Utopias/Dystopias: From the Progressive Era to a Sustainable Future

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PROGRESSIVE ERA NOVELS

Utopian/dystopian novels of the late-nineteenth-and-early-twentieth centuries grappled with how society was to survive contemporary challenges such as the oppression of industrial workers, the extremes of wealth and poverty, urban overcrowding, immigrant assimilation and pollution. Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward 2000-1887*, characterized at the time as “the ‘Uncle Tom’s Cabin’ of industrial slavery,” describes a world where workers are no longer slaves to industrial tycoons and, in Marxist terms, own the means of production and share equitably in the fruits of their labor.1

Bellamy’s protagonist Julian West (an up-and-coming intellectual who had flirted with the ideas of socialism in his own time) awakens in the year 2000 from a supposed 113-year drug-induced sleep in his native Boston (Figure 1). Profound changes in industrial production have peacefully transformed life, labor, and social relationships across the globe. The monopolies that people feared in the late-nineteenth century have ultimately been seen as the only way to use resources efficiently to produce goods for everyone.2 So rather than destroy these monopolies, the people took control of them and created a single central entity based on association, not competition—foretelling the early ideas of the Bolshevik Revolution twenty years later.3

In this socialist utopia, everyone works from the age of twenty-one until the age of forty-five producing the goods and services needed by society. Individuals can then pursue intellectual or other interests for the next ten to twenty years of life. Life expectancy for someone born in 1890 was between thirty-seven and forty-two years depending on race and gender but in the new society with less strenuous work, less pollution, and less disease, people were expected to live longer. Bellamy, himself, born in 1850, only lived to 48 years old.

In this new society, production and consumption became totally driven by personal desires and freed...
from the coercion of advertisement and the pressures of retailers and middlemen. Sample goods were located in conveniently located ‘stores’ but were delivered from a central location so that only needed inventory was created (foreseeing ‘just in time’ production). Money was unnecessary since everyone was issued what Bellamy called a “credit card” with the same amount of credit that people spent according to their own wishes whether on fine clothes, food, horses, or whatever. People could inherit material objects, but they could not sell them, so they were disinclined to accumulate things. People tended to have houses that were just large enough for their needs and furnished for ease of maintenance in accordance with their tastes.

The city also had clean with well-ordered streets. As Dr. Leete explained when West remarked on the lack of chimneys and smoke, “it is nearly a century since the crude method of combustion on which you depended for heat became obsolete.” Electricity provided light and heat and a wide variety of live music was piped into subscribers’ homes. People ate in dining facilities and washed clothes centrally as well. Women worked in this utopia and were no longer dependent on men for their subsistence although they were still treated as the weaker sex. Emigration was still possible internationally. Without competition, war became obsolete. Since everyone’s needs were met, the criminal class also disappeared.

In reaction to Bellamy’s machine-centered utopia, the textile designer and socialist William Morris (1834-1896) used a similar device of a sleeping time traveler to explore England a hundred years hence (Figure 2). For Morris, industrialization resulted in masses of shoddy inelegant and useless goods whose creation led to imperialism and the alienation of workers from their labor. In News from Nowhere published in 1890, Morris foresaw the violent overthrow of this capitalist system and its transformation into a world where handcraft and beauty were valued and machines only mitigated the drudgery of work that needed to be done. People did the work they took pleasure in and provided their services and wares to those who wanted or needed them for free. In Morris’ world, cities no longer existed. People lived in towns or dispersed in the countryside and cooperated to provide a range of services for each other. Accumulation was discouraged. Architecture was valued and ornamented and interiors were spacious and comfortable. Morris despised the iron structures of his day and in his imagined world, stone bridges and traditional construction methods were revived.

