

# Edward Bellamy and Kang Youwei's Utopian Society: Comparative Analyses

Dmitry E. Martynov<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Kazan (Volga Region) Federal University, Kazan, Russia

Correspondence: Dmitry Evgenyevich Martynov, Kazan (Volga Region) Federal University, Kremlyovskaya street, 18, Kazan 420008, Russia. E-mail: dmitrymartynov80@mail.ru

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## Abstract

The importance of the problem is determined by typological and functional similarity in reconsideration of the main social values having occurred at a turn of the XIX-XX centuries and nowadays. The article focuses on the comparative analyses of the models of the ideal society introduced by Kang Youwei (1858-1927) in 1890s and the American socialist Edward Bellamy (1850 – 1898). Despite the claims about Kang Youwei's complete intellectual isolation, his idea of a social ideal was strongly influenced by Bellamy's novel *Looking Backward* which was translated into Chinese. This fact lets us use the comparative method. The article shows that the Western lifestyle was the main justification for the use of the social experience of the United States for rebuilding China and eventually having global society (represented in those days as a utopia). The article may be useful to political scientists, sociologists and historians concerned with the public ideal and its use in the development of ideologies.

**Keywords:** utopia, socialism, monopoly, nationalism, “The Book of Great Unity” (Da Tongshu), Kang Youwei, Edward Bellamy

## 1. Introduction

The popularity of literary utopia in the late XIX century was explained by the peculiarities of socio-economic situation - the transition from free competition of small entrepreneurs to monopoly. Utopian fiction created by social reformers belonging to the middle class, was a means of preparation for future changes. This fact determined the demand for this kind of literature in the Far East, in China and Japan namely (Martynov, 2013).

Utopian fiction has ideological function. It offers the ways to solve the real contradictions of the capitalist society: attacks the idea of competition, creating inequality in a society, and preaches the idea of evolution, opposing the socialist revolution. Utopian novels served the purpose of social reorganization, diverting the minds of the middle class from the idea of revolution. This thesis is examined, analyzed and proved on the material of two popular utopian projects created at about the same time in the United States and monarchal China. The common trend of the utopian projects between 1880-1920 was the idea of socialism and communism (Beaumont, 2004).

Edward Bellamy's project rendered in the novel *Looking Backward* was extremely popular and influential. Its magazine translation into Chinese influenced the specific forms of Kang Yuwei's perception of the future (Chang, 1987). The most important innovation, introduced by Kang Yuwei into the Chinese social thought, was the idea of progressive evolutionary development and hedonistic model of society, aimed at consumption as a key indicator of its level of development (Pusey, 1983). Declaring the nature of the Confucian ideology, Kang Yuwei went beyond the classical Confucianism. He sharply criticized the family institution, which, according to *The Book of Great Unity*, was a major obstacle to the progress (Kang Yuwei, 2005).

## 2. Methodological Framework

The investigation of the considerable peculiarities of the set of utopian works and projects created in the 1880 – 1920s, reveals one characteristic feature – the majority of authors recognize socialism to be the best social system. Therefore, investigating the conditions for the creation of such social ideals, it is necessary to consider, first of all, the realities of the Atlantic world of the same world, in which, for various reasons, The First World War was “crossed out”.

The cultural context of the era is *fin de siècle*. One of the most important aspects of the global economic development, along with the expansion of the market to the geographical boundaries of the world, was the monopolistic concentration of capital, the increasing rationalization of industrial production and having no analogues in the past, market transformation of consumer products. According to the famous British historian Eric Hobsbawm, with the growth of population and real incomes, increasing urbanization in the consumer market, where food and clothing used to dominate, ensuring the basic needs of man, consumer goods, produced on an industrial scale, took the first place (Hobsbawm, 1987). According to Koselleck's (1979) terminology, "experience", being the basis of the majority of utopias, becomes rational production in its relations with a new developing social space - space of consumption. There appears the question about the content of the "Horizon of Expectation" (at the level of mass consciousness, to which always any utopian author applies).

