“The Spectre of Uncertainty”:
Chance in Bellamy’s Utopian Fictions

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ABSTRACT

Edward Bellamy’s utopian novels Looking Backward (1888) and Equality (1897) imagine a new society of equality, justice, and a life of plenty, where no one has to fear for the security and wellbeing of their own or future generations. In Bellamy’s utopian future, the “spectre of Uncertainty,” which had been a permanent threat to the lives of people in the late nineteenth century, is presented as having disappeared. And yet, for all of its emphasis on security, Bellamy’s utopian vision in fact does not exclude chance, risk, or accident. Placing statistics at the center of his utopian economy, Bellamy imagines a society that is based on probability rather than certainty. Bellamy’s industrial workforce of the utopian future is modeled on the ideal of the army, which he envisions as both a rational organization and an organization predicated on risk. Meanwhile, the possibility of accident not only plays a considerable role in the smooth workings of the utopian system but is also the very precondition for the transportation of the novel’s protagonist, Julian West, into the future of the year 2000. Thus, in both Looking Backward and Equality, the unpredictable event, the error, and the accident have to be possible for utopia to exist.

I. Uncertain Conditions

In Edward Bellamy’s 1888 Utopian novel Looking Backward 2000-1887, “[a] spectre is haunting” late nineteenth-century Boston, but it is not—Marx and Engels notwithstanding—“the spectre of Communism” (Marx and Engels 218). At the end of the novel, Julian West, the first-person narrator, finds himself one night caught in a dream. In a reversal of the novel’s central plot device—Julian’s transposition into the future of the year 2000 where he witnesses the workings of an ideal society—he dreams of waking up back in his own nineteenth-century. He realizes that his experiences in the year 2000, which in the novel represent actual reality, were themselves but a dream. In this nightmare, he sees his fin-de-siècle contemporaries in a new light:

For thirty years I had lived among them, and yet I seemed to have never noted before how drawn and anxious were their faces, of the rich as of the poor, the refined, acute faces of the educated as well as the dull masks of the ignorant. And well it might be so, for I saw now, as never before I had seen so plainly, that each as he walked constantly turned to catch the whispers of a spectre at his ear, the spectre of Uncertainty. (187)

1 Joseph Vogl uses the phrase “the specter of capital” to describe the workings of “the modern finance economy” (5), a phrase explicitly taken from Don DeLillo’s Cosmopolis (5). Bellamy’s specter, which is presented as a product of capitalism, is a close kin to this “specter of capital.”
The historical condition of a pervasive uncertainty is, to take up Bellamy’s metaphor, the ghost that plagues his nineteenth-century contemporaries, and this permanent threat of uncertainty has even become engrained in their physiognomy. Julian West then continues:

“Do your work never so well,” the spectre was whispering,—“rise early and toil till late, rob cunningly or serve faithfully, you shall never know security. Rich you may be now and still come to poverty at last. Leave never so much wealth to your children, you cannot buy the assurance that your son may not be the servant of your servant, or that your daughter will not have to sell herself for bread.” (187)

Uncertainty, which in its philosophical formulation might also be considered as skepticism, is here juxtaposed with a state of security, which is in turn equated with securing a knowledge about the future. Security and its counterpart are presented in epistemic as well as in economic terms. What remains unknowable is whether, even when someone is placed in an economically secure position, this economic security can be passed on into the future of the next generation. Bellamy’s utopian fictions, Looking Backward and its sequel, Equality, are deeply concerned with risks and insecurities and construct a social and political system in which these dangers no longer are a threat to its citizens. At the same time, however—as this article will argue—Bellamy’s fictions are also predicated on the workings of chance: not only do they fail to exclude chance events and miscalculations, but both the fictional world they construct and the underlying poetics are built on the possibility of the unpredictable.

In 1894, Bellamy published a short piece in The Ladies’ Home Journal, “How I Wrote ‘Looking Backward.’” In this essay, he explains the rationale for writing his first utopian novel, a bestseller that sold more copies than any other American novel in the post-bellum era and whose impact on its contemporaries is only rivaled by another novel of reform, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin.2 In his piece for the Ladies’ Home Journal, Bellamy explains why he didn’t write Looking Backward at an earlier stage in his life: “[l]ike most men […] I was under the sordid and selfish necessity of solving the economic problem in its personal bearings” (Edward Bellamy Speaks Again! 221). Bellamy thus presents himself as belonging to the very ranks of the passers-by that Julian West observes in his dream of the nineteenth century. He stages himself as one of the many whose faces reveal the presence of the “spectre of Uncertainty.” The decisive turning-point in Bellamy’s retrospective life-narration presented in “How I Wrote ‘Looking Backward’” is the birth of his children, an event that introduces to him the worries of parents for their offspring: “how to provide for and safeguard their future when they [the parents] themselves shall no longer be on earth” (Edward Bellamy Speaks Again! 222). He becomes painfully aware of the very futility of such an endeavor without a radical change in perspective:

However high, however wise, however rich you are, the only way you can surely safeguard your child from hunger, cold and wretchedness and all the deprivations, degradations and indignities which poverty implies, is by a plan that will equally safeguard

2 For an overview on nineteenth-century American fiction’s engagement with reform, see Claybaugh 32-33.
all men’s children. This principle once recognized, the solution of the social problem becomes a simple matter. (Edward Bellamy Speaks Again! 223)

Certainty about the future well-being of a child is only to be achieved by securing the well-being of the entire group of which this child forms a part; only by moving beyond the merely individual is safety to be had. This turning towards a collective is, as Jason Puskar has shown, a common response to risk in the late nineteenth-century. “[C]hance collectives,” as Puskar calls them, “mobilized Americans to join together against the lurking threat of chance” (3). The proposition to turn to “all men’s children,” however, clearly extends far beyond the chance collectives that Puskar discusses, such as the “private risk pools of the nineteenth-century life insurance industry” (3). Bellamy thereby universalizes the notion of using positive forms of interrelatedness to counter the threat of uncertainty. 3

Bellamy, who also worked as a journalist for most of his adult life, decided against introducing the public to the necessity of forming such a collective through writing newspaper editorials, or economic or political treatises. 4 Instead, as he states in his piece “How I Wrote ‘Looking Backward,’” he was convinced that it would be necessary to make use of another medium:

There was no doubt in my mind that the proposed study should be in the form of a story. This was not merely because that was a treatment which would command greater popular attention than others. In adventuring in any new and difficult field of speculation I believe that the student often cannot do better than to use the literary form of fiction. (Edward Bellamy Speaks Again! 223)

At first sight, it seems counterintuitive to turn to fiction for developing a reformist agenda that aims at radically changing society. 5 And yet, this is not the only striking thing about the above quotation. What is perhaps even more surprising than Bellamy’s choice of fiction is that he also calls this an endeavor in the “field of speculation.” 6

II. Logics of Speculation

In Equality, Bellamy’s 1897 follow-up to Looking Backward, Julian looks back at nineteenth-century economics and explains to his guide to the twentieth century, Dr. Leete, “that nobody could honestly acquire a million dollars. Everybody

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3 At the same time, Bellamy’s nineteenth-century real-life followers embraced insurance as a practical means of dealing with chance. See Lears 200.
4 After Looking Backward became a bestseller, Bellamy would again turn to journalism for propagating the ideas that he developed in his utopian fiction, even founding a journal of his own, The New Nation.
5 What is striking about Bellamy’s explanation is the ways in which it differs from another account of how he came to write Looking Backward, “Why I Wrote ‘Looking Backward,’” which was published in The Nationalist in 1890. In this earlier version, he claims that he started to work on Looking Backward without any reformist intent, and while working on his book “stumbled over the destined corner-stone of the new social order” (Edward Bellamy Speaks Again! 202).
6 Both Bellamy’s Looking Backward and his follow-up, Equality, can also be described as speculative fiction. On the difficulty of defining the genre of speculative fiction, see Gill 71-74.
knew that it was only by extortion, speculation, stock gambling, or some other form of plunder under pretext of law that such a feat could be accomplished” (112). The moral indictment of speculation is repeated throughout Equality, and it is voiced not only by Julian, but also by the children of the twentieth century. When Julian and Dr. Leete attend an examination of ninth-grade students on late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century history, one of the students, Margaret, presents her knowledge of fin-de-siècle capitalism in class: “Business was indeed little more than a speculative risk, a lottery in which the blanks greatly outnumbered the prizes” (Equality 165). In the schoolbooks of this new era, business is described as an aleatory enterprise, dictated by chance and devoid of reliable rules. Such an indictment of the chance workings of the economy is, however, not an invention of Bellamy, but quite typical for the Gilded Age. It was, after all, Mark Twain and Charles Dudley Warner’s satire The Gilded Age, which deals extensively with different schemes of speculation that gave this era its name. In the final chapter of Looking Backward, when Julian dreams of waking up in the old Boston of the late nineteenth-century, he resumes his morning routine of reading the daily paper. The newspaper that he picks up is dated May 31, 1887, and one of the dismal headlines of economic havoc reads: “Speculators engineering a great wheat corner at Chicago” (181). A center of the U.S. economy and, moreover, one of the most important places for the trade with grain in the global economy, Chicago struggled with the so-called “corners,” where a group of grain traders would manipulate the trade in futures, in other words, “contracts for the future delivery of grain that perhaps did not even exist yet” (Cronon 124-25). The title that Julian reads refers to a system of speculation that is not just emblematic of fin-de-siècle capitalism, but also one of the first instances of a very modern form of financial speculation. But whereas the term “speculation” only makes its appearance in Looking Backward in reference to gambling with the economy, in Equality this—negative—usage of the term speculation is set off by a more neutral usage of the term, one that refers not to financial risk-taking but to conjectural thinking.

What for Bellamy distinguishes speculating in the realm of fiction and as a form of reasoning from economic speculation is that he considers the former type of speculation—unlike economic speculation—not to be based on chance. This applies especially to a speculation that happens in the medium of narrative, since “[n]othing outside of the exact sciences has to be so logical as the thread of a story” (Edward Bellamy Speaks Again! 223-24). For Bellamy, a fictional narrative has to be believable, and in order to be considered believable by its readers, it has to strictly adhere to the laws of logic. This, however, is not the discipline of logic as developed, for instance, by contemporaries of Bellamy’s such as John Stuart Mill or Charles Sanders Peirce:

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7 In the literature of the antebellum period, speculation was one of the primary targets of satires such as Herman Melville’s The Confidence-Man and Caroline Kirkland A New Home, Who’ll Follow?
8 On the trade in futures in late twentieth-century stock markets, see Vogl 64-67.
9 Speculation, in this understanding, is, to quote the OED, “a conclusion, opinion, view, or series of these, reached by abstract or hypothetical reasoning.”
You may make a sermon or an essay or a philosophical treatise as illogical as you please and no one know the difference, but all the world is a good critic of a story, for it has to conform to the laws of ordinary probability and commonly observed sequence, of which we are all judges. (Edward Bellamy Speaks Again! 224)

The esoteric realm of high science, of philosophy and theology, is juxtaposed with the ordinary, the common, and the everyday, and it is within the parameters of this field that Bellamy’s narrative reasoning operates in order to ensure that his is a believable fiction. For William Dean Howells, who references Bellamy in his utopian novel A Traveler from Altruria, the common and the everyday held a central place in Bellamy’s poetics. “[W]hether he knew or not,” writes Howells, “he unerringly felt how the average man would feel” (“Edward Bellamy” 254). It is indeed quite self-consciously by this standard of the average man’s logic that Bellamy wants his work to be judged.10

Bellamy describes his own poetic method as “the working out of problems, that is to say, attempts to trace the logical consequences of certain assumed conditions” (Edward Bellamy Speaks Again! 224). In this statement, it is possible to detect a kinship with Emile Zola’s ‘experimental novel,’ insofar as Bellamy’s “assumed conditions” are thought experiments, purely fictional, whereas the consequences that are drawn from such assumptions follow from a belief that one understands human actions, a belief that, in Bellamy’s case, is founded on the anthropological assumption that man is a rational animal. Again and again, Bellamy states that his fiction, including both his earlier novels such as Dr. Heidenhoff’s Process and the later utopian novels, is grounded in logic, and he describes Looking Backward as “an attempt to work out logically the results of regulating the national system of production and distribution by the democratic principle of equal rights of all, determined by the equal voice of all” (Edward Bellamy Speaks Again! 224-25). Looking Backward thus exemplifies for Bellamy a logical thinking through of economic questions within the medium of fiction, which, unlike a specialized science, allows itself to be judged by a democratic public sphere constituted of average citizens.

III. Militarized Industry

Bellamy’s commonsensical reasoning in the realm of fiction produces a specific answer to the pressing issues of his time: how to safeguard the future of all men’s children. In Looking Backward, this is achieved by placing “an industrial army” at the center of the ideal future society. In an earlier account of why he wrote Looking Backward in the periodical The Nationalist (which was, in fact, inspired by his utopian fiction), he writes that his answer to the social question “was directly suggested to [him] by the grand object lesson of the organization of an entire people for national purposes presented by the military system of universal service for fixed and equal terms, which has been practically adopted by the nations of Europe” (Edward Bellamy Speaks Again! 201). Bellamy conceived universal

10 For Howells’s “aesthetic of the common,” see Kaplan 21-23.
conscription as one way of creating equality: by drafting everybody without any distinctions—including those of gender—into the army, social differences would be undone and the class system destroyed.\footnote{Krishan Kumar points out that “the system of universal compulsory military service” on which Bellamy’s modeled his industrial army, is “a practice which had its origins in the revolutionary concept of the citizen army and the levée en masse of the French Revolution” (150).} Yet, it is not just the fact that every citizen is drafted into the army that makes the army into a model for Bellamy. The inspiration extends beyond this. In his dream of waking up in the nineteenth century in the final chapter of \textit{Looking Backward}, Julian happens by mere chance upon a military parade during his walk through the streets of his hometown:

A regiment was passing. It was the first sight in that dreary day which had inspired me with any other emotions than wondering pity and amazement. Here at last were order and reason, an exhibition of what intelligent cooperation can accomplish. The people who stood looking on with kindling faces,—could it be that the sight had for them no more than but a spectacular interest? Could they fail to see that it was their perfect concert of action, their organization under one control, which made these men the tremendous engine they were, able to vanquish a mob ten times as numerous? Seeing this so plainly, could they fail to compare the scientific manner in which the nation went to war with the unscientific manner in which it went to work? (188)

The army epitomizes the ideal of a rationally organized social body, whose high efficiency is captured by Bellamy’s machine metaphor, and this image of order and rationality is juxtaposed to the unruly, anarchic social body of the mob that is furthermore highly ineffective and can easily be subdued by the military.\footnote{The “scientific manner” of the military also invites the comparison to Taylorism, which has been made by several critics. Cf. Auerbach 32-33.} Even though Julian West’s experiences in the utopian future have made him more receptive towards the existing inequalities of Gilded Age America, his sympathies do not lie with the mob of strikers. In the Gilded Age, military troops were repeatedly called upon to subdue strikes. They played a vital role in the class warfare of that period and were used by the state government for protecting interests on the side of capital, perhaps most famously in the Great Strike of 1877.\footnote{The Great Railroad Strike was followed by other strikes that were also subdued by force, such as the Haymarket Strike. See Pfafelzer 7.} In the account of the development of the revolution in \textit{Equality}, Dr. Leete acknowledges the military’s role in subduing the nation-wide strikes: “The labor strikes often resulted in disturbances too extensive to be dealt with by the police, and it became the common practice of the capitalists, in case of serious strikes, to call on the State and national governments to furnish troops to protect their property interest” (318). Though Dr. Leete disapproves of the military’s involvement, his sympathy for strikes and mob violence is limited. The strikes have succeeded in making the public aware that radical change is necessary, but at the same time, they also demonstrated their own incapacity to make this change happen.\footnote{In \textit{Looking Backward}, the representation of the strikers is even more negative than in \textit{Equality}: they are presented as actually being protesters paid by the capitalists so as to discredit serious attempts at reform. See Bellamy, \textit{Looking Bakward} 148-49.} Dr. Leete’s positive perception of the military also materializes in his opinion that the
wars in the nineteenth century were relatively “humane” when compared to “the fratricidal economic struggle” (*Equality* 276). Still, from our present day vantage point, it might strike readers as surprising that Bellamy’s novels would present nineteenth-century military action in such a light and even propose the army as a model for his socialist utopia.\(^{15}\)

In order to better understand the rationale for Bellamy’s decision, it is important to keep in mind that when a military parade marches the streets of Boston in the year 1887, some of the soldiers in its ranks might well have been Civil War veterans. The Civil War was a decisive period for Bellamy: too young to fight in the war, he was an ardent supporter of the Union, deeply fascinated by the military, and sought, when coming of age after Appomattox, to enroll at West Point.\(^{16}\) In Bellamy’s Civil War short-story “An Echo of Antietam,” first published in *Century Magazine* in 1889, Philip King, a young lawyer who has volunteered to join a Union regiment as a lieutenant, bids farewell to his fiancée, Grace Roberts, speaking the following words:

> The future to most men is but a chance of happiness, and when they risk it they only risk a chance. In staking their lives, they only stake a lottery ticket, which would probably draw a blank. But my ticket has drawn a capital prize. I risk not the chance, but the certainty, of happiness. (37)\(^{17}\)

Philip King juxtaposes the predictable future of a blissful domestic life at the side of his soon-to-be wife to the unpredictable dangers of the battlefield. As one of the first modern wars, the “Civil War was,” writes Louis Menand, “an unusually dangerous war for every soldier who fought in it” (49-50). The response to the pervasive risk of death on the battlefield was, however, ambiguous. For Jackson Lears, soldiers in the Civil War were “a population sharply aware of the arbitrariness of fate” (144), and Bellamy’s Philip King is no exception to the rule. At the same time, as Lears argues, providentialism persisted throughout the war years, and even became the dominant interpretation of the Civil War after the war’s end (144-45). The Battle of Antietam, the first battle that Philip King’s regiment took part in, shows how the young lieutenant not only risks, but, against all hopes and prayers, also losses everything; only a few days after taking leave from his loved ones, he is killed in what came to be known historically as one of the most gruesome battles of the Civil War. But though Philip takes his chances and stakes his life on the battlefield, his death is not interpreted by Bellamy as showing the cruel doings of mere chance. On the contrary, the minister’s sermon that Bellamy provides for the occasion of Philip King’s funeral interprets his death as an act of providence and a sacrifice shared equally by the bereaved: “It had been

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\(^{15}\) Arthur Lipow convincingly argues that Bellamy is a representative of “one” of the “authoritarian current[s]” in socialism (1).

\(^{16}\) According to George M. Frederickson, his failure to be accepted into West Point “was a traumatic disappointment” (226). It did, however, in no way put an end to Bellamy’s enthusiasm for the military.

\(^{17}\) In this short story, Bellamy uses the exact same metaphor for the chances of death on the battlefield that he would use eight years later in *Equality* to describe the pitfalls of late nineteenth-century capitalism: drawing a blank in the lottery.
appointed that half in blood of men and half in women’s tears the ransom of the people should be paid, so that their sorrow was not in vain, but for the healing of the nation” (“An Echo of Antietam” 56-57). The minister describes both Philip’s death and Grace’s loss as the price foreseen by God to be paid so that the Nation can be redeemed and the Union restored.

In *Looking Backward*, Dr. Leete, Julian West’s twentieth-century interlocutor at whose house he awakens after his mesmeric sleep, explains that in the year 2000, “[w]e have no wars now, and our governments no war powers, but in order to protect every citizen against hunger, cold, and nakedness, and provide for all his physical and mental needs, the function is assumed of directing his industry for a term of years” (35). Instead of being conscripted to fight wars and sacrifice their lives for their country, in the United States of the year 2000, citizens are conscripted to join the ranks of the industrial army. Though the draft has now become universal, it is organized in such a manner as not to foreclose individual wishes and desires. Every person is free to choose his profession in the industrial army, a choice based on “a man’s natural endowments, mental and physical” (39). The centralized bureaucracy in the militarized economy does not pressure any member of society to work in a field that he or she does not find fulfilling. Instead, it enables every member to find the type of work that best fits his or her abilities and inclinations. Yet, Julian is doubtful about the possibility of such an organization of labor, as it presumes that “the number of volunteers for any trade is exactly the number needed in that trade” (40). The difference in the attractiveness of the individual trades and professions, Julian reasons, surely produces an imbalance that the state has to counter. Responding to this, Dr. Leete admits that the labor market is not entirely self-organized, but he presents the interventions by the government as being done in such a way so as not to intrude on the individual freedom of its citizens. As Dr. Leete argues, certain rewards—especially a reduction in daily working hours—are used “to equalize the attractions of the trades” (40). In case that “the unavoidable difficulties and dangers” associated with a certain type of work should hinder the recruitment of enough volunteers, “the administration would only need to take it out of the common order of occupation by declaring it ‘extra hazardous’” (40-41). The use of scare quotes marks the phrase “extra hazardous” as a hyperbolic rhetoric that fails to adequately describe the reality of the workplace. This discrepancy between rhetoric and reality is also underlined by Dr. Leete’s explanation that unlike in the nineteenth century, in the year 2000 the work-spaces are organized in such a manner as to avoid all risks to the health and well-being of the workers. In the nineteenth century, fear was a primary motivating force for workers, namely the “fear of want” (56). In order to avoid suffering from want, men would work under the most atrocious conditions and risk serious injuries in the workplace. Etymologically, “[c]hance,” as Leland Monk points out, “(from the Latin *cadere*, to fall),” can be understood as “a totally haphazard event” (2). Accidents were one of the instances where the

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18 William Morris therefore critiques Bellamy for merely changing the incentives to work, but not transcending the cultural logic behind it: “Mr. Bellamy worries himself unnecessarily in seeking (with obvious failure) some incentive to labour to replace the fear of starvation” (506).
fatal workings of chance became evident. In *Looking Backward*, however, in the year 2000, chance becomes reinterpreted. To attach notions of risk and danger to specific types of work has the effect of generating labor, since adventurous men would seek out the honor of taking a risk for their nation: “[o]ur young men are very greedy of honor” (41). This principle is the same principle that the military is based on, and the affects attached to it also pervade Bellamy’s industrial army:

> When it was a question of the grandest class of efforts, the most absolute self-devotion, they depended on quite other incentives. Not higher wages, but honor and the hope of men’s gratitude, patriotism and the inspiration of duty, were the motives which they set before their soldiers when it was a question of dying for the nation, and never was there an age of the world when those motives did not call out what is best and noblest in men. (56)

The notion of *pro patria mori*, exemplified in Philip King’s sacrifice of his life for the greater good of the nation in “An Echo of Antietam,” is thus framed as representing the height of patriotic self-devotion, and it is this patriotic attitude that the industrial army in the year 2000 also aims at mobilizing, this devotion to a greater cause. This notion of simultaneously keeping the peace and yet being able to mobilize the sentiments and the sense of duty evoked by the army was not dreamt up by Bellamy alone. In 1910, William James formulated a similar idea in “The Moral Equivalent of War”: he saw nations across the globe steering into a “more of less socialistic future” (1289-90), and he warns his contemporaries that “[w]e must make new energies and hardihoods continue the manliness to which the military mind so faithfully clings” (1290). For both James and Bellamy, the army represents an ideal of virtue to which to aspire, and while both dream of abolishing the radical risk that comes with war, they nevertheless both want to keep the spirit alive that drives men to risk their lives.¹⁹

In “Why I Wrote ‘Looking Backward,’” Bellamy admits that at first he thought about the military only along metaphorical lines, but then “recognized in the modern military system not merely a rhetorical analogy for a national industrial service, but its prototype, furnishing at once a complete working model for its organization” (Edward Bellamy Speaks Again! 202). As important as the self-devotion that drives men to risk their own safety for the greater good is for Bellamy, even more significant is the fact that the army provides a blueprint for modern social organization. In the Gilded Age, when (as John Thomas writes in his introduction to *Looking Backward*) “a younger generation, intellectual heirs of the Civil War […] were striking out in new directions in search of the rational, scientifically organized society” (18), the military and its administration was one of the places where they looked.²⁰ In *Looking Backward*, service in the industrial army is, as Dr. Leete states, “regarded as so absolutely natural and reasonable” (37). This

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¹⁹ Given the fact that James ends his essay with a quotation from H.G. Wells, who subscribed to the Fabian brand of socialism, for which Bellamy also maintained an affinity, one could even see a direct—though obscured—line from Bellamy to James. See James 1292.

²⁰ Assessing the impact of the Civil War on northern intellectuals, George M. Fredrickson writes, “If the military experience contributed to the new ideal of the intellectual as scientific expert, practical administrator, and pragmatic reformer, service with the Sanitary Commission led to a similar emphasis on professionalism and scientific principles in the field of philanthropy” (211).
unquestioned logicality of the labor system does not mean that the citizens of the future spend their entire life serving in the industrial army. Instead, they dedicate only twenty-four years of their lives to this task. When it comes to the question of the wages that the workforce of the industrial army receives, Julian wonders if some “prodigious philosopher devised a new system of calculus satisfactory to all” (44). Dr. Leete first responds by stating that the hours of work per day differ corresponding to the arduousness of the labor. Then, however, he lets Julian on to the full truth, namely that “there is no idea in the modern social economy which at all corresponds with what was meant by wages in your day.” Instead, “all have the same share,” as Julian realizes to his utter dismay (54).

IV. Utopian Calculations

Since Thomas More’s *Utopia*, it has been one of the conventions of utopian societies to operate without money, at least, without money in an ordinary sense. Bellamy’s *Looking Backward* is no exception to the rule: “We have kept the old word [dollar], but not the substance. The term, as we use it [...] merely serves as an algebraic symbol for comparing the values of products with one another.” A citizen receives “[a] credit corresponding to his share of the annual product” (51), which is predicated on the fact that the exact number of “the annual product” as well as the exact count of the population is known. In the nineteenth century, there was, as Ian Hacking famously puts it, “an avalanche of printed numbers” (2). Bellamy not only welcomed this development, but imagined how this counting, measuring, and quantifying of the entire national production and consumption could be perfected. Writing on nineteenth-century Britain, Mary Poovey has argued that the government started to embrace numbers “once they came to seem like instruments that could generate impartial, rigorous, value-free knowledge” (306). It is precisely this neutrality of the language of mathematics that made numbers seem the adequate tool for ensuring equality and social justice in Bellamy’s utopian polity. If a citizen wants to obtain a product in one of the department stores, which in Bellamy’s vision are vital for the distribution of commodities, the amount of his share in the annual product that he has to pay is determined by a “calculation”: “the labor employed in the various processes of a manufactured article gives its price relatively to other articles” (*Looking Backward* 109). Calculations determine the “share” that each citizen has in the nation’s wealth, the amount of hours each citizen works per day, or, again, the amount of their “share” that they have to pay for commodities. Responding to Julian’s question about how the administration determines “what shall be done in every department, so that enough of everything is produced and yet no labor wasted,” Dr. Leete responds that the system operates

[...] on principles so obvious and easily applied, that the functionaries at Washington to whom it is trusted require nothing more than men of fair abilities to discharge it to the

21 Fredric Jameson describes “the abolition of money and property” as “More’s initial utopian gesture,” which “runs through the Utopian tradition like a red thread” (20).
entire satisfaction of the nation. The machine which they [the functionaries in Washington] direct is indeed a vast one, but so logical in its principles and direct and simple in its workings, that it all but runs itself; and nobody but a fool could derange it, as I think you will agree after a few words of explanation. (106)

Again, both the logicality and the simplicity of the ways that state functionaries organize the national economy is emphasized: it is a system that operates with impersonal, quasi-automated administrators. Bellamy’s contemporaries were well acquainted with the principles on which this system operates:

Even in your day statisticians were able to tell you the number of yards of cotton, velvet, woolen, the number of barrels of flour, potatoes, butter, number of pairs of shoes, hats, and umbrellas annually consumed by the nation. Owing to the fact that production was in private hands, and that there was no way of getting statistics of actual distribution, these figures were not exact, but they were nearly so. Now that every pin which is given out from a national warehouse is recorded, of course the figures of consumption for any week, month, or year, in the possession of the department of distribution at the end of that period, are precise. On these figures, allowing for tendencies to increase or decrease and for any special causes likely to affect demand, the estimates, say for a year ahead, are based. (106-07)

The basic operational principle of Bellamy’s future society is the new science of statistics. It is a society based on its own radical quantification, which allows for the creation of an economy that is both more efficient and more just than late nineteenth-century capitalism. What emerges in Bellamy’s fiction is, as Dora Ahmad has put it, “a rationalized, bureaucratized, utterly static state” (27), and statistics is at the heart of this state.22 As Dr. Leete makes clear, statistics is of course no twentieth-century invention, but already well in place in the late nineteenth century. What has changed in Bellamy’s utopian vision, then, is not that a new science for organizing society has emerged, but that statisticians are working with a different set of data. Alain Desrosières, in his history of statistics, argues both that “the United States is the country where statistics has displayed the most plentiful developments,” and that “it is also the country where the apparatus of public statistics has never experienced the integration and legitimacy that its French, British, and German counterparts […] have managed to acquire” (189). In Bellamy’s authoritarian state-socialism, such an integration of the data is well in place.

Bellamy’s turn towards statistics is symptomatic for the late nineteenth-century engagement with the culture of chance. In his classic The Taming of Chance, Ian Hacking juxtaposes “the Age of Reason” to the end of the nineteenth century, arguing that whereas in the Enlightenment “chance had been called a superstition of the vulgar” (1), with the fin-de-siècle “chance has attained the respectability of a Victorian valet” (2). Hacking is alluding to the transformation of the perception of chance through statistics, which formulated laws that govern what previously was conceived of as crude luck. But statistics does not merely refer to the record-

22 Thomas Peyser states that “[f]or Bellamy, the quest for a perfect organization is informed by the rising ethos of engineering” (42). Jonathan Auerbach even argues: “If Bellamy’s appealing fiction is prophetic at all, I suggest, it is for anticipating certain central tendencies of advanced capitalism: the increasing division between ownership of capital and its control by bureaucratic administration” (25). The importance of statistics has, however, not been noted by these critics.
ing and describing of all quantifiable facts in the present. To return to a passage from *Looking Backward* cited above: “On these figures, allowing for tendencies to increase or decrease and for any special cause likely to affect demand, the estimates, say for a year ahead, are based” (107). Statistics is not just interested in describing data in its charts and tables: it also uses this set of data to draw inferences and make scientific forecasts. This, of course, applies not only to Bellamy’s imagined future, but also to nineteenth-century statistics, which is already about the mathematical probability of future events and states.

Even in the future present of the year 2000, however, statistical calculations cannot completely eliminate all uncertainty about the future. In *Looking Backward*, prognostics are presented as “estimates,” that is, reliable estimates that are to be used “with a proper margin for security” (107). In her book *Die Fiktion der wahrscheinlichen Realität* (*The Fiction of Probable Reality*), Elena Esposito discusses statistics and probability theory as “present[ing] an unreal, but realistic reality as they simplify reality and make reality transparent in a way that the real world would never allow” (57, my trans.). As Esposito also writes, statistics present us with a fiction about the future, “not a random fiction, however, but a fiction that is developed according to rules that are comprehensible and where there is a consensus regarding their workings” (57, my trans.). Therefore, statistical prognostics are functional fictions, not functioning in the sense that they can actually predict a future reality but functioning insofar as they provide a sense of orientation and security in the present (60-61). Bellamy uses statistics in *Looking Backward* along the lines described by Esposito: that is, for providing a sense of orientation in the present that guides the economy. Yet, his statistics are not just functional fictions but also fictions that function: the predictions in *Looking Backward*’s future Boston correspond, with a slight margin of error, to the actuality of the future once it has become the present. Through this fiction of a highly functional statistics, a planned economy becomes a more effective way of producing and distributing goods, and thereby securing a life of plenty.  

Statistics function prognostically: they aim at predicting the future. Prior to their use in the field of economics, however, they were used for calculating demographic developments. At the end of his final novel, *Equality*, Bellamy scrutinizes this line of statistical thinking by focusing on the foremost theoretician of demographics and population growth in England, Thomas Malthus. In *Looking Backward*, Julian comes to see centralized socialist economics based on statistical calculations as the proper way to safeguard the security of the next generation. The Malthusians, however, objected to the idea of the possibility of a life of plenty, and Bellamy takes up this objection in *Equality*. His final novel ends with the presentation of excerpts from “The Book of the Blind,” an edited volume compiled after the revolution (or evolution, as it is called in *Looking Backward*) from fin-de-siècle capitalism to socialism. This volume presents verbatim the many arguments that were made by the opponents of socialism to attack the emerging politi-
cal system. Dr. Leete recites a wide range of these nineteenth-century objections, including worries such as that once economic productivity is no longer dictated by sheer necessity, it will decline rapidly, or that equality threatens individuality.

The so-called Malthusian objection, however, is located on a level different from all of the other objections that are made in “The Book of the Blind.” Instead of attacking the idea of equality or any other of the social principles underlying the emerging system of centralized state-socialism (or Nationalism, as Bellamy also calls it), the Malthusians present a bleak prognosis of what happens in a world without scarcity. In his 1798 *Essay on the Principle of Population*, Malthus juxtaposes what he calls the “geometrical ratio” of population increase with the “arithmetical ratio” of “[s]ubsistence increase,” and declares “that the power of population is indefinitely greater than the power in the earth to produce subsistence for man” (71). In *Equality*, the Malthusians who object to the new principles of equality argue, in the words of Dr. Leete, that as “no motive of prudence would be operative to restrict the number of offspring” what would happen is “a much faster increase of population than ever before known, and ultimately an over-crowding of the earth and a pressure on the food supply” (409-10). In the historical nineteenth-century, the laws that Malthus formulated did not meet with the approval of his contemporaries, but rather led to a negative attitude towards the new science of political economy, which he represented. Mary Poovey argues that these critics “charged that Malthus’s pessimism undermined hope, that his claims that misery served a spiritual use sanctioned the neglect of the poor by those more interested in wealth than in virtue” (289). This critique of the Malthusian line of argumentation is also repeated in *Equality*; it becomes visible, for instance, when Dr. Leete alludes to the popularity that Malthusian thinking enjoyed among the upper classes: “By means of the Malthus doctrine, the meanest man who ever ground the face of the poor had no difficulty in showing that he was really a slightly disguised benefactor of the race, while the philanthropist was an injurious fellow” (411). Malthus provides a rationale for inaction, a perfect excuse for those unenthusiastic about reform. In the actual historical reception of Malthus, this resulted in his critics believing that numbers are not merely neutral, but outright immoral. Malthus’s critics not only attacked the conclusions to be drawn from his theorem, but “focused on the method that seemed, in form at least, related to the numbers” (Poovey 290). The method was statistical.

It should come as no surprise that the objection to Malthusian thinking made in *Equality* differs in this regard. According to Dr. Leete, the Malthusian critique of the Nationalist system is based on faulty assumptions, namely that radical economic restructuring would have no impact on the numbers of children in a family. Dr. Leete therefore harshly criticizes Malthusian population statistics:

[…] while laying such stress on the direct effects of poverty and the ills it stands for to destroy life, it [Malthus’s doctrine] utterly failed to allow for the far greater influence which the brutalizing circumstances of poverty exerted to promote the reckless multiplication of species. Poverty, with all its deadly consequences, slew its millions, but only after having, by means of its brutalizing conditions, promoted the reckless reproduction of tens of millions—that is to say, the Malthus doctrine recognized only the secondary effects of misery and degradation in reducing population