



LOOKING FORWARD

IN *LOOKING BACKWARD*, THE ENORMOUSLY POPULAR 1888 novel that dared to imagine a more equal America, author Edward Bellamy had his hero, a comfortable Bostonian by the name of Julian West, go to sleep one evening in 1887 Boston and awake in 2000 — to a new millennium and a new world. The ugly gaps in income and wealth that had divided Julian West’s nineteenth century Boston had vanished. America had become a caring place, a land without inequality and injustice, a good society.

On January 1, 2000, the first day of the genuine new millennium, Edward Bellamy’s great-grandson looked back at *Looking Backward*. What might his great-grandfather think, Michael Bellamy wondered in an op-ed column, about how his United States of America had actually evolved?

“Were his hero to wake up today, Bellamy might be inclined to put him back to sleep for another millennium,” the great-grandson concluded. “In fact, if Julian West came to today, he might think that he had simply had a normal night’s rest.”

A Julian West who stepped out into the real new millennium America, Michael Bellamy pointed out, would find “mean streets” that bore “an uncanny resemblance” to his era’s own. Julian West, in our time as in his, would see homelessness everywhere, wealth concentrated to a fearsome degree, and “an economic incentive system that tends increasingly to reward sitting on one’s assets far more generously than actually doing a day’s work.”¹ Julian West would see in modern America little of the progress his creator, Edward Bellamy, had so hopefully imagined. He would see an America that has failed to come to grips with inequality.

Should we be startled by our failure? Perhaps not. Human societies, after all, have been failing to come to grips with inequality for thousands of years, as archaeologists have a habit of reminding us every so

often. Recent scholarship on the ancient Roman city of Pompeii, for instance, has revealed a society seething “with massive economic inequality.”² An elite Pompeii family, notes Antonio Varone, an Italian expert on antiquity, could spend more on a single banquet than a senior public official could earn in a year. In deeply unequal Pompeii, resentments smoldered everywhere. Pompeii’s plutocrats, no fools, spent lavishly to keep the lid on their inferno. Their subsidies kept a host of diversions, from wine and prostitutes to gladiatorial extravaganzas, readily accessible. Their clever and cynical reign seemed secure, even eternal. But another inferno, from nearby Vesuvius, would eventually do in Pompeii’s plutocrats. They could not keep a lid on nature. Vesuvius would eventually bury their greed.

In other cities, at other times, wise men and women have struggled to place more human limits on wealth’s dominion. We can read human history, in significant part, as an ongoing struggle to place limits on power, to defend ourselves from the mightiest and the wealthiest among us. Power corrupts, our prophets have always understood, not just the individuals who possess power, but any society that lets power concentrate in the hands of an intensely wealthy few.

In a sense, intense concentrations of wealth have the same impact on our human societies as intense concentrations of matter have on our physical universe. Within the cosmos, astronomers tell us, concentrations of matter, if they become intense enough, create black holes. These black holes suck the energy out of their surroundings. They devour all. They destroy all. In our human societies, great concentrations of wealth leave the same devastation. They suck the life out of their surroundings. They devour. They destroy. The more concentrated a society’s wealth, the more awesome the destruction.

None of this particularly worries our contemporary cheerleaders for inequality. We need not impose any limits on accumulation, they argue. We need only trust in “free markets.” Capitalism as we know it, conservative author Dinesh D’Souza assures us, “civilizes greed, just as marriage civilizes lust.”³

An economic order that accepts grand concentrations of wealth, these pages have argued, civilizes nothing. An economic order that celebrates these grand concentrations, as ours does, only goads greed on — and brutalizes whatever the greedy do not value.

Our contemporary America hosts many legions of good people working to undo the ravages of this brutalization. In hospitals, in

courts of law, in homeless shelters, in schools, in halfway houses, in prisons and parks, we see these good people, dedicated professionals and volunteers, activists and experts, devoting their lives to fighting entrenched problems that no civilized society should have to do battle against. Health problems. Crime problems. Housing problems. Pollution problems. In contemporary America, these problems all stand separate, alone, one unrelated to the next. We fight them individually — and ineffectively. We make, year after year, painfully minor progress. Yet we seldom stop to ask why. Instead, we paper over our failures, with steady streams of reports and white papers that continue to document our continuing problems. We drown ourselves in a data deluge. But we ignore the data that matter most, the data on the gaps in income and wealth that divide us. These data tell our society's most significant story. These data determine the trajectory of our society, of any society.

Income and wealth gaps can narrow, income and wealth gaps can widen. The difference determines whether we see our lives improve or we just merely get by.

In a deeply unequal America, those of us who want to see the quality of all our lives improve, not just some but a great deal, cannot afford to have our eyes diverted from the inequality around us. Whatever our specific concern about modern American life, whatever our expertise, we all share a common interest in narrowing the gaps that divide us, in limiting concentrated wealth. Achieving a more equal America will not, to be sure, magically solve all our problems. But achieving a more equal America, limiting our concentrations of wealth, would make all our problems more solvable, and appreciably so. On a more level playing field, on a playing surface where the wealthiest can no longer dominate, good people and good causes would score more triumphs. Progress toward the American dream, on that more level field, could and would resume.

Leveling needs to become our shared mission. We need to unite to oppose any initiative that would widen gaps in income and wealth, that would concentrate still greater fortune in the pockets of the already fortunate. We need to openly discuss and debate and rally behind initiatives that would narrow our gaps. Our efforts, in our lifetimes, might not create a Ten Times Rule America. But our efforts, if pressed ahead with passion, with diligence, with savvy, even with

humor, would most certainly leave America a different place, a better place.

The alternative?

If we allow the wealthy to keep their wealth a nonissue, their power will only continue to bloat. America will continue to stumble backwards. We cannot let that happen. We have stumbled too long already.

“We’re back to serfs and royalty,” one alarmed business school professor told *Business Week* in 2001 after the release of the latest CEO pay data.

“But even the Middle Ages,” rejoined journalist Geneva Overholser, “didn’t last forever.”⁴

How long will our new Middle Ages endure? That remains our choice. Our choice alone.