According to M. Beaumont (2004), the popularity of literary utopia in the late XIX century was explained by the peculiarities of socio-economic conditions. The transition from free-market capitalism, where small entrepreneurs dominated, to the forms of monopoly lasted from mid-1870 until the end of the 1890s. The process was painful and shaken the confidence of the middle class to the capitalist system. With the beginning of the era of workers' riots in late 1880s when the "new unionism" and socialist movement (especially in the form of anarchism) began to rapidly acquire influence in the United States and Britain, capitalism turned into a "scarecrow". Utopian fiction created, as a rule, by social reformers, belonging to the same middle class, was a means of understanding (or even implementation) of future changes (Beaumont, 2004). Looking ahead, we should point out that this circumstance determined the demand for this kind of literature in the Far East. It should also be mentioned that utopian projects started only in the UK and the US (not just novels by Bellamy and H. Wells, but also the urban utopia "gardens and cities" by E. Howard) could outlive their contemporaries. Incredibly popular in the early twentieth century, Austrian economist Theodor Hertzka was completely forgotten after the First World War.

As mentioned above, during the development of monopoly capitalism (in 1904 it will be given the name of "imperialism") utopian fiction carried out quite certain ideological functions. According to M. Beaumont (2004), social reformers wanted to sail the ship of Western civilization past Scylla, spiritually bankrupt bourgeoisie and Charybdis, the working class potentially prone to anarchy. Utopia offered the opportunity (in imagination) to solve real contradictions of capitalist society. On the one hand, utopia attacked the idea of competition, breeding cruel inequality in society, on the other hand drove away the specter of Communism - because its presence on the political scene threatened to any prospect of a peaceful evolution to a society of the future (Beaumont, 2004). Characteristic feature of the ideology was the novel by H. Wells "The Time Machine" (1895). In general, utopian novels, fulfilling socio-critical function, served the purposes of social rehabilitation, diverting the minds of the middle class from the idea of revolution. As it regards, William Morris, a member of the Pre-Raphaelites and the author of the idyllic utopia *News from Nowhere* was completely right in his criticism: "... the only ideal of life, which could be imagined [E. Bellamy - D.M] - is nowadays existence of a hard-working professional, belonging to the middle-class, with only one amendment: the poor man is free from the sin of involvement in the crimes of monopoly and he has gained independence, replacing its current role of a freeloader" (Beaumont, 2004). Morris's novel was written, as an opposition to an extremely popular at that time the novel by E. Bellamy (1850 - 1890) "Looking Backward: 2000 - 1887", having a significant impact on his contemporaries. The main idea of this utopia "sublimated" the fear of the reader of the labor movement, strengthened his faith in the possibility of building "capitalism with a human face."

### 3. Results and Discussions

#### 3.1 *Consumer Society by E. Bellamy - Supermonopoly*

Bellamy's utopia is the story of the dream of the protagonist. In 1887 Boston rich rentier Julian West had to visit a hypnotist because of the economic crisis, worsened by strikes that have become common, the causes of which are already forgotten: "The working classes had quite suddenly and very generally become infected with a profound discontent with their condition, and an idea that it could be greatly bettered if they only knew how to go about it" (Bellamy, 1888). Escape from imminent and expected catastrophe turns into an escape from history: West wakes up in 2000.

Much of Bellamy's novel tells the story of the development of urban infrastructure in Boston in 2000, which allows to show the structure of the future North American society. A local cicerone - Dr. Leete introduces both of it to West. The first West's question in the new world is quite significant: "have you found for the labor question? It was the Sphinx's riddle of the nineteenth century, and when I dropped out the Sphinx was threatening to devour society, because the answer was not forthcoming" (Bellamy, 1888). Leete answers "and there is no way

in which it could arise, I suppose we may claim to have solved it. Society would indeed have fully deserved being devoured if it had failed to answer a riddle so entirely simple. In fact, to speak by the book, it was not necessary for society to solve the riddle at all. It may be said to have solved itself. The solution came as the result of a process of industrial evolution which could not have terminated otherwise. All that society had to do was to recognize and cooperate with that evolution, when its tendency had become unmistakable" (Bellamy, 1888) and then meticulously explains what "industrial evolution" means. Leete explains that in the 1880s already work organization and strikes were simply a consequence of the concentration of capital in greater amount than ever. The following decades led to the absorption of small enterprises by large monopolies. It was "the era of corporate tyranny" when the gulf between rich and poor deepened a lot. But this same era showed that as a "means of production of wealth", the higher was capital consolidation the more effectively it worked.