Dystopian novels also envisioned socialism defeating capitalism but portrayed the future in dull, monochromatic terms where all differences and competition were eradicated—even the types of humans reproduced were standardized either through controlled conception or the euthanization of children who were ‘different’. Everyone lived in identical rooms, listened to the same piped-in music and news, and communicated with loved ones through machines. Works such as Jack London’s The Iron Heel (1907); Robert Hugh Benson’s Lord of the World (1908); and

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**Figure 2.** Cover of William Morris, News from Nowhere 1891 by Walter Crane (1845–1915), titled “Solidarity of Labour,” 1890. Representatives of the five continents in pre-industrial dress hold hands surrounded by banners echoing the words of the French Revolution (Fraternity, Liberty, and Equality). Hand tools are arrayed at their feet.
E. M. Forster, *The Machine Stops* (1909) characterized socialism as a negative force that would eliminate curiosity, creativity, and progress.⁷

Labor unrest, violent strikes, and disassociated immigrants were features of everyday life in the industrial age (1870s-1910s)—dubbed the *Gilded Age* by Mark Twain in his 1874 eponymous novel.⁸ The boom-and-bust cycles of competitive systems that encouraged the production of goods at the lowest possible cost and their sale at the highest had created a financially untenable situation for most workers who were treated as endless expendable cogs. Managers thought that if even one person was waiting in line to take a job, the employed worker must be overpaid.⁹ Industrialists also competed with each other and over-production of goods was a constant problem, which increased unemployment and fostered imperialistic actions to open new markets for these surplus goods.¹⁰ Major recessions occurred every few years punctuated by bank panics throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and this further destabilized employment and echoes the situation today...one of longer and deeper recessions since the early 20th century.

Figure 3. Temple of Music at the 1901 Pan America exposition in Buffalo, New York, by Architects Esenwein and Johnson where the Polish-born anarchist Leon Czolgosz shot President McKinley during a public reception. Rendering attributed to Nolan S. Hewlett. Watercolor. 1899. Collection of the Buffalo & Erie County Historical Society, used by permission.

These ideas evolved into a systematic and scientific view of the city among planners. The so-called “city practical” or “city functional” movement appealed to hard-boiled men who were more interested in the way the city was managed and functioned than in its attractiveness and amenities.³⁰ Plans for many cities such as Frederick Law Olmstead’s plan for Pittsburgh were executed during this time and embodied the ideals of practicality and beauty (Figure 4).

Despite the stressful urban conditions in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, American cities continued to grow by leaps and bounds. By the 1920 census the United States had become a majority urban nation with 51.2 percent of residents living in cities. A burning question was how to accommodate the ever-increasing number of urban dwellers most of whom were from southern and Eastern Europe.³¹

Although the 1892-93 Columbian Exposition in Chicago has been characterized as a turning point in...
urban planning because of its impact on visitors, city mayors and architects, the first comprehensive urban plan, was the so-called 1902 McMillan Plan for Washington, D.C. As with the earlier Daniel Burnham Plan for the Chicago exhibition, the plan resulted from the collaboration over time of artists, architects, planners and government officials, and was realize despite many difficulties. Planners and even architects began to realize that city planning and architectural design was not the result of an individual’s brilliant insight, but of a collaborative effort among dozens of interested parties and experts and involved the ultimate residents of the cities.

Urban historian Michael McGerr characterizes the progressive movement as ‘radical’ in its scope and as a ‘failure’ because it clung too tightly to middle class values. According to McGerr, although those involved were more socialist than they would admit, they shied away from restructuring fundamental economic relationships and from challenging “the virtue of private property.” The remaining legacy is that, as David Harvey argues, wealth distribution has become more uneven since the 1980s and is approaching the level it was in 1913 (Figure 5). Infrastructure investment further favors the wealthy and the well-placed residents. The poor are left to absorb the negative aspects of development.

The 1924 AIA Committee on Community Planning and their supporters such as the editor of the Journal of the AIA, Charles Harris Whitaker, and the urban theorist Lewis Mumford did not promote the continued growth of cities, which they saw as unmanageable.

Community planning does not ask by what desperate means a city of 600,000 people can add another 400,000 during the next generation, nor how a city of 7 millions may enlarge its effective borders so as to include 29 million....it asks...how big must a city be to perform effectively all of its social, education, and industrial functions.

They largely were ‘anti-urbanists’ and preferred less dense cities. Their ideas were later soundly criticized by writers such as Jane Jacobs, who argued that ‘great cities’, so-called megalopolises, were desirable because they were large and fostered incredible diversity within an efficient system.

**INFRASTRUCTURAL LEGACIES**

Cities in the early 21st century are again faced with infrastructural choices. Through New Urbanism (old urbanism in new clothes) and co-housing (ecological planning), architects have again become more involved with “community planning” if not urban planning as hoped for by the 1924 AIA Committee on Community Planning.

