

# The Economics of Utopia: Morris and Bellamy Contrasted

Stephen Coleman

The problem of explaining how production and distribution of goods and services will work in a utopian society has been a matter of only passing concern to those who have confined themselves to merely dreaming about the future. After all, if Utopia is Nowhere, why bother about such down-to-earth considerations as crop production and the relevance or otherwise of the market? In 'The Land of Cockayne' the economic problem was easily solved: people could just reach into the sky and pluck a ready-cooked goose, sauce and all. But neither Edward Bellamy nor William Morris, whose utopian novels were published within two years of each other, set out to be, or were, mere dreamers.

Both Morris and Bellamy were motivated to think about utopia by their profound opposition to the late nineteenth-century capitalist societies in which they lived. Bellamy was sickened by the waste and inefficiency of the American Gilded Age. Morris detested the ugliness and injustice of Victorian Britain. Their economic critiques, however, were inspired by different theories. According to Cyrus Willard, probably the closest political associate of Bellamy, the latter "was repelled by the materialistic philosophy of Marx."<sup>1</sup> Morris, on the other hand, was a Marxist who systematically opposed capitalism as a system of commodity production based upon wage labour and capital. Bellamy's anti-capitalism was a less all-embracing assault. His principal opposition was to *private* capitalism, against which he advocated what he explicitly called "public capitalism."<sup>2</sup> Rather than seeking the abolition of the structure of property relationships inherent in capitalism, Bellamy favoured "the abolition of private capitalism and the substitution of some form of co-operative industry."<sup>3</sup> As one studies *Looking Backward* and *News From Nowhere* with a view to understanding the alternative systems of wealth production and distribution proposed in them, it becomes clear that the two writers are attempting to solve different basic economic problems, and therefore, not surprisingly, depict quite different economic visions.

Under capitalism the economic organisation of society is determined by the requirements of profit accumulation. Work, the essential relationship between human energy and the natural environment, is transformed into a commodity. To work within the capitalist economy is to be employed, and employment is an alienated labour process in which one's mental and physical abilities are appropriated by an employer. Work is an activity performed at the behest of the buyer of wage (or salary) labour. It is an activity characterised by a tense and antagonistic relationship between buyer and seller, producer and possessor, profit-maker and profit-taker. Like work, distribution takes a specific form under capitalism. Goods and services are not distributed solely because they are needed.

They must be purchased. If one is incapable of buying in order to satisfy a need, then one must be deprived; one is free to buy in excess of any explicable need if one has the buying power to do so. This process of distribution is known as market allocation, and defenders of capitalism, usually well-trained economists, refer to it as the most rational method of resource allocation available – probably the only one. The control of the capitalist economy is linked directly to ownership of the means of wealth production and distribution. Such control is not democratic, is highly centralised and bureaucratised, and leaves non-controllers (who constitute the majority of the population) with the status of secondary economic citizens. These economic features of capitalism are transcended in Morris's *Nowhere*, but not in Bellamy's Boston of the year 2000.

Let us first consider work in the respective utopias. The citizens of *Nowhere* enjoy working: “all work is now pleasurable ... happiness without happy daily work is impossible.”<sup>4</sup> This clearly contrasts with the common perception of work under capitalism. What accounts for this difference? Firstly, there is an “absence of artificial coercion” in *Nowhere*. People are not compelled to either work or starve, but there is “freedom for every man to do what he can do best”. (p.79) Secondly, people's work is no longer directed to production for “a vague market of which they know nothing, and over which they have no control”. (p.82) When people create purposefully there is a greater satisfaction in working:

The wares which we make are made because they are needed: men make for their neighbours' use as if they were making for themselves ... (p.82)

Thirdly, “no inferior goods are made”. (p.82) This eliminates the factor, so detrimental to work-satisfaction under capitalism, of having to participate in shoddy production which stifles the creative drive. Fourthly, in *Nowhere* the pleasure of consumption is not considered to the exclusion of pleasure in production; in line with Morris's view that “all men should have work to do which is worth doing, and of itself pleasant to do”,<sup>5</sup> work is arranged so that “no man is sacrificed to the wants of another”. (p.83) This does not mean that dirty or arduous tasks are never performed: on the contrary, such work is often carried out so that those who do it may “gain in honour” (p.78), i.e. appreciation from the community, but

From time to time, when we have found out that some piece of work was too disagreeable or troublesome, we have given it up and done altogether without the thing produced by it. (p.83)