According to Dr. Leete (or rather Bellamy) monopoly capitalism naturally moved to the next stage, which can be called state capitalism. Production and trade, which first was run by a handful of irresponsible corporations and syndicates belonging to private persons, who were capricious and anxious about their own revenues, transformed into a single syndicate serving the interests of the entire nation for the sake of everyone's income. The nation has created one great corporation to absorb all the other corporations; a lot of capitalists were replaced by a single owner of the capital and the employer-monopolist, taken over all the previous small monopolies - and all citizens have become the recipients of income and benefits from this supermonopoly.

Labour conflicts have disappeared, because "the final consolidation of the nation's capital," put an end to the competition. Nation has become a capitalist. At some point this development was supported by a mass of people. "The very fact that the nation would be the sole corporation in the field would, it was seen, relieve the undertaking of many difficulties with which the partial monopolies had contended" (Bellamy, 1888). Unanimity allowed the nation to spread "the principle of general conscription to the labor question", turning all the people into the industrial army. This industrial army became the basis of the whole social structure of the state-socialist future. This system has identified all aspects of life in the twentieth century from the allocation of resources to law enforcement. As you can see, a utopian programme introduced by Bellamy, not only egalitarian, but also "aggressively utilitarian" (M. Beaumont's definition, 2004).

The actions in *Looking Backward* take place in 1887, three years before passing the first in the United States antitrust laws. The novel starts with the description of a social situation. It should be pointed out that class conflict, which plays a great role in industrial relations, has substantial character for E. Bellamy as something that is beyond the power of a man. This proves the fact that Bellamy was influenced by Hegelianism: it is enough to trust absolute spirit, which manifests itself in history. Therefore in Bellamy's utopia there is no sense to ask "how these changes occurred?" You will never have the answer. Just the opposite is William Morris's aesthetic utopia. This question runs like a leitmotiv throughout all the actions.

E. Bloch precisely evaluates E. Bellamy's utopia "it entirely fits the projection of the present ... for the future; there is a deep satisfaction with the basis of capitalist civilization" (Bloch, 1986). "Horizons of expectation" introduced by Bellamy's utopia was implemented in 1930: triumphant nationalism, protectionism, monopolization, "Taylor" production management system. Obviously, these technologies helped to overcome the consequences of the Great Depression in 1929. They were used in the United States under Roosevelt and Germany under Hitler (Kasson, 1977). However, Bellamy's work has not only prophetic goal. E. Bellamy's utopia is the heaven for a consumer society. According to John Kasson, "in Bellamy's utopian world material consumption is becoming a major attraction for the population." However, the external forms of consumer paradise are far from the modern: for example, there is no advertising. The image of the goddess of consumption from Bellamy's novel was used by the owners of the company "Sears and Roebuck", pioneers of trading via mail. However, the most important here is that Bellamy discusses the distribution of necessary things rather than luxurious ones; it is about rational rather than irrational mechanisms. M. Beaumont notices that "the act of consumption is in no way affiliated with the seller, acting as a middleman between the goods and the buyer, which is so natural for XIX century. Those days it was the seller who was interested in selling goods as comfortably as possible. Bellamy has a different mechanism..." (Beaumont, 2004).

In fact, E. Bellamy established a new trend of American liberalism placing a consumer and a department store (supermarket) at the center of his utopia. His party, founded in 1888, preached the same idea: in future capitalism would function as a system free from the conflict between labor and capital on the one hand and from the conflict between the individual capitalists on the other hand.

### *3.2 The world of Kang Yuwei's Great Unity – Bellamy's Influence and the Chinese Model Experience*

The main work of the life of the Chinese reformer Kang Yuwei "The Book of Great Unity" (Da Tongshu), took a

very long time to write, and in its complete form it was published only 8 years after the author's death. The main pathos "Da Tongshu" is the abolition of private property and the family as major obstacles to the achievement of earthly paradise for humanity. It is important to mention that the Chinese material is used for the criticism of the family institution and the examples for the criticism of the early twentieth century economy come from the experience of Western industrial civilization.

If you try to give a brief description of Kang Yuwei's perfect society you will get the following: Great Unity is a universal state where global society has no kinship, race, physical and social differences in the communist economy, characterized by the highest level of technological development. In other words, Great Unity is a form of existence in which the highest and complete happiness is materialized through the unity and equality of all people. Earthly paradise (that is how Kang Yuwei characterized this) could be achieved through four types of transformations: political, social, economic and racial.