Urbanized countries consume more energy and produce more greenhouse gases than un-urbanized ones, but within urbanized countries, dense urban centers consume as much as 30% less energy than the suburbs or rural areas. It is very difficult for people to change their behavior even when intentions are good, so creating denser urban areas is one approach to reducing energy consumption. Cities are struggling to invest wisely in their urban infrastructure and are trying to re-create themselves as denser, more efficient centers of innovation and creativity. They should also consciously, if not explicitly, move their planning goals in this direction. Architects, planners, utopian and dystopian thinkers all need to come together to imagine and strategize to adapt to this future, whatever it turns out to be ‘becoming’. Undoubtedly it will involve major infrastructural investments. As municipal leaders invest-

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**Figure 5.** After Neoliberal policies were implemented in the early 1980s, income disparities soared especially in the United States (top line on right). The disparities have only continued to increase since then. Source: Thomas Piketty and Emmanuel Saez, “Income Inequality in the United States, 1913-1998. The Quarterly Journal of Economics, February 2003, 1-39. p. 38.
ed in the infrastructure of early 20th century cities, so must we invest in cities in the early 21st century.

**Legacy of Urban Highways**

Mass transportation systems that developed in the early 20th century had a great impact on the organization of the city and have continued to shape them. Although overall mass transit use in the United States in very low, only 1.9% of commuters use mass transit, in major urban areas it is considerably higher, for instance in New York City 36.7%; Boston 17.4%; Chicago 9.7% and Philadelphia 7.9%; Ottawa, Canada 17.9%. Some argue that mass transit in the United States has not produced the ridership and transit-oriented development as promised. Richar Voith in a Brookings-Wharton Papers on Urban Affairs challenges the conclusions of an extensive study by Nathaniel Buam-Snow and Matthew E. Kahn arguing among other things that the investment in highway construction in the 16 cities studied between 1970-2000 undermined the investment in mass transit ($25 Billion had been spent on mass transit in the 30 years studies whereas $128.5 billion was spent on highways in 2000 alone.)

Urban highways across the country encircle downtown areas in a tight knot cutting the business core from the rest of the city and creating barriers to walkability. Dallas’ highways create a central city of approximately 1.4 miles x 1.0 mile, Detroit 1.2 miles x .85 mile, Houston 1.4 miles x 1.0 mile, and Charlotte, North Carolina, 1.64 miles x .77 miles. Highways also cut cities off from adjacent waterways and scenic vistas (Cleveland, Cincinnati, Seattle, Louisville, etc.).

Urban highways not only harmed cities directly, but also indirectly by making suburban living convenient. After World War II, Title I of the Housing Act of 1949 and the Housing Act of 1954 were intended to target socio-economic problems in cities and revitalize urban centers in order to retain and promote middle-class residents. Yet The Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956 that strove to connect cities coast to coast and to facilitate inter-urban movement, ultimately undermined the goals of the 1949 and 1954 Housing Acts by opening up areas outside of the urban core to suburbanization.

A few American cities managed to avoid the pressure to allow urban highways to dominate their downtowns in the 1950s and 1960s. In San Francisco, only three of ten planned highways (Southern, Embarcadero and Central) were built (Issel 1999, p. 622). In Phoenix the Arizona Republic newspaper fought the proposed configuration of the I-10/Papago Freeway that would have run two concrete ribbons one hundred feet over Central Avenue with “helicoil” off-ramps. It was defeated in 1973; approved in a new form in 1983; and finally completed below grade, topped with a successful urban ‘Deck Park’ in 1990 that has enhanced the space around the Central Library. Other cities have removed urban elevated highways and entities such as the Center for New Urbanism would like to remove more of them. The Loma Prieta earthquake in 1989 caused the removal of the Embarcadero in San Francisco. The feared gridlock did not follow its demise or the later removal of the Central Highway when it was reduced and replaced with the European styled Octavia Boulevard. This has allowed the adjacent Hayes Valley neighborhood to blossom.

To successfully remove urban highways, cities need good mass transit systems and/or a well-connected and integrated network of streets to accommodate the traffic such as occurred in the successful removal of Milwaukee’s Park East Freeway.

**SHRINKING/EXPANDING POPULATIONS**

In the 21st century, some cities are still growing, while others have to learn to contract as we are arriving toward maximal urban growth in the United States. The concentration of people and activities in a physical environment fosters and supports interaction and invention. According to the 2010 US census, 83.67% of the population live in urban areas (defined as greater than 50,000 people or in urban clusters of between 2,500-5,000 people). The United Nations expects urban populations to grow steadily both worldwide and (at a slower pace) in the OECD Countries (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development). By 2050, 70% of world population and 86% of OECD countries will live in urban areas.

The most densely populated cities are in Asia. Union City, New Jersey is the only US city included in the top 50 densest world cities (49,381 people per square mile; 77 people per acre). The densest city in the world is Manila in the Philippines with 111,576 people per square mile (174.3 people/acre). The residential section of Le Corbusier’s Ville Radieuse, (Ra-
Many urban centers have lost population density since the 1950s. As explained above, in the 1940s cities were trying to revitalize their central business districts to attract more middle-income residents while the federal government on a national scale was funding urban highways, which facilitated the exodus from cities. City leaders thought that urban renewal programs would allow them to clear out the undesirable parts of cities, yet their single-mindedness in carrying out these intentions destroyed the cities they were attempting to save. The residents that were displaced exacerbated problems in other parts of the city and created an infrastructural legacy that is inequitable and resistant to easy solutions. According to Nigel Taylor, the "normative principles of post-war planning thought are its Utopian comprehensiveness, its anti-urbanism, its ordered conception of urban structure and a consensus view of planning values" that treats "'people' or 'the public' as an undifferentiated group."^{52}

As urban centers have lost population, often their related 'hinterlands' have expanded two and three times in population and size. Municipalities see expansion and annexing unincorporated areas as a good way to maintain flexibility and control development in a larger area. Some cities especially in the northeast and in the mid-Atlantic are geographically constrained and have difficulty controlling investment and development. Others such as Denver have been legislatively limited in their ability to expand.^{53} Portland Oregon has had a growth boundary since 1972—its goal was to protect the fields and forests and the natural beauty of the areas. Consequently, its density is almost twice that of Seattle, Washington and has a very pleasant walk-able downtown area.

Cities that lost population have been trying to revitalize their centers to make them more desirable. Many of them have built large-scale projects such as convention centers to attract visitors. Convention planners told city officials that the venue is critical, that convention centers need to be in unique and lively environments with upscale shopping, restaurants, and cultural amenities within walking distance. These, in addition to quality urban housing, are also the criteria used to attract the so-called creative class, which reinforces this bias towards cultivating the special character of a place.^{54} Cities spent billions of dollars in their downtown cores and succeeded in attracting just a few percentage points in population increases. Cities like New York, Boston, Denver, and Chicago have become much more vibrant and their urban populations have risen but they are also very expensive to live in making it difficult for young members of the creative class to live there. In Kansas City, there is some indication that the construction of the "Kansas City Live" Power and Light District in 2007 did not create new revenue, but simply shifted it from the neighboring areas of Westport and Country Club Plaza to the downtown area. The projects that are not built or developed because of the funds spent on a large glitzy project are not easily estimated. In David Sawicki’s view, probably the most valuable contribution of these 'Festival Marketplaces’ is the pride that they engender in the population.^{56}

Cities have spent billions of dollars on infrastructure in the last decade to attract talented creative residents. Their goal is to enliven their downtown cores to increase their tax base, not to reduce their carbon footprint. They have still not attracted a large enough population to these areas to make them viable. The downtown cores are also often adjacent to some of the poorest neighborhoods of the city, which have seen little to no investment. Infrastructural investment needs to be focused twenty to forty years into the future and actively incorporate strategies to increase the density of cities and make them more self-sufficient.

CONCLUSION

Utopian and dystopian novels of a century ago recognized the social inequality as well as the dehumanization of workers by oppressive tactics of industrial magnates. Today, we are faced again with equal and even greater inequities and with a global economy it is even more difficult to control the flow of goods and labor. In the nineteenth century,
workers were pushed to produce intensely 12 to 16 hour a day, 5-6 days a week for starvation wages only to be fired when goods glutted the market or labor unrest closed factories.

Today, machine efficiency has made it possible to eliminate many of the jobs that low and medium skilled workers used to do after the early-twentieth century reforms, and survive. Rather than shipping goods to the markets opened up by progressive-era imperialism, we are now importing products produced by their workers. Cities in the United States have been emptied out of their manufacturing jobs and are strategizing to make them viable. What are the utopian and dystopian visions that face architects today? How will our vision of the world read in 2100?

ENDNOTES

1 Looking Backward was extremely popular when it was published, selling hundreds of thousands of copies. "The 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' of the industrial slavery of to-day," says "The Pilot," speaking of Bellamy's marvelous romance." New York Times, April 14, 1888, 5. ProQuest Historical Newspapers.
4 This is the first use of the word "credit card". It could be used anywhere and was exchanged into the currency of the country the user was travelling in. As Edith Lette, explains to the bemused Julian west, "although the income is the same, personal taste determines how the individual shall spend it. Some like fine horses; others, like myself, prefer pretty clothes; and still others want an elaborate table." Bellamy, News from Nowhere, 85
5 Bellamy, News from Nowhere, 30.
6 William Morris and Stephen Arata, News from Nowhere, or, An Epoch of Rest, Being Some Chapters from a Utopian Romance (Peterborough, Ont: Broadview Press, 2003), 304.
10 Miller, The President and the Assassin, 69 (many goods were overproduced...three times the weight of cotton compared to demand; one third again the number of bicycles; etc.).
14 Rydell, All the World’s a Fair, 139.
16 William Hudson Harper, Milo Milton Quaife, and Mabel McIlvaine, Chicago, a History and Forecast (Chicago: Chicago Association of commerce, 1921), 177-78.
18 Finley, 68-70. Frederic Clemson Howe, The City, the Hope of Democracy (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1905).
19 Blake, ??, Weidener ??
20 "In 1902, outstanding state and local government debt was US$2.1 billion or $27 per capita. By 1927 the amount had jumped to $14.9 billion-$125 per capita." Mayraj Fahim, "Municipal Bonds have been issued by US local government since 1812," http://www.citymayors.com/finance/bonds.html#Anchor-47383
21 "Boston (Mass.). Statistics Department, "Rapid Transit," Special publications, 6 (1900), 114-117.
To clarify the complexity, I have transcribed the issue below: "The [Rapid Transit] Commission was authorized [in 1891] but not required to construct: (1) a subway or subways of sufficient size for four railway tracks through and under Tremont street and the adjoining mall of Boston Common from a point near the junction of Tremont street and Shawmut avenue to Scoilay square and thence to Causeway street; (2) a subway of sufficient width for two tracks only from Tremont street through and under Boylston street and the adjoining mall of Boston Common to a point on Boylston street where a suitable connection with the surface tracks could be made, and from Boylston street through and under Park square and Columbus avenue, to a point on Columbus avenue where a suitable connection with the surface tracks could be made; (3) a subway from Tremont street through and under Park street, Temple
street, and Stanford street to Merrimac square; and (4) a tunnel from a point on or near Scollay square to a point on or near Maverick square in East Boston. They were also required to construct a bridge to Charlestown (see Charlestown Bridge). The act further authorized an issue of bonds to the amount of $7,000,000 for the construction of subways and a sufficient sum, in addition to $750,000 already appropriated by the City Council, to complete the Charlestown bridge. The act further authorized an issue of bonds to the amount of $7,000,000 for the construction of subways and a sufficient sum, in addition to $750,000 already appropriated by the City Council, to complete the Charlestown bridge. This act was approved July 2, 1894, and accepted by the voters of the City of Boston by vote at a special election held July 24, 1894, as follows: Yes, 15,542; No, 14,162.  


32 Although the total number of foreign-born residents continued to rise in the mid-century the domestic birth rate also rose accounting for the lower figure.  


34 Peterson The Birth of City Planning, 97.  

35 McGerr, xv.  


42 Johannessen & Girand, The Papago Freeway: a report (Phoenix, AZ: Arizona Highway Department, 1969)  

43 http://www.cnu.org/highways/freewayswithoutfutures  


45 Cervero et al., 32.  


47 According to the 2010 US census, Guttenberg, New Jersey, is the densest city and also the smallest incorporated city in the United States with 11,176 people on .2 square miles. (55880/square mile).  

48 This data is from Wikipedia. If only the largest densest cities are considered, Mumbai would be number 1 and Manilla number 15. http://www.citymayors.com/statistics/largest-cities-density-125.html  

49 http://www.cnu.org/highways/freewayswithoutfutures  

50 Joel Shrock, The Gilded Age (Westport, CT, Greenwood Press,2004), 66.  

56  Sawicki, 354.