

# Looking Backward 123 Years Later

By Samuel Blumenfeld

The year 2011 marks the 123<sup>rd</sup> year since the publication of Edward Bellamy's famous utopian novel, *Looking Backward*, in which the author depicted a happy, socialist America in the year 2000. In Bellamy's optimistic fantasy, greed and material want ceased to exist, brotherly harmony prevailed, the arts and sciences flourished, and an all-powerful and pervasive government and bureaucracy were efficient and fair.

The book became enormously popular, selling 371,000 copies in its first two years and a million copies by 1900. Its influence on American progressive educators and intellectuals was enormous. In fact, it became their vision of a future American paradise in which human moral perfectibility could at last be attained.

The extent of the book's influence can be measured by the fact that in 1935, when Columbia University asked philosopher-educator John Dewey, historian Charles Beard, and Atlantic Monthly editor Edward Weeks to prepare independently lists of the 25 most influential books since 1885, *Looking Backward* ranked as second on each list after Marx's *Das Kapital*. In other words, *Looking Backward* was considered the most influential American book in that 50-year period.

John Dewey characterized the book as "one of the greatest modern syntheses of humane values." Even after the rise of Hitler's National Socialism in Germany and Marxist-Leninist communism in Russia, Dewey still clung to Bellamy's vision of a socialist America. In his 1934 essay, "The Great American Prophet," Dewey wrote:

"I wish that those who conceive that the abolition of private capital and of energy expended for profit signify complete regimenting of life and the abolition of all personal choice and all emulation, would read with an open mind Bellamy's picture of a socialized economy. It is not merely that he exposes with extraordinary vigor and clarity the restriction upon liberty that the present system imposes but that he pictures how socialized industry and finance would release and further all of those personal and private types of occupation and use of leisure that men and women actually most prize today....

"It is an American communism that he depicts, and his appeal comes largely from the fact that he sees in it the necessary means of realizing the democratic ideal....

"The worth of Bellamy's book in effecting a translation of the ideas of democracy into economic terms is incalculable. What *Uncle Tom's Cabin* was to the anti-slavery movement Bellamy's book may well be to the shaping of popular opinion for a new social order."

Bellamy envisaged America becoming socialist by way of consensus rather than revolution. In turn, Dewey, who spent his professional life trying to transform

Bellamy's vision into American reality, saw education as the principle means by which this transformation could be achieved. He spent the years 1894 to 1904 at the University of Chicago in his Laboratory School seeking to devise a new curriculum for the public schools that would produce the kind of socialized youngsters who would bring about the new socialist millenium.

The result, of course, is the education we have today--a minimal interest in the development of intellectual, scientific, and literacy skills and a maximal effort to produce socialized, politically correct, individuals who can barely read.

Today, many years later, the University of Chicago stands as an island of academic tranquility in Chicago's Southside, surrounded by a sea of social and urban devastation caused by the philosophical emanations from Dewey's laboratory and other departments. Charles Judd, the university's Wundtian professor of educational psychology, labored mightily to organize the radical reform of the public school curriculum to conform with Dewey's socialist plan.

According to Dewey, the philosophical underpinning of capitalism is individualism sustained by an education that stressed the development of literacy skills. High literacy encourages intellectual independence which produces strong individualism. It was Dewey's exhaustive analysis of individualism that led him to believe that the socialized individual could only be produced by first getting rid of the traditional emphasis on language and literacy in the primary grades and turning the children toward socialized activities and behavior.

In 1898, he wrote a devastating critique of traditional Three R's education, entitled "The Primary-Education Fetich (sic)," in which he took to task the entire centuries-old emphasis on literacy. He wrote:

"The plea for the predominance of learning to read in early school life because of the great importance attaching to literature seems to me a perversion."

He then mapped out a long-range, comprehensive strategy that would reorganize primary education to serve the needs of socialization. "Change must come gradually," he wrote. "To force it unduly would compromise its final success by favoring a violent reaction."

If what he was advocating was so beneficial, why would it favor a violent reaction? The simple fact is that when parents send their children to school they want them to become good readers. They don't send them to school to become socialists.

Obviously, Dewey had learned a lot from the Fabian socialists in England whose motto was *Festina lente*--"Make haste slowly."

Part of the new primary curriculum was a new method of teaching reading, an ideographic method that teaches children to read English as if it were Chinese, by simple word recognition, as if each word were like a Chinese character. It was called the

“look-say or sight” method. In fact, it was at the University of Chicago that Charles Judd’s protégé, William Scott Gray, developed the Dick and Jane reading program which in the 1930’s became the standard method of teaching reading in American schools and has caused the devastating epidemic of functional illiteracy in America.

By 1955, the reading problem had become so severe that Rudolf Flesch felt compelled to write a book about it, *Why Johnny Can’t Read*. But it didn’t move the educators to change anything. They were firmly committed to Dewey’s plan to create a socialist America. Indeed, in 2007, the National Endowment for the Arts released a somber report on the state of American literacy. Its chairman, Dana Gioia, stated: “This is a massive social problem. We are losing the majority of the new generation. They will not achieve anything close to their potential because of poor reading.”

False doctrines lead to tragic consequences. Chicago’s Southside, New York’s Harlem and East Bronx, Boston’s Roxbury, and other such third-world type enclaves in American cities, peopled by the new American underclass, all of whom have attended American government schools, are the making of the arrogant eugenicist doctrines, policies, and strategies of the progressive movement. Progressives, of course, will never admit responsibility for the human wreckage they have created . In fact, they have deified Dewey, attributing the failures of progressive education to everything but Dewey.

Meanwhile, Bellamy’s consensus utopia is far more remote today than it was in 1888. The present economic mess created by the socialists in Washington--with, unfortunately, some help from the Bush Administration--cannot possibly evolve into anything Bellamy would have recognized. At least back then many intelligent people entertained the delusion of human perfectibility and that utopia was possible.

Today, after the horrible events of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we know that Bellamy’s basic analysis of capitalism and human nature was false. But the fact that diehard socialists still exist in America and occupy the highest ranks of power in Washington is proof that man is indeed a fallen creature and capable of the kind of evil that destroys nations. We survived John Dewey and Edward Bellamy. But will we survive Obama?