because everyone is economically equal.

In order for people to have equal treatment, private capital is eliminated and as a result the government owns all capital. Dr. Leete explains that "no organization of labor was possible when the employing power was divided among hundreds or thousands of individuals and corporations, between which concert of any kind was neither desired, nor indeed feasible" (41). Since private capital only lead to jobless workers, business failures, market shortages, and strikes. Dr. Leete asks Julian "what the most prominent feature of the labor trouble of your (his) day?" and Julian responds with "Why, the strikes, of course" (34). Yet since private capital does not exists, there are no longer business issues such as strikes, joblessness, shortages, etc., and as a result all citizens are economically equal.

Although the government controls all funds, it does not regulate people's choice of job. People no longer go into a field just for the money, but they do what they love to do. Dr. Leete also explains to Julian how everyone's salary is equal. Each person receives the same amount of money on a credit card. All citizens enjoy an "equal degree" (28). Yet, Dr. Leete assures Julian that the amount of money that everyone receives on their credit card is more than enough for everyone to live on and that no one has to worry about poverty.

Nineteenth century people feared poverty, but in the new socialist government, the government protected its citizens from that and even more. Every citizen was protected "against hunger, cold, and nakedness, and provide for all his physical and mental needs" (39). Dr. Leete tells Julius that his society has "abolished poverty and the fear of it, and inordinate luxury with the hope of it" (63). So as a result, there is less crime because everyone has the same amount of money and does not need to steal.

Unlike the new socialist society, the former capitalist society was based on competition rather than everyone working towards a common good for the community. The nineteenth century people were motivated by wanting to be above poverty and by wanting money to buy nice things. While twentieth century people, believed in everyone to do their best performance and by doing so he or she is helping the community not oneself. Yet, Julian is puzzled about what motivates everyone to work if everyone is receiving the same amount of money. Dr. Leete replies that everyone is required to "make the same effort; that is, we demand of him the best service it is in his power to give" (61). People are motivated by honor and that each worker is assigned a grade and is evaluated.

Competitive motivation in business is eliminated, but Bellamy believes that competitive art is alright. Unlike citizens' working jobs, which are not competitive, artistic talents are competitive. Also, the government does not control art production. The difference between the system of nineteenth century art and twentieth century art is that the "universally high level of education nowadays gives the popular verdict a conclusiveness on the real merit of literary work which in your day it was as far as possible from having" (107). There is also no favoritism "of any sort to interfere with the recognition of true merit. Every author has precisely the same facilities for bringing his work before popular tribunal. To judge from the complaints of the writers of your day, this absolute equality of opportunity would have been greatly prized" (107). I am not sure how having a high level of education can stop someone from having favorite art pieces. I also do not understand how Bellamy takes away competitive business but he leaves competitive art. I believe that he is biased, because he is a writer.

Bellamy mentions competitive arts such as writing novels, but he has not mentioned competitive sports or games. Possibly because he does not want people to have a competitive mindset, but if people are artists than they are going to have a competitive mind, because competition is part of the process of getting published.

Not only does Bellamy not mention competitive sports, but he also barely touches upon religion. The author does not say how religion is going to play a role in government. In Mr. Barton's sermon, he mentions that the nineteenth century was primarily Christian, but was really "anti-Christian because of commercial and industrial frame of society. He then refers to nineteenth century people referring to themselves as "followers of Jesus Christ," but really he was just mocking their capitalistic society. Bellamy does not say what type of religion the twentieth century people believe in, he refers to "human brotherhood" and the "selflessness" that people should have, but not what faith to be.

Not does Bellamy portray Mr. Barton's service as biased, because he lives in the socialist society and he cannot relate to what people have to go through in the capitalistic society, but the author also gives women a biased view. Women are seen as "inferior in strength to men, and further disqualified industrially in special ways" and as a result women get fewer hours to work and more vacation time. Women are not seen under the same system of ranking and discipline as the men. Dr. Leete claims that women are in an "entirely different discipline" from men (168). Women are seen as lesser to men, but within Bellamy's utopian society he claims that "no woman is heard nowadays wishing she were a man nor parents desiring a boy rather than girl children," but we do not read about the story from a women's point of view (169). Women only have rights when they are married and have a child. I understand that Bellamy did take a huge step when he did give women economic independence because before the women's rights movement, women were not seen as independent. But I believe that if he wanted everyone to be equal, everyone should be equal.

Not only does Bellamy shy away from addressing these issues, but he also gives readers an unrealistic take on people's reaction to conforming from capitalism to socialism. He claims that all people conformed to socialism and no protesting went on. Yet, realistically upper class people and small business owners would have rallied against his ideas, because instead of making six figures and riding on top on the carriage out of the dust, they are now in the dust making what everyone else is making. Not only would people who were upper class and business owners, but people in jobs such as business, marketing, and sales would have been upset, because they would no longer be able to practice what they love to do, because their would not be in any competition in the United States or in countries such as Europe, Australia, Mexico and parts of South America (91) because these countries used the United States as a model to form their socialist society. Other people such as the elders who grew up all their lives in a capitalistic society would not be so ready to conform to a knew way, some would want to hang on to their roots regardless of what the benefits may be.

Many people may have felt the transition between capitalism to socialism as lonely as Julius feels. Once Mr. Barton gives his sermon, Julius feels incredibly lonely. He claims that the sermon of Mr. Barton, with its "constant implication of the vast moral gap between the century to which I (he) belonged and in which I (he) found myself (himself), had had an effect strongly to accentuate my (his) sense of loneliness (191). If Julius feels out of place, how would other citizens feel who had to live through the transition from capitalism to socialism. I understand that after four generations, people would not be able to relate to capitalism and all they would know would be socialism, but I am referring to the people who currently had to live in the transition of governments.

Bellamy attempts to make a "perfect" society by changing the United States from capitalism to socialism by removing social statuses and equaling everyone financially, yet while Bellamy believes that his society is perfect he has flaws such as no competitive motivation in work, sports or games as well as an incomplete idea of religion and his negative views of women as being inferior to men.

Works Cited

Bellamy, Edward. *Looking Backward*. Introduction. *The Future of Futurism: An Introduction to Looking Backward*. By Walter James Miller. 2000. New York: Signet Classic, 2000.