Looking Backward –
Even Further

Jim Fyrth

On May 13th, 1889, Morris wrote to Bruce Glasier that he had read *Looking Backward* by the American socialist Edward Bellamy, as he had promised to lecture on it. “Thank you”, he wrote, “I wouldn’t care to live in such a Cockney paradise as he imagines”. It did, however, help to incite him to write *News from Nowhere*.

It is not difficult to guess what he would have thought of Bellamy’s sequel, *Equality*, published in an English edition in 1902. This was written to include “what was left out” of the original. The theme is the same. Julian West, a rich young man who was hypnotised and taken for dead in 1887, is awakened in the year 2000 by Dr. Leete and his daughter Edith, the great-granddaughter of West’s fiancée. The book centres around a series of conversations between the three and a description of the brave new world of socialism which has been built in twentieth-century America.

Such interest as there is in the book lies in its contrast to Morris’s vision of the future in *News from Nowhere*, and in an understanding of the extent to which American socialist ideas influenced the British socialist movement in the early twentieth century, when there was considerable coming and going of socialists across the Atlantic, and when a great deal of the socialist literature available here was imported from America. There is also an interesting resemblance between Bellamy’s imagination and that of H. G. Wells; a similar forecast of, and belief in, mechanical marvels, and a similar attraction to what might be called “authoritarian equality” – if that is not an oxymoron.

The “Cockney” (perhaps we would say “sci-fi”) features of Bellamy’s utopia are as prominent as in the earlier book. West is shown the new America from an “air-car” (Morris might at least have approved of the afforestation and of the dispersal of urban centres which he witnessed from it), and watches drama and a tour of the world through an “electro-scope” and telephone combined (TV!). This device, as we learn, has made attendance at the theatre, and indeed at any large gathering, unnecessary. So that with the piped music in every house and shopping delivered through tubes, which we met in *Looking Backward*, citizens of socialist America need scarcely leave their houses; except, oddly, to go to the bank to draw the dividends which each receives from the social fund, and to take part in the gymnastics which appear to be compulsory.

Like Morris’s people in *News from Nowhere*, Bellamy’s are noted for their physical beauty. Indeed, they all have periodic measurements of their limbs taken to make sure that they conform to the standards of beauty. Readers in the real late twentieth century will raise an eyebrow to read that the beauty of Bellamy’s Americans is assured because men continue to run after the age of forty-five, and women after the age of fifteen.

Morris, of course, was well aware of the economic basis of socialism and of the economic injustices of capitalism. But whereas, for him, socialist economics were only the foundation on which to build the human values of a good society, Bellamy’s vision seems
to have gone little way beyond economics. Not only are some eighty of his closely printed pages virtually a pamphlet explaining the economics of capitalist crises, his approach to matters which Morris treats with humanity is almost wholly economic. The subordination of women, for instance, he sees as rising from their lack of economic independence. While most socialists would go much of the way with that outlook, today few would believe with him that, since his revolution had made men and women economically independent, what is now called "male chauvinism" had vanished.

Likewise in a – very short – section headed ‘The Coloured Race and the New Social Order’, he recounts how the former slaves (not so long liberated when the book was written) were "in need of some industrial regimen, at once firm and benevolent". The need was met by conscripting them into the "national industrial army". This, together with "universal education" and "economic welfare", brought the end of racial prejudice. No doubt to reassure his white readers he added that, “even for industrial purposes the new system involved no more commingling of races than the old had done”. This is by no means the only case of ideas which would be easily acceptable to the authoritarian right.

Nevertheless this does not obscure the fact that there are many commonsense passages in the book, and some appealing ideas. His justification of equality, and his demolition of arguments which deny it, are relevant today; and his deduction of the need for socialism from the basic principles of the American Constitution would have made his political ideas more acceptable to his readers. Unfortunately his style is turgid and his writing prolix, with none of the magic or historical insight of News from Nowhere.

It is interesting to compare the accounts which the two books give of what Morris called “How the Change Came”. Whereas Old Hammond’s story of the revolution is based on Morris’s experience and understanding of the politics of the 1880s, and uncannily foresees something of the course of European events in the first third of the twentieth century, Dr. Leete’s account in Bellamy’s book is little more than a piece of utopian wishful thinking. As he tells the story, the trusts and monopolies, which were rapidly increasing their power in Bellamy’s day, eventually became all-powerful, and brought economic crises which caused capitalism to virtually fall to pieces. Meanwhile the publication of statistics showing the scandal of economic inequality, a period of industrial strife, and the preaching of the socialists, led to a burst of revivalism, combining religion with socialism, which so swept the country that the electors simply opted for the new society, after which all was smooth water.

This idea, that capitalism would “collapse” and socialists would then be able to “take over” was prominent in the early British socialist movement, and was still around in the 1930s. It was frequently, and wrongly, ascribed to Marx, but seems to have owed more to Hyndman and perhaps, on the evidence of Equality, to American socialists.

But the most saddening feature of Bellamy’s America in 2000 A.D. is its philistinism. In it there seems to be no feeling for “the earth … and all that grows out of it”, none for architecture or beautiful things, or for the buildings and artifacts of the past. Above all, there is no sign that anyone makes anything or is engaged in any kind of creative occupation; and certainly no evidence of “fellowship”. How Morris would have hated it!