In *Nowhere* the worker has become an artist, production and consumption have ceased to be antagonistic relationships, and, more often than not, there is a “conscious, sensuous pleasure” to be derived from working. (p.78)

Work in Bellamy's Bostonian utopia is somewhat different. Work is compulsory. People are “conscripted” into working at the age of twenty-one and not released from service until they are forty-five. In short, work becomes a social duty – an obligation or sacrifice, into which one is dragged and out of which one is allowed to retire after enough has been done. Those performing work are described as an “industrial army”.<sup>6</sup> For Bellamy, the military metaphor becomes literal; as Dr Leete, who guides us around the Bostonian utopia, explains:

The people were already accustomed to the idea that the obligation of every citizen, not physically disabled, to contribute his military services to the nation

was equal and absolute. That it was equally the duty of every citizen to contribute his quota of industrial or intellectual services to the maintenance of the nation was equally evident, though it was not until the nation became the employer of labour that citizens were able to render this sort of service with any pretense either of universality or equity. (p.69)

As Bellamy noted in his article entitled “How I Came To Write *Looking Backward*”, in May 1889, “the modern military system (is) not merely a rhetorical analogy for a national industrial service, but its prototype, furnishing at once a complete working model for its organisation ...”<sup>7</sup>

The coercion of industrial conscription is necessitated by the assumption that without being organised from above people will not contribute their productive energies to society. Bellamy goes into detail to show how his utopia rewards people for working, augmenting the gains as the unattractiveness of labour increases. So, whereas *Nowhere*'s inhabitants freely volunteer their labour and take according to their self-defined needs, Bellamy's conscripts, just like the sellers of the labour-power commodity under existing capitalism, are compelled to endure unequal working conditions. All conscripts into the industrial army spend the years between the ages of 21 and 24 in a virtual slave status, known as “the class of unskilled or common labourers” who are “assignable to do any work at the discretion of their superiors”. (p.73) (It is not known whether Mrs. Thatcher read *Looking Backward* before devising her current youth job-training policy.) Dr Leete informs us:

“These three years of stringent discipline none are exempt from, and very glad our young men are to pass from this severe school into the *comparative* liberty of the trades.”(p.73. My emphasis)

Even after this three-year work ordeal, working is by no means carried on under conditions of equality. We are told in *Looking Backward* that “the highest places in the nation are open only to the highest-class men” who enjoy “special privileges” because they are “superior-class men”. (p.106) All men in the industrial army are in one of three ranks. There is also a division – inimical to Morris's whole outlook – between “brain” and “hand” workers. (p.74) Those described by Bellamy as “stupid” remain “common labourers” throughout their industrial army service. (p.74) There is an “invalid corps” for those considered unfit to make it into the ranks. (p.109) As for women, they are permitted to carry out “lighter occupations” as “an allied force” to the male industrial army. Dr Leete boasts:

We have given them a world of their own, with its emulations, ambitions, and careers, and I assure you they are very happy in it. (p.186)

William Morris has been criticised for romanticising the position of women in *Nowhere*, but, whatever validity there may be in the suggestion that Morris downgrades the female gender, that is insignificant in comparison with the virtual sexual apartheid of Bellamy's utopia.

Although Bellamy does not describe work in the industrial army as wage labour (Chs IX and X), the payment for work by labour-credits places an effective price upon such activity and the commodity character of work, fundamental to the existence of capitalism, still exists. The existence of wage labour in any form, including labour-time vouchers, places production within the value-ethos of market economics.<sup>8</sup>

Turning from the production of goods to their distribution, what features might we expect to associate with resource allocation in a post-capitalist society? Firstly, the common ownership of social wealth removes the need for buying and selling, for one cannot engage in commodity transactions with oneself as both buyer and seller of what society produces. Secondly, the absence of buying and selling would make money superfluous.

In *Nowhere* these principles of distribution do prevail. When the Guest in Morris's utopia is taken to "the market" for the purpose of "shopping" he is shocked to learn that such activity does not involve the buying of commodities. When he is given a fine pipe he asks, to the incomprehension of those around him, 'But however am I to pay for such a thing as this?' (p.31) Only later is he told by Old Hammond that "there is no buying and selling". (p.82) Likewise, there is no money in *Nowhere*. When the Guest offers to give money to Dick the waterman, the latter finds the custom amusingly anachronistic:

"You think that I have done you a service; so you feel yourself bound to give me something which I am not to give to a neighbour, unless he has done something special for me. I have heard of this kind of thing; but pardon me for saying, that it seems to us a troublesome and roundabout custom; and we don't know how to manage it." (p.7)

In short, there is no exchange mentality. Value has come to be expressed in terms of social appreciation and not through fetishised coins, which in *Nowhere* are kept in a museum.

In Bellamy's utopia it is also the case that "There is no selling nor buying nowadays". (p.82) But there is still an exchange mentality, for Bellamy's Boston has not transcended property relationships, but only *private* capitalism. This is made clear in an explanation by Dr Leete:

"When innumerable different and independent persons produced the various things needful to life and comfort, endless exchanges between individuals were requisite ... But as soon as the nation became the sole producer of all sorts of commodities, there was no need for exchanges between individuals ... Everything was procurable from one source, and nothing could be procured anywhere else." (p.83)

So, all that has been eliminated is private or individual exchange. The inhabitants of Bellamy's Boston must still procure what they need from the state. Despite Leete's assertion that such procurement is not a buying transaction – just as he claimed that payment for working is not a wage – the evidence given in the novel shows that it is precisely that. In order to procure one's needs from the national shops everyone pays, using a credit card which corresponds "to his share of the annual product of the nation". (p.83) In short, labour credits, or wages, are used to buy what one needs. For example, house rents charged by the nation "vary, according to size, elegance and location". (p.97) This means that credit performs the usual function of money: the universal equivalent which may be spent on one good to the exclusion of another. It serves as a barrier to free access. Bellamy could argue that this credit would not constitute money because it would not circulate. Even if this could be guaranteed, it is still money in the important respects of being a device for rationing purchases and alienating the procurers from the store of goods and services – to

alienate them from what, as the collectivity of the nation, they are supposed to own. The conclusion cannot be avoided that whereas *Nowhere* had dispensed with buying, selling and money, Boston in the year 2000 claims to have done so, but has not.

Economic control in *Nowhere* is not explained. It is evidently decentralised, and we are informed that those who wish to work outside of the wider community are free to do so. (pp.148-52) As no mechanism for the planning of production and distribution is outlined, one might assume that such activity is carried out almost spontaneously, simply because it needs to be done: a sort of economic anarcho-Taoism. Bellamy's utopia depends upon a highly centralised, benevolently authoritarian economic administration, the political nature of which is beyond the scope of the present article. The nation has become a giant business corporation. Of this utopia, Morris wrote that it "may be described as State Communism, worked by the vast extreme of national centralisation".<sup>9</sup> More logically, Morris might have called it state capitalism; or, had he been writing forty years later, the corporate state. When Bellamy's son, Paul, was introduced to the Labour Prime Minister, Clement Attlee, in 1948, Attlee described *Looking Backward* as one of the English bibles and commented that his government was "a child of the Bellamy idea".<sup>10</sup> One could not imagine Attlee claiming inspiration for his government's programme of centralised, bureaucratic, state-capitalist measures from Morris's *News from Nowhere*.

In a period such as our own, where at home and abroad those who have called themselves socialists are hastily re-defining the economic implications of that concept – at a time when Gorbachev and Kinnock compete with one another to be most praising of the market mechanism, and the Marxist conception of a non-market society is being decried all the way from the Banks of Shanghai to the halls of British academia where "neo-socialist" philosophers attempt to reconcile socialism with the market – we could do worse than consider these utopian visions of what a post-capitalist society might look like. And we could do worse than ask of them, which has been tried? which is worth trying?

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Arthur E. Morgan, *Edward Bellamy* (New York, 1944), p. 372.

<sup>2</sup> Edward Bellamy, *Equality* (New York, 1890), Preface, p. ii.

<sup>3</sup> Morgan, op. cit., p. 368, f.iv.

<sup>4</sup> William Morris, *News from Nowhere* ed. J. Redmond (London, 1970). Subsequent references are given in brackets.

<sup>5</sup> A.L. Morton, *Selected Political Writings of William Morris* (London, 1973), p. 111; the quotation is from Morris's "Art and Socialism" (1884).

<sup>6</sup> Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward* (Harmondsworth, 1986), p. 70. Subsequent references are given in brackets.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Morgan, op. cit., p. 319.

<sup>8</sup> See my chapter IV in M. Rubel, and J. Crump, *Non-Market Socialism in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (London, 1987)

<sup>9</sup> *Commonweal*, 22 June 1889

<sup>10</sup> Sylvia Bowman, ed., *Edward Bellamy Abroad: An American Prophet's Influence* (New York, 1962), p. 88.