

A Great American Prophet

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BY JOHN DEWEY

It was over a generation ago that Edward Bellamy thrilled America with a new vision of what this country might become. "Looking Backward" was published in 1888 and nine years later it was followed by "Equality". The two books drew a picture of America as it might be in the year 2000. They carried their message to almost every country of the world. Civilization seemed to be on the verge of collapse at that time, and the prophecy of a day when liberty and equality could be made real, on a basis of economic planning and security for all, appealed to literally millions of readers. Now interest in Bellamy is once more coming to the fore. Bellamy clubs are springing up everywhere. Technocracy has carried on many of Bellamy's ideas. The following article by the great American philosopher-educator is an analysis of the significance of Bellamy's works in the light of the present crisis.

In his "Equality" Bellamy stated, through the mouth of Dr. Lester's exponent, the device that marks off his picture of a social Utopia from all other literary Utopias. Explaining why men of our day do not see the meaning of facts that stare them constantly in the face, he says: "It was precisely because they stared you and your contemporaries so constantly in the face that you lost the faculty for judging their meaning. They were too near the eyes to be seen aright". This statement gives the key to the literary device which Bellamy employs in both "Looking Backward" and "Equality". He uses his picture of the new order as a means of making us realize by force of contrast the realities of the social world in which we now actually live.

I do not mean that Bellamy did not take his picture, in its main outlines, seriously. But I do mean that it was evolved by his own brooding on the injustices, oppressions and wreckage attendant on the present economic system, and that when he had seen these things for himself, he employed his imagination of a social order based on economic equality to enable others to see what he had himself seen and felt. Many persons have indicted the present system. But what enabled Bellamy's books to circulate by the hundreds of thousands was that his indictment operated through imagination setting forth what was possible. The result is a sense of the terrible gulf between what is possible and what is actual.

Upon the page next to that from which the above quotation is taken, he gives a statement of the principle that, from a technical intellectual point of view, underlies his indictment of the present economic system. The system starts from the sound principle that things, physical nature, have no rights as against human beings. From this principle was derived in practice the conclusion that individuals might acquire an unlimited ownership of things as far as their abilities permit. "But this view



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from the unequal distribution of material things in a world where everybody absolutely depends for life and all its uses on their share of those things". In this simple sentence, Bellamy has given the unanswerable reply to those moralists who unwittingly defend the existing order by making a sharp separation between the material on one side and the ethical and ideal on the other. Bellamy's communism rests on an ethical base rather than upon a view that is sometimes called "scientific" because of its abstraction from considerations of human well-being. But his ethical principle always takes cognizance of the dependence of human life and its supreme values upon equal access to and control over material things. In doing that, it makes ample place for all the factors that "scientific" communists have emphasized, regarding the political and social power that is exercised by economic relations of production and distribution.

His Faith in Democracy

Bellamy was an American and a New Englander in more than a geographical sense. He was imbued with a religious faith in the democratic ideal. But for that very reason he saw through the sham and pretence that exists or can exist in the present economic system. I could fill pages with quotations in which he exposes his profound conviction that our democratic government is a veiled

plutocracy. He was far from being the originator of this idea. But what distinguishes Bellamy is the clear ardor with which he grasped the *human* meaning of democracy as an idea of equality and liberty, and portrayed the complete contradiction between our present economic system and the realization of human equality and liberty. No one has carried through the idea that equality is obtainable only by complete equality of income more fully than Bellamy. Again, what distinguishes him is that he derives his zeal and his insight from devotion to the American ideal of democracy.

This approach inevitably suggests comparison and contrast with that of Marx. Bellamy's most obvious indebtedness to Marx is in connection with his adoption of the idea that the present system is resulting in greater and greater concentration of capital (Bellamy wrote in the period of the overt emergence of trusts) and the fact that this concentration would result in the organization and socialization of labor, while the final outcome would be a society economically communist in nature. The most obvious point of contrast is found in Bellamy's conviction that the revolution would be essentially peaceful in nature. He imagined that by the end of the nineteenth century the trust movement would have resulted in the practical consolidation of the entire capital of the nation, so that the 'logical' next step in evolution would be its nationalization and administration for the benefit of the people.

His Trust in "Evolution"

The issue raised is too large to be discussed here. But it is fairly evident that Bellamy was too much under the influence of the idea of evolution in its Victorian sense. Consequently he thought on the one hand that the mass of the people would realize the great transitional service rendered by the system of consolidated capitalism, while on the other hand that these would control this system would demand that the final logical step be taken. It is a moderate comment that Bellamy was not conscious of how long the capitalist psychology would remain active, even among the laborers and farmers, after the capitalist system had broken down, and that he did not realize the extent of sabotage, so brilliantly exposed by Veblen, that prevails among the capitalist class—witness the manipulations by insiders carried on at the expense of stockholders.

There is another point in Bellamy's theory in relation to Marx's that remains ambiguous. The administrative government plays a large part in Bellamy's theory. On the face of it there is no "withering away of the state". At the same time, in view of Marx's definition of the state as the agent of class domination, it may be that the difference is more verbal than real. For Bellamy's administrative government is certainly the expression of a classless society.

The Opposite of Regimentation

I wish that those who conceive that the abolition of private property and of energy expended for profit signify regimentation of life and the abolition also of individual choice and all emulation, would read with an open mind Bellamy's picture of a socialized economy. It is only that he exposes with extraordinary vigor the restriction upon liberty that the present system imposes but that he pictures how socialized industry would release and further all those personal and private types of choice of occupation and use of resources that men and women actually most prize today.

His picture of a reign of brotherly love may be overdrawn. But the same cannot be said of his account of freedom in personal life outside of the imperative demand for the amount of work necessary to provide for the upkeep of social capital. In an incidental chapter on the present servility to fashion he brings out the underlying principle. "Equality creates an atmosphere which kills imitation, and is pregnant with originality, for everyone acts out himself, having nothing to gain by imitating anyone else". It is the present system that promotes uniformity, standardization and regimentation.

From the standpoint of their immediate task in Europe, Marx and Lenin may have been right in being chary of prognosis of the future classless society. It seemed to them part of a hated "idealism" to indulge in imaginative picturization. But the value of judging the present in terms of imagination of what is possible in the future, nowhere appears more clearly than in Bellamy's account of private life and the direction that emulation takes under a system of socialized production and distribution.

However, even with respect to the latter, he exhibits a good deal of prescience. There is little in Technocracy's picture of a possible future that is not foreshadowed by Bellamy—even to the amount of personal income that would be available. While he was wise in not going into detail, he foresaw an enormous increase in productivity by means of power, and a consequent release from the onerous forms of labor. Yet his interest is in the psychological emancipation that will result more than in the material mechanism, clearly though he sketches many features of the working structure of the latter. Nothing is further from the truth than the criticism often advanced that he pictures simply a millenium of material ease and comfort.

It is not surprising that during the present bankruptcy of economic class control, there is a great revival of interest in Bellamy. It is an American communism that he depicts, and his appeal comes largely from the fact that he sees in it the necessary means of realizing the democratic ideal. Limitations of space compel me to pass by in silence a multitude of interesting points, but I hope that what I have said will lead some to consult his "Equality" which is more thorough than the more popular "Looking Backward", as he himself intended. The chapters on the "Suicide of the Profit System" and "The Parable of the Water Tank" are priceless—and not in its slang sense. The chapter on "What Started the Revolution" and its sequel are extraordinary summaries of contemporary history. It is encouraging to know that Bellamy Societies are starting almost spontaneously, but with the aid of a central organization, all over the country. It is a good omen and I do not believe that a mirage of prosperity will again bring about the eclipse of Bellamy's teachings that occurred in the post-war period. In this country the problem of industrial socialization is much more of a psychological problem than, it seems to me, it is in any European country. The worth of Bellamy's books in effecting a translation of the ideas of democracy into economic terms is incalculable. What "Uncle Tom's Cabin" was to the anti-slavery movement Bellamy's book may well be to the shaping of popular opinion for a new social order. Moreover there is one difference. Bellamy's work is definitely constructive. While it is filled with fundamental criticisms of the present anarchy (which demands of language have compelled me to refer to times as an order or system!) there is no tinge of bitterness in it. It accords with American psychology in bringing the atmosphere of hope.

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