Kang Yuwei used a simple postulate that the existence of state borders provokes conflicts over territory. Therefore, only the elimination of borders will allow humanity to get rid of the conflict. However the existence of a sovereign state makes it absolutely impossible. Thus, states must be liquidated, nothing else will help. Kang Yuwei thought that he had discovered the principles according to which a state functions: the law of evolution makes strong states take over weak ones, and this will continue until the creation of structures on universal scale. Another tendency, highlighted by Kang Yuwei, is the gradual replacement of autocratic forms of government by democratic. Kang Yuwei admitted that the world globalization could be achieved by military means, but he preferred the way of nonviolence. There are three steps to achieve an ideal society peacefully: 1) to hold a peace conference to make general laws, 2) to build alliances around the world, 3) to call parliament common for all states. "These three steps are implemented naturally, stemming from the current preconditions of development, so it is impossible to unite it [the world] in the short term" (Kang Yuwei, 2005). According to the most optimistic estimates, it will take two or three centuries to complete this process.

The world of Great Unity is the world of full democracy, where the personal element is minimized. The basis of social order will be complete equation of the rights between men and women, as well as the abolishing of all restrictions on blood and marriage. Women will receive the same education as men and will be free to communicate and choose friends. They will get rid of the "humiliating" and crippling practices as hiding the face, foot binding, corsets, and even piercing a nose and ears. A married woman will not obey her husband and take his name, moreover, as a sign of full equality between men and women their clothing will have no difference. With the further development of society marriage as an institution will be canceled, it will be replaced by the "intimacy contract". Actually, it will be a temporary concubinage rather than a marriage in which both sides will be completely equal and independent "as states in alliance with one another". In order to preserve the rights of women, Kang Yuwei offered to have a contract for a period, but not for life. The contract may be signed for not less than a month, but not more than a year. If a couple has been successful, the relationship can be renewed without any limits. Thus, the norms of traditional morality and crimes against it such as divorce, problems of chastity, fornication, etc. disappear automatically. Even the views of Chinese radicals of the 1920s were modest compared with Kang Yuwei's position. At the same time, Kang Yuwei understood the consequences of the described position and to avoid promiscuity and complete cessation of the human race, he claimed that such orders could be implemented only when the society would be completely ready for them.

Obviously, Kang Yuwei understood that technical and industrial progress breeds a number of intractable moral and ethical issues. He did not disapprove modern civilization: he approved the use of agricultural machinery and chemical fertilizers, he accepted the way of life of the humanity in the early twentieth century. He was interested in agriculture a lot as China at that time was an agricultural country and Kang Yuwei spent the most part of his life in a village. In ancient times Confucius developed a system of "waterhole fields" (jing tian) which was to implement the principle of "equality without poverty". However outside China this system could not be implemented. Then Frenchman Charles Fourier (1772 - 1837), referred to as "the Englishman Fu" and his classic utopian socialism are mentioned. The novel Looking Backward by Bellamy was source of ideas of socialism for Kang Yuwei. T. Richard's retelling of this novel was published in the newspaper Wan Go Gun Bao from December 1889 to April 1890 (according to other sources, from December 1891 to April 1892).

The text "Da Tongshu" kept all the features of Bellamy's novel: up to the age of 21 all citizens were to get an education and up to the age of 55 were to be members of "labor army". Thus they had to compensate the society for the resources spent on them. The distribution of work depends on the abilities of each individual, while there is no gender discrimination, and all get equal salary, equal access to public loans namely. Although the institution of a family is preserved, now the woman is independent of men, and the symbol of this is the absence of kitchens in private homes: everybody has meals in canteens and restaurants near their homes and working places. Liáng

Qǐchāo and Tan Sitong also knew the translation of Bellamy's novel. Moreover, Liáng Qǐchāo recognized it as "the most important book about the West, available in China". Tan Sitong mentions this book in the 47th chapter of his work "Teachings about humanity" (T'an Ssu-t'ung, 1984).

Kang Yuwei, recognized the reasons of the class struggle not in economic inequality but in competition. He transferred the problem to the ethical dimension. Kang Yuwei linked economic competition with the Darwinian concept of the struggle for existence. Therefore he castigated Darwinism, and democratic institutions (Pusey, 1983). Competition harms both industry and trade, and leads to the inequality in the social sense. Thus, Kang called for the complete elimination of the existing order, and building new institutions which would have nothing to do with his contemporary Chinese or Western ones (Titarenko, 2006).

L. Mumford in "History of Utopia", first published in 1924, drew the reader's attention to the fact that "too many ... utopias are based on the concept of authoritarian discipline". Thus a typical utopian community, created by a generation of writers and dreamers, demonstrates the "dictatorial tendencies" and "creates so inflexible regime and so absolute and centralized management system that any changes are already forbidden". A good example of this approach is "A Modern Utopia" by H. Wells with its class division of society and the class of "Samurai". Kang Yuwei's utopian society is also not quite free from regulations and military orders, but they relate primarily to economic organization. However, sometimes contradicting himself, Kang Yuwei emphasizes repeatedly the importance and role of personal freedom in his ideal society. In this sense, his utopia is unique, since it does not make a separate identity a "cog" of society. It does not involve the instrumental use of people (that is natural to all areas of traditional Chinese thought, Taoism without exception). It does not impose restrictions on the rights or there is no something like "political tutelage", during which a person is prepared to realize fully their rights that is what Wells's samurais do. Da Tongshu is hedonistic utopia in which the happiness of each individual is the ultimate and immediate purpose of society and all its institutions. Even economic regulation is necessary for full utilization of production that makes life enjoyable and leisure long and varied. However, Kang Yuwei's utopia is not purely materialistic. He believes that once a person fully pays the debt to the state for his education and training, he is free not to work. He can have fun or for example be a monk and seek Taoist path of immortality or practice Buddhism trying to escape the cycle of rebirth. The pickiest liberal critic can hardly find here a lot of coercion. The "Book of Great Unity" belongs to its time, of course, and one can find a lot of oppressive details: Kang Yuwei had a positive attitude towards the science of eugenics, supported sterilization of mentally ill people, representatives of the "inferior races" and people suffering from incurable diseases. Moreover he thought they ought to be isolated from the society on some islands. It should be mentioned that these measures were taken not only in Nazi Germany, but also in the democratic United States until the 1950s.

There is one more interesting feature: Kang Yuwei was unable to imagine absolute perfection. If one carefully reads the final chapter "Da Tongshu", it turns out that evolution is eternal, and therefore, the very Great Unity is a step towards the higher form of existence. According to him progress means "to increase human happiness and decrease [the amount] of unhappiness". And if social organization lacks significant potency to its evolution, therefore, it is necessary to promote fully scientific and technological progress, which eventually will lead all mankind to physical immortality, making the entire Universe a field for trips ... In the "hasty verses at the end of "Da Tongshu"(1918), Kang Yuwei wrote that every earthling in the world of the Great Unity will become a Buddha.

#### 4. Conclusion

E. Bellamy's utopian project became one of the most attractive and influential in the XIX century. Only in the English-speaking world the novel Looking Backward has sold more than 1 million. There are at least 6 Russian translations and two into Chinese. Bellamy's goal was to remove contradictions and conflicts between labor and capital on the one hand, and among individual capitalists on the other. He suggested achieving it through the creation of a single supermonopoly – "industrial army". His system shows satisfaction with deep foundations of capitalism as it is. The fact that he put department store (supermarket) at the center of his utopia and made it a symbol of its capabilities purely justifies it.

Kang Yuwei linked criticism of family with criticism of private property. He used Chinese material to criticize the family institution, and for criticism of the economic system of the early twentieth century he used examples almost exclusively borrowed from the experience of Western industrial civilization, to be more precise, Kang Yuwei used his personal experience in exile. He realized that the technological and industrial progress raises a number of intractable moral and ethical issues. At the same time, he didn't blame his contemporary material civilization; on the contrary, he admired it.

The plot of “Da Tongshu” demonstrates Kang Yuwei’s familiarity with the ideas of E. Bellamy’s novel *Looking Backward* first published in Chinese translation in 1889 or 1892. Adjusted to Chinese peculiarities, the main features of the lifestyle of Kang’s utopian society match Bellamy’s ones. But they came to different conclusions: if the US socialist wanted to improve socialist institutions of his day, the Chinese reformer called for the total liquidation of the existing system.

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