

ANTI • SCIENCE AND  
ANTI - TECHNOLOGY ATTITUDE 1870-1900

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The adoration of Science and Technology-one of the most; striking features of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries-was fiercely contested by a number of writers and thinkers on both sides of the Atlantic. Those writers who had adopted an anti-Science or anti-Machinery bias can roughly be divided into two groups. On one hand there were those writers-and they were mainly those who wrote prior to the turn of the century-who simply argued that the infiltration of the Machinery into human life would destroy many of the things which man so far valued. It naturally follows that the literary output of most of these writers lack any substantial philosophical basis, or extensive study of the psychology of the individual in a highly technological or scientific society. Another group of authors, on the other hand, fully realising the value and the importance of science and technology, were as much afraid of the kind of world its abuse and idolatry would produce. The swift and unbridled march of Science and the impending catastrophes of 1914 and 1939 urged a number of early and mid-tentieth century writers to examine the impact of this new phenomenon on the individual and how it would effect human relationships in the form of anti-utopias. A brief analysis of the former group, however, is the concern of this paper while the following paper seeks to introduce a study of the later group.

One of the major writers of the nineteenth century who raised the argument against the advent of technology was F. Dostoevski (Dostoevsky). in works like *Letters from the Underworld*, *The Demons* (or *The Possessed*) Dostoevski sought to investigate the stifling and insidious implications inherent in a rationalised and industrialised society in greater depth than some of his British and American counterparts had done.

Samuel Butler, the nineteenth century English novelist, in his satirical utopia *Erewhon*, (which significantly when read in reverse means 'Nowhere') championed the view that making excessive use of machinery would create new problems and lead to frustrations. Butler, also attacked Darwin's law of natural selection -the theory which had impressed Wells immensely- instead arguing that variations were due to striving of individuals and handed on through 'unconscious memory'.

In Britain, however, the most persistent opponent of too much dependence on the new technology was William Morris, the socialist thinker who held that there was a sensuous pleasure in manual work. It is not surprising that as a craftsman, an artist, and most importantly, as the Poet Laureate, Morris should preach that engagement in hand-crafts and other manual labour was an act of creativity, though this did not mean that Morris was repulsed by labour saving devices. In his address to the Birmingham Art Students in 1879 he asserted that the chief duty of civilisation should be to render work happy for man and to minimize unpleasant and unhappy labour for all. The condition Morris abhorred was one which Butler had feared in *Erewhon*-allowing machines to be our masters and not our servants. Too much dependence on the new technology would dwarf man's mental, moral, and physical strength and also his creative faculty which would eventually deteriorate. As a lover of beauty and aesthetics Morris was convinced that mechanical devices would destroy the spirituality of life in addition to the despoilation of the environment, The modern technological city with its soul-less mechanical contrivances and its factories was a potential destroyer of the good in man, Unlike Bellamy, the progressive visionary in the United States of America, Morris was a medievalist believing in the simple rural life with its crafts and idyllic pleasures which offered man the opportunity to cultivate and perfect his physical, mental, and spiritual proclivities.

Such convictions provoked in him the desire to challenge Bellamy's highly industrialised rationalised socialistic state. The result was one of the best return-to-nature utopias in which the march of mechanisation was arrested. The background is the middle ages though the time was projected forward to that almost coinciding with Bellamy's excessively technological Boston. Whereas the Bostonians in Bellamy's *Looking Backward* live in densely populated towns of tall concrete buildings, their contemporaries in rural London lead a care-free life, collectively and individually in an untouched Nature. While the Bosto-

nians rush daily to join their industrial armies, the inhabitants of the land of pure communism are engaged in manual industries in an environment of simple and friendly craftsmanship where everyone takes according to his needs and contributes according to his abilities. While Bellamy's Bostonians conceive no other pleasure than walking in weather protected streets and relaxing in man made parks, the Londoners of the year 2000 roam about on small stone bridges among rose bushes and in green meadows, they swim in clean blue rivers and travel by what Bellamy had called in 1879 'the vanishing kind of conveyance -the boat' 'They consider themselves as the most fortunate people on earth for such a natural pattern of life has also enabled them to enjoy a harmonious relationship with their fellowmen. Their cultural tools are not 'piped music' (that is, the radio) but human voice to the accompaniment of medieval instruments. In a word, it is an unpolluted, satisfying, and contented world where there are no industrial armies, no industrial saints or heroes, no ruling elite, no rewards for enterprise and no restrictions.

This pastoral and tranquil existence displayed in *News from Nowhere* was a hostile yet totally peaceful protest against Bellamy's monolithic, industrially integrated and highly efficient rational state. The underlying argument is that real communism exists only in free craftsmanship and fraternity. Admittedly, such a dream could not solve the unprecedented problems of the nineteenth century industrialisation, but it did offer a splendid break from politics and economic theories that could have exhausted multitudes in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Undoubtedly it was on account of this that Morris's alternative title for his book was *An Epoch of Rest*. The whole work is like one long pastoral poem, the kind of un-rhyming poetry which even Bellamy's industrial people would like to hear recited on their radios as a piece of classical literature.

Morris's world of rural felicities spurred to action even writers on the other side of the Atlantic, especially those who maintained that the excessive use of mechanical contrivances in all sections of life devastated the spirituality of life and the beauty of things. William Dean Howells, whose socio-economic fiction owed a lot to Bellamy expressed delight at the fact that Morris was persistently preaching that pastoral virtues produced a better civilisation than the artificialities of a technological era. In fact, Howells's criticism of *Looking Backward* had revealed that he was not least attracted by the material delights Bellamy

offered. Bellamy's assurances that the metropolis of the twentyfirst century would not be only a land of iron and steel wherein the metallic rattle of the Machine fell unpleasantly on Iraman ears but a place with gardens, domes, and fountains had failed to convince Howells. Happy childhood memories of the simple joys of his native Ohio forests and fields

Howells to renounce Bellamy's and other-like-minded American writers' insistence on middleclass comforts and luxuries. in his review of Bellamy's utopia he disclosed that 'he should have preferred to have the millennium much simpler, more independent of modern inventions, modern conveniences, modern facilities'. It seemed to him that 'in any ideal condition.. . we should get on without most of these things which are but sorry patches on the rags of our civilisation, or only toys to amuse our greed'.<sup>2</sup> As he valued personal relationships and individual freedom to a greater extent than Bellamy, he disfavoured machinery for he saw it as the greatest threat to personal contacts and individualism. Mechanisation, he held, would ultimately replace man in industry, thereby diminishing his choice and employment prospects, In fact, he was convinced that the mechanical marvels Bellamy and the like-minded thinkers promoted could appeal to neither rural nor urban dwellers, for the former were unfamiliar with them while the latter were already tired of them. So the blissful existenece he displayed in *A Traveller From Altruria*, though founded on many of the socio-economic principles Bellamy championed, has done away with excessive regimentation and industrialisation, instead favouring much simpler and pastoral joys.

Howells was expressing in good literary style what was in the minds or in the hearts of some other contemporary thinkers or less significant writers. Edward E. Hale, for instance, although a fervent supporter of Bellamy's social and economic theories disapproved of his over-dependence on technological resources. 'Mr Bellamy', he complained, 'has no right, when he wants to get out of a scrape, to invent an invention for that purpose'<sup>3</sup>. Some ecclesiastical circles, too, resented the glorification of the Machine Culture. One clergyman referring to Bellamy's idea of delivering sermons in accoustically prepared chambers like musical performances said that we 'have our music laid on by telephone as we lay on our gas; of hear what in Bellamy's utopia passes master for preaching-without any of the inspiration of common worship or the speaker behind the voice'.<sup>4</sup> The more conservative fraction of the Church feared that the infiltration of religious life by machinery would render it totally unspiritual. Another pious oppohent voiced such

criticism when, rather in a sarcastic manner, he asserted that 'of the pulpit eloquence we have a specimen, and it is startlingly like ours. One great improvement, however, *there* is; the preaching is done by telephone and you can shut it off. You turn on the celestial music as you turn on gas or water. The visions of a material heaven on earth naturally arise as the hope of a spiritual heaven fades away'.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, less outstanding authors, like Anne Bowman Dodd dismissed outright a socialistic heaven where love of machinery had replaced the desire for individual relationships.

In summary, the message in all these books, whether expressed artistically or not, is clear: Happiness is not always compatible with technology and an overly technological society will destroy all that is good in us and external to us. In fact, the kind of the bad utopia the early and mid-twentieth century authors depicted, are hidden in the tranquil and beautified worlds Howells and Morris revered. Reverse the dream-like picture in *A Traveller From Altruria* or *News From Nowhere* you get the Hell-the collapse of the socialistic and technological utopia- writers of all nationalities like Forster, Carel Kapek, Zamyatin, Huxley, or Orwell created.

#### Reference

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- 5- **G. Smith**, '**Prophets** of Unrest', *The Forum*, (August, 1890), p.55.