



Looking Backward: 2000 to 1887

Edward Bellamy

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Looking Backward: 2000–1887 is a utopian science fiction novel by Edward Bellamy, a journalist and writer from Chicopee Falls, Massachusetts; it was first published in 1888. According to Erich Fromm, Looking Backward is “one of the most remarkable books ever published in America”.

It was the third-largest bestseller of its time, after Uncle Tom’s Cabin and Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ. It influenced a large number of intellectuals, and appears by title in many of the major Marxist writings of the day. “It is one of the few books ever published that created almost immediately on its appearance a political mass movement”.

In the United States alone, over 162 “Bellamy Clubs” sprang up to discuss and propagate the book’s ideas. Owing to its commitment to the nationalization of private property and the desire to avoid use of the odious term “Socialism,” this political movement came to be known as “Nationalism” — not to be confused with the political concept of nationalism. The novel also inspired several utopian communities.

Bellamy’s novel tells the story of a hero figure named Julian West, a young American who, towards the end of the 19th century, falls into a deep, hypnosis-induced sleep and wakes up one hundred and thirteen years later. He finds himself in the same location (Boston, Massachusetts), but in a totally changed world: It is the year 2000 and, while he was sleeping, the United States has been transformed into a socialist utopia. The remainder of the book outlines Bellamy’s thoughts about improving the future. The major themes include problems associated with capitalism, a proposed socialist solution of a nationalization of all industry, the use of an “industrial army” to organize production and distribution, as well as how to ensure free cultural production under such conditions.

Although Bellamy’s novel did not discuss technology or the economy in detail, commentators frequently compare Looking Backward with actual economic and technological developments. For example, Julian West is taken to a store which (with its descriptions of cutting out the middleman to cut down on waste in a similar way to the consumers’ cooperatives of his own day based on the Rochdale Principles of 1844) somewhat resembles a modern warehouse club like BJ’s, Costco, or Sam’s Club. He additionally introduces a concept of “credit” cards in chapters 9, 10, 11, 13, 25, and 26, but these actually function like modern debit cards. All citizens receive an equal amount of “credit.” Those with more difficult, specialized, dangerous or unpleasant jobs work fewer hours (in contrast to the real-world practice of paying them more for their efforts of, presumably, the same hours). Bellamy also predicts both sermons and music being available in the home through cable “telephone” (already demonstrated but commercialized only in 1890 as Théâtrophone in France). Bellamy labeled the philosophy behind the vision “nationalism”, and his work inspired the formation of more than 160 Nationalist Clubs to propagate his ideas.

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