

# EDWARD BELLAMY AND THE WEATHER OF UTOPIA

WILLIAM B. MEYER

**ABSTRACT.** Utopian thinkers have often assumed that radical geoengineering is necessary for the creation of a perfect world. This assumption necessarily puts them at odds with environmentalism, but the conflict is not inescapable. Human difficulties with the biophysical world can instead be interpreted as arising from the interaction of environment with society and thus as capable of being eradicated simply by reforming the latter. One notable early exponent of this kind of social constructionism was the American utopian novelist and publicist Edward Bellamy (1850–1898). His fictional and nonfictional writings analyzed the ways in which the troubles that Americans of his time had with weather and climate grew out of their ways of life and political-economic institutions and would disappear if these were reformed. This line of thought allowed Bellamy to portray a utopia where human beings had ceased to suffer serious harm and inconvenience from the weather yet had not tampered with the atmospheric environment itself. *Keywords:* Edward Bellamy, environmentalism, social construction, utopias, weather and climate.

The last decade of the nineteenth century and the first years of the twentieth saw a great outpouring of utopian novels in the United States, much of it inspired by the extraordinary success of a single work, Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward, 2000–1887* ([1888] 1967). Although the ideal societies they described varied greatly, in their attitudes toward the natural environment most of these novels' authors were in agreement. They envisioned the human reshaping of the earth no less than the reform of human institutions. Supposing, as one literary historian observed, "that man was duty-bound to adjust nature to his comfort rather than to conform man to the delicate balance of nature," one after another of them projected "schemes to alter massively the face of the earth and to change the climate" in particular (Burt 1981, 177–178). In the typical future they portrayed, "excessively hot regions have been cooled and excessively cold ones warmed; excessively wet ones have been made drier and excessively dry ones wetter. . . . Declares [one character]: 'We have absolute control of the weather'" (Segal 1985, 27).

Such successful tinkering with the elements figured in many of the fringe and obscure visions of the future that made up the bulk of the period's output. It appeared too in the work of the foremost American man of letters to turn his hand to utopian fiction in Bellamy's wake. In three novels published between 1894 and 1907, William Dean Howells contrasted the United States of his day with an invented nation, Altruria, which occupied a continent in the Southern Hemisphere. American society as Howells portrayed it was plagued by innumerable evils arising from the unrestrained competition and the class and gender inequalities of the Gilded Age, dominated by corporate wealth. Altruria had removed the chief incentives to greed, selfishness, and crime by abolishing the private accumulation of property, maintaining peace with other countries, reforming the unequal relations of the sexes

---

✪ DR. MEYER is the A. Lindsay O'Connor Visiting Associate Professor of American Institutions at Colgate University, Hamilton, New York 13346.