Looking Backward, 2000-1887 by Edward Bellamy, 1888

Introduction

*Looking Backward, 2000–1887,* is a utopian science fiction novel written by American author and socialist Edward Bellamy. Bellamy was first exposed to the plight of the urban poor as a young man studying law. He later worked as a journalist in Massachusetts and New York before he began to publish short stories. With the publication of *Looking Backward, 2000–1887,* Bellamy described a United States operating in the future under his vision of an ideal socialist system. The novel’s narrator, a wealthy man named Julian West, lives in Boston in the year 1887. Julian lives to see the year 2000 after surviving an accident in a state of suspended animation. He experiences an ideal Boston that is vastly different than the Boston he lived in during the nineteenth century: the government owns and directs all means of production and divides products fairly among all citizens. Living in such a place causes Julian to come to believe that nineteenth-century Boston is inhumane. *Looking Backward, 2000–1887,* drew a huge following across the United States, in social and economic circles. Several “Bellamy Societies” or clubs sprang up, expressing their interest in social and economic reform. In the following excerpt, Julian explains some of the differences between the way people lived in 1887 and the way they lived in the year 2000.

Sourcing Questions

1. Who wrote this passage and when?
2. What was happening in the United States when this was written? Explain the context.
3. What motivated Bellamy to write this novel?
Vocabulary

debauch (v): to destroy or debase the moral purity of; corrupt

depravity (n): moral corruption; wickedness

enfeeble (v): to make weak or feeble

pestilent (adj): destructive to life; deadly

Comprehension Questions

1. Describe the analogy; for example, who was where on the coach?
2. According to his analogy, where did the majority of people work and what does that say about society?
3. Where did everyone want to be on the coach and why?
4. What did Bellamy mean by this statement: “By the rule of the coach a man could leave his seat to whom he wished, but on the other hand there were many accidents by which it might at any time be wholly lost”?
5. Was anyone completely secure in this coach? Be sure to explain and cite the text.
6. What was the similarity between the cost of labor in 1887 and in 2000?
7. What caused the difference in cost in 1887 compared with 2000 and how did that provide for a more equitable system?
8. What would also be in large supply and why was that important?
9. What happened to the goods that remained unsold and why was that necessary in a completely equitable society?
10. Why were both the rich and the poor in a bad situation in the late nineteenth century?
11. How was life in the twenty-first century better for women and children?
12. Overall, how had life improved for everyone because of this new equitable system?
13. According to Bellamy, what is “simple and obvious” about a society based on selfishness? How is this a critique of nineteenth-century society?
14. How were people put into an impossibly hypocritical situation in the nineteenth century?

Historical Reasoning Questions

1. According to the character Julian West, what was life like for the average U.S. citizen during the late 1800s?
2. In Bellamy’s view, how did disparity in wealth affect the general health of the country?

According to this text, to solve the problems of the nineteenth century, what did Bellamy believe needed to occur?
By way of attempting to give the reader some general impression of the way people lived together in those days, and especially of the relations of the rich and poor to one another, perhaps I cannot do better than to compare society as it then was to a prodigious coach which the masses of humanity were harnessed to and dragged toilsomely along a very hilly and sandy road. The driver was hunger, and permitted no lagging, though the pace was necessarily very slow. Despite the difficulty of drawing the coach at all along so hard a road, the top was covered with passengers who never got down, even at the steepest ascents. These seats on top were very breezy and comfortable. Well up out of the dust, their occupants could enjoy the scenery at their leisure, or critically discuss the merits of the straining team. Naturally such places were in great demand and the competition for them was keen, every one seeking as the first end in life to secure a seat on the coach for himself and to leave it to his child after him. By the rule of the coach a man could leave his seat to whom he wished, but on the other hand there were many accidents by which it might at any time be wholly lost. For all that they were so easy, the seats were very insecure, and at every sudden jolt of the coach persons were slipping out of them and falling to the ground, where they were instantly compelled to take hold of the rope and help to drag the coach on which they had before ridden so pleasantly. It was naturally regarded as a terrible misfortune to lose one’s seat, and the apprehension that this might happen to them or their friends was a constant cloud upon the happiness of those who rode…

But the explanation need not be long; the cost of the labor which produced it was recognized as the legitimate basis of the price of an article in your day, and so it is in ours. In your day, it was the difference in wages that made the difference in the cost of labor; now it is the relative number of hours constituting a day’s work in different trades, the maintenance of the worker being equal in all cases. The cost of a man’s work in a trade so difficult that in order to attract volunteers the hours have to be fixed at four a day is twice as great as that in a trade where the men work eight hours. The result as to the cost of labor, you see, is just the same as if the man working four hours were paid, under your system, twice the wages the others get. This calculation applied to the labor employed in the various processes of a manufactured article gives its price relatively to other articles. Besides the cost of production and transportation, the factor of scarcity affects the prices of some commodities. As regards the great staples of life, of which an abundance can always be secured, scarcity is eliminated as a factor. There is always a large surplus kept on hand from which any fluctuations of demand or supply can be corrected, even in most cases of bad crops. The prices of the staples grow less year by year, but rarely, if ever, rise. There are, however, certain classes of articles permanently, and others temporarily, unequal to the demand, as, for example, fresh fish or dairy products in the latter category, and the products of high skill and rare materials in the other. All that can be done here is to equalize the inconvenience of the scarcity. This is done by temporarily raising the price if the scarcity be temporary, or fixing it high if it be permanent. High prices in your day meant restriction of the articles affected to the rich, but nowadays,
the means of all are the same, the effect is only that those to whom the articles seem most desirable are the ones who purchase them. Of course the nation, as any other caterer for the public needs must be, is frequently left with small lots of goods on its hands by changes in taste, unseasonable weather and various other causes. These it has to dispose of at a sacrifice just as merchants often did in your day, charging up the loss to the expenses of the business. Owing, however, to the vast body of consumers to which such lots can be simultaneously offered, there is rarely any difficulty in getting rid of them at trifling loss…

In your day, riches debauched one class with idleness of mind and body, while poverty sapped the vitality of the masses by overwork, bad food, and pestilent homes. The labor required of children, and the burdens laid on women, enfeebled the very springs of life.

Instead of these maleficent circumstances, all now enjoy the most favorable conditions of physical life; the young are carefully nurtured and studiously cared for; the labor which is required of all is limited to the period of greatest bodily vigor, and is never excessive; care for one’s self and one’s family, anxiety as to livelihood, the strain of a ceaseless battle for life—all these influences, which once did so much to wreck the minds and bodies of men and women, are known no more. Certainly, an improvement of the species ought to follow such a change. In certain specific respects we know, indeed, that the improvement has taken place. Insanity, for instance, which in the nineteenth century was so terribly common a product of your insane mode of life, has almost disappeared, with its alternative, suicide…

…It finds its simple and obvious explanation in the reaction of a changed environment upon human nature. It means merely that a form of society which was founded on the pseudo self-interest of selfishness, and appealed solely to the anti-social and brutal side of human nature, has been replaced by institutions based on the true self-interest of a rational unselfishness, and appealing to the social and generous instincts of men…

Poor fellows, theirs was indeed a trying business, preaching to men a generosity and unselfishness which they and everybody knew would, in the existing state of the world, reduce to poverty those who should practice them, laying down laws of conduct which the law of self-preservation compelled men to break. Looking on the inhuman spectacle of society, these worthy men bitterly bemoaned the depravity of human nature; as if angelic nature would not have been debauched in such a devil’s school! Ah, my friends, believe me, it is not now in this happy age that humanity is proving the divinity within it. It was rather in those evil days when not even the fight for life with one another, the struggle for mere existence, in which mercy was folly, could wholly banish generosity and kindness from the earth.