

Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*
by Thomas Peyser

In 1887, as bureaucrats and legislators in Washington labored to bring the Interstate Commerce Commission into being, an obscure, self-educated writer named Edward Bellamy was working along parallel lines, creating what would become the most influential and best-selling utopia ever written by an American: *Looking Backward: 2000-1887*. It tells the story of one Julian West, a well-heeled Bostonian insomniac who, in 1887, has himself mesmerized so he can sleep, falls into a state a suspended animation for 113 years, and wakes up to find the world completely transformed. Capitalism has utterly disappeared, replaced by a system in which the government is modeled on a vast corporation, with every citizen an employee of its “industrial army”. The novel was a huge success, most visibly among the cultured, middle-class readers whom the inhabitants of Bellamy’s utopia so much resemble.

Before the novel was published, the word “socialism” was in very bad odor among the educated elite in America, in part because they tended to associate it with those they regarded as scoundrelish immigrants from southern and central Europe, or with the scandalous doctrine of “free love”. Well aware of these prejudices, Bellamy produced a novel presenting a spic and span vision of America in the year 2000 that is in every respect socialist, but in which the *word* “socialism” does not appear. While Americans still tend not to like the sound of this word, middle-class readers and intellectuals of a reforming bent discovered in *Looking Backward* that they were very fond of the *thing*, even if they did not care to call it by its proper name. More than any other book, *Looking Backward* is what made it respectable to talk about implementing socialist schemes in the United States. It was one of the bestsellers of the 1890s, when Bellamy Clubs sprang up across the country—except, notably, in the South—and continued to cast a long

shadow well after it took its place among books forgotten by the general public but revered by intellectuals and other special-interest groups. *Looking Backward* is probably be the only American novel that was familiar both to many Bolsheviks and to many of the founders of the New Deal. (The first major biography of Bellamy was written by Arthur Morgan, the first head of the Tennessee Valley Authority.) Moreover, it left a deep impression on the John Dewey generation of leftist thinkers who presided over American intellectual life during what Auden called the “low dishonest decade” of the 1930s, and whose spiritual descendants, like Richard Rorty, may still be relied upon to advocate policies that would nudge the country in the direction Bellamy wanted it to go. Thus even if this year would have been a disappointment to those who looked forward to the year 2000 that Bellamy predicted, we can still turn to *Looking Backward* to discover the animating spirit of many who cleared the path towards the year 2000 that we have actually gotten.

The basic structure of the society Bellamy desired is easily summarized: the state runs everything. As employees of the state, all citizens draw the same annual salary. All of the men march in mass rallies designed to encourage solidarity with the nation as a whole. Everyone is rich. Everyone is happy. And why shouldn't they be? Instead of the wasteful competition of the market, which also encouraged each man to think of his brother as a potential enemy, a small group of bureaucrats manage every aspect of production and distribution in every corner of the nation, and since they, in common with everyone else, think always of the good of the whole, individuals feel nothing but passionate sympathy for one another; Bellamy serves up the kind of soppy vision of emotional life under socialism so brilliantly parodied in the “Squeeze of the Hand” chapter of *Moby Dick*.

Even if most Americans might not agree with Paul Cantor's judgement that *Looking Backward* is "the stupidest book ever written", probably not many people—outside English departments, that is—still regard the authoritarian socialism Bellamy presented as a useful model for economic arrangements in the real world. What, then, survives today of Bellamy's outmoded vision? What I would like to suggest is that Bellamy's chief importance may be his emotional attachment to planning as a good in and of itself. Anyone who has tried to point out the drawbacks of planning—perhaps economic planning above all—soon discovers that his opponents have a liking for planning that is quite independent of anything that could be called a *reason*. Irrational devotion to the inherent rightness of large-scale planning is one of the chief features of the twentieth-century mind, and although Bellamy certainly was not the first to feel this devotion—it is an ancient faith—he was one of those who helped to crystallize this faith in its recognizably modern form. Along with many others, Bellamy laid the foundations for what I would like to call the culture of planning. Of course saying that planning has a culture involves me in a far from neutral enterprise, since the ideology of the plan must almost of necessity present itself as something beyond culture; the plan is rational, whereas culture is a messy, unorganized (because unplanned) tangle of fictions. The sequestration of the plan from the manifold illusions of culture is the fundamental illusion behind the ideology of the plan. Thus that paradigmatic planner, the Swiss architect Le Corbusier, proclaimed the following on the title page *The Radiant City*, a 1933 work laying out plans for an ideal city that would create all the conditions necessary for human happiness: "Plans are the rational and poetic monument set up in the midst of contingencies. Contingencies are the environment: places, peoples, cultures, topographies, climates." Lumping culture together with the weather as just one of those things with which the

plan has to deal, Le Corbusier assures us that the desire to plan is itself untainted by anything irrational—that is, cultural. For the planner, even what seems to be a principled opposition to planning is a sign of mental imbalance, cultural prejudice, or conniving self-interest. It might, then, be well to ask just what aspects of the prejudice in favor of planning are most immune to counter-arguments based upon reason.

Bellamy's *Looking Backward* offers some important clues, since it is not clear that the book appealed to readers because of its passages laying out Bellamy's absurdly uninformed economic *pensées*. Indeed, when, at the height of his fame, Bellamy brought out a fat sequel to *Looking Backward* that sought to lay out his economic musings in a more apparently systematic form, the thing fell stillborn from the press. I may be the only American, other than Bellamy himself, ever actually to have read it through. It may be, in fact, that the appeal of *Looking Backward* may have more to do with aesthetics than with economics, because Bellamy, in common with other planners, justifies his plans at least partially on aesthetic grounds. By this I mean something other than the banal proposition that Bellamy took care to stock his utopia with beautiful objects and people. Utopian planners concern themselves with wholes—whole societies or even just whole cities—that are far too complex to be fully present in all of their details to an individual mind; no matter how full an account of such a society or city is given, in other words, it cannot constitute a unified object of knowledge. Such wholes can, however, be grasped aesthetically, just as one can experience aesthetic satisfaction when contemplating the whole, say, of *Middlemarch*, without fulfilling the impossible condition of having all its details before one's mind at the same time. Since utopian plans are inevitably package deals, requiring the total implementation of a comprehensive order whose details, nevertheless, cannot be grasped by the

intellect, utopians often present us with aesthetically satisfying vistas that are supposed to make palpable the harmonious coordination of all human action that elsewhere they may expound upon in more technical and abstract, but less immediately appealing, ways. Thus Julian West passes through an important stage in his conversion to socialist principles when his utopian host, one Dr. Leete, takes him to a rooftop to survey the city as a whole: “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 inclosures, stretched in every direction. Every quarter contained large open squares filled with trees, among which statues glistened and fountains flashed in the late afternoon sun. Public buildings of a colossal size and an architectural grandeur unparalleled in my day raised their stately piles on every side. Surely I had never seen this city nor one comparable to it before” (18). Although the eye can compose an aesthetic whole even out of cities that do not betray any sign of having been systematically designed—Wordsworth’s “Composed upon Westminster Bridge” is a famous instance--what is being “sold” by Bellamy is the pleasure of coordinated design itself, the kind of experience offered by photographs promoting communities like Seaside, Florida, where much of *The Truman Show* was filmed. The fact that everything is plural—“fine buildings”, “open squares”, “broad streets”—draws our attention to the managed rhythms made possible only by the plan, and not to any particular streets, squares, or buildings. When West dreams that he has returned to nineteenth-century Boston, one is not surprised to find him almost retching when confronted with the uncoordinated hubbub and “malodorousness” (174) of the town.

It is instructive, however, to juxtapose the discomfort with apparent disorder that West acquired in 2000 with the very different assessment of such jumbles offered by architectural critic

Peter Blake. Describing an especially bustling commercial street in Old Delhi, he writes, “It wasn’t designed by anybody in particular. It just happened....It is lined with open-air markets and with thousands of wall-to-wall people. It is a totally disorganized and frenetic mess.... By even the most modest standards of urban design, nothing—nothing whatsoever—even remotely works...; it is quite simply an administrative nightmare. Nothing works...that is, except life itself. For this is precisely the heart of the city.”¹ Since Jane Jacobs’s *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, those who follow urban planning debates have become accustomed to such passages suggesting that the perspective of the administrator or the planner really puts her at odds with those actually on the street, but what I wish to highlight here is the link between Bellamy’s aesthetic preference for regularity in city design and his political assumptions. By trying to inspire a revulsion at forms that do not display conscious design, Bellamy is attempting to teach a political lesson that is unmistakable, and whose ramifications are far-reaching. For just as Bellamy would have us feel that the plan makes for peace and beauty where there was only ugliness and chaos before, so does he also seem to believe that the complexity of the modern world is precisely what requires that it be planned. This error, which has played a distinguished part in so much of the man-made suffering of our century, is endorsed in *Looking Backward* by Dr. Leete, who describes the system of private enterprise and market exchange in the following terms: “No mode more wasteful for utilizing human energy could be devised, and for the credit of the human intellect it should be remembered that the system never was devised, but was merely a survival from rude ages when the lack of social organization made any sort of cooperation impossible” (127). Now this is one of the points that Bellamy got right—half-right, anyway—for the market system is *not* the result of deliberate design. What Bellamy gets wrong is his association of lack

of design with blundering inefficiency and chaos. The fact that the new system has been consciously designed counts for Bellamy as an automatic mark in its favor, but what I want to suggest is that the basis for his preference may depend on the mysterious faculty of taste, about which there can be no disputing. The bazaar in New Delhi just happened, but something like the Nuremberg rally cannot just happen; it must be planned. And if you have in your heart—as did Bellamy--the feeling that such rallies are beautiful, and that the hustle-bustle of spontaneous human activity is disgusting, you may find yourself casting about for reasons supporting the kind of arrangements that will routinize rallies and outlaw jumbles. In his brilliant, parodic obituary of a fictionalized version of Heidegger, Woody Allen has his Heidegger stand-in excuse his membership in the Nazi Party with a jargony, pseudo-philosophical rigmarole, which he sums up in the following way: “In other words, I have the kind of eyes that are set off well by a brown shirt.” The degree to which political stances derive from aesthetic preferences cannot be known with precision, but the presence of such preferences may account for the invulnerability of certain ideologies to reasoned attack.

One ideological enterprise that is notable for such invulnerability (and which, as I will show in a minute, is not unrelated to *Looking Backward*) is urban planning. The most notable outcome of post-World War II urban planning was the debacle of urban renewal. One might have predicted that this disaster might have taught planners some humility, but at least sometimes the lesson planners learned was quite to the contrary. Because, perhaps, of an emotional dedication to planning itself, some drew the following lesson from the failure of planning: “it is beginning to be recognized that planning for social change can no longer be confined to projects within the poverty area alone, however comprehensive in scope such neighborhood projects might

be....Consequently, the tradition of planning for social reform...is now gradually being absorbed into the broader stream of comprehensive development planning.”²

I focus on urban planning in part because, as the above remark quite nakedly shows, city planning is often a stalking horse for social engineering, and because as enthusiasm for overt economic planning becomes harder to maintain, national governments may turn more and more to questions of urban design in order to preserve the scope of their own prerogatives. Al Gore’s desire to turn “sprawl” into a key issue in a national election suggests as much. In addition, the particular set of urban planners with whom Gore is trying to associate himself owe a particular debt to Edward Bellamy himself. One of Bellamy’s early disciples was the British architect Ebenezer Howard. He loved *Looking Backward*, and in order to realize its goals he invented the idea of “the garden city”. For this, he is revered by many as a forerunner of the now vogueish ideas that are known collectively as “the new urbanism,” and I would like to conclude with a consideration of this latest incarnation of Bellamy-tinged thinking.

The new urbanism has the unusual distinction—among theories of urban design, that is—of having been subjected to a hyperbolic satire in a major motion picture I have already mentioned, Peter Weir’s *The Truman Show*. Although the film has been received as a critique of the media—and it is that—television and the environment created by the new urbanism function in the film as metaphors for each other, especially in the way that both work to erode the distinction between the unregulated world of private life and the requirements of the community. In his essay “Planning the American Dream,” which appears in the movement’s most significant collection of manifestos, Peter Katz’s *The New Urbanism: Toward an Architecture of Community*, Todd W. Bressi rather breathtakingly claims that the new urbanism is based on one simple principle:

“Community planning and design must assert the importance of public over private values.”³

Very similar sentiments are voiced in the film by the actress playing Truman’s wife, when, in an interview publicizing the show, she explains that there is nothing degrading about living her life on camera, since “For me, there is no difference between the public life and the private life.”

Indeed, the avowed aim of the new urbanism is to enhance the individual’s awareness of, and commitment to, the public, so to saturate the interiority of the individual psyche with awareness of public needs that she will, if necessary, sacrifice herself to them—“to assert the importance of public over private values.” As is the case with Bellamy, such positing of a social goal will need to be backed up by a kind of free-wheeling assertiveness about issues our understanding of which can hardly be put on a scientific basis. Thus Bellamy assures us that to rely for one’s paycheck upon another individual produces a sense of degradation, but to receive it directly from a government agency is satisfaction itself (146). Who knew? Similarly, advocates of the new urbanism frequently tell us that to be in one’s car or alone at home is to experience disquieting feelings of isolation and alienation, whereas to present oneself for recognition by one’s fellow citizens in a festival marketplace is to be taught an ennobling lesson about “desperately needed civic responsibility,” a responsibility that will find expression in calls for “additional government initiatives.”⁴ When one reads such assertions presented not as articles of faith—which they are—but as the straightforward conclusions of reason, one begins to see why Weir was moved to turn the bustling and inviting public spaces of the new urbanism into symbols of paranoid dread and tyrannical surveillance.

Indeed, the new urbanism really aims at the refashioning of human beings with an eye to making them fall into a preordained line. Consider, for example, Ray Oldenburg’s essay

“Prospects for Community”, appended to a book celebrating Seaside, Florida, in which he writes, “So pronounced has been the shift towards privatized lifestyles that the American dream has been sorely reshaped. Gone...is the ideal of community so crucial to our establishment as a nation and so essential to our predecessors’ well-being and contentment.”⁵ Whether this is good history is certainly open to question; the predecessors alluded to were the same people in whose faces Thoreau thought he read the signs of quiet desperation. It is certainly true, as Oldenburg states, that “The decline of community has been a perennial theme in American social commentary for most of this century.”⁶ But in part that would seem to be not a sign of American thinkers’ centuries-long commitment to what Oldenburg calls community, but because so many twentieth-century thinkers, following in Bellamy’s footsteps, have abandoned the traditional American ambivalence towards such community; as intellectuals became more and more convinced of the virtues of communalism, naturally American society, in which the individual is protected from the community to an unusual degree, started to look worse and worse. The continuity that *is* reflected in the works of many recent American intellectuals is with the robust tradition of European disdain for the relatively unregulated character of our society and manners. This is why Oldenburg approvingly quotes a Frenchman with little understanding of or taste for American life, Jean-Paul Sartre, to whom it seemed that Americans “are dying of loneliness.”⁷ I do not know if there is any way of saying whether one society has more “community” or “loneliness” in it than another, but I am persuaded that laments concerning the decline of community have at least something to do with a mounting hostility towards the idea that individuals should be exposed only to a minimum of interference from communally sanctioned power. The belief in the goodness of that, of course, is a necessary feature of the culture of planning—planners cannot carry

out their plans without it.

But lest my main point get lost in the heat of controversy over the subsidiary issue of current trends in design, let me re-state what it is: that the desire to lay out comprehensive plans for the future is itself an expression of cultural preferences, not reason, and that such plans themselves will necessarily embody the limited range of culturally sanctioned values that make planning seem attractive. It is not the limitation *per se* in plans that need concern us; culture inescapably *is* limitation. What we must remember is that comprehensive plans for the future—even if they could manage to overcome all impediments and achieve their aims—would end up clearing a space not for liberated humanity, but for the kind of human being envisioned by and at home in a culture of planning, a culture of which, in its modern American version, Edward Bellamy is one of the founding fathers.

Thomas Peyser
Associate Professor of English
Randolph-Macon College
Ashland, VA 23005
(804)752-7348
tgpeyser@att.net

1. Peter Blake, *Form Follows Failure: Why Modern Architecture Hasn't Worked* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1977) 118-119.
2. Dorris B. Holleb, *Social and Economic Information for Urban Planning* (Chicago: Center for Urban Studies of the University of Chicago, 1969) 17.
3. Todd W. Bressi, "Planning the American Dream," *The New Urbanism: Toward an Architecture of Community*, ed. Peter Katz (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994) xxx.
4. Bressi xxx, xlii.

5. Ray Oldenburg, "Prospects for Community," *Parallel Utopias: The Sea Ranch, California; Seaside, Florida: The Quest for Community*, Richard Sexton (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1995) 159.

6. Oldenburg 159.

7. Oldenburg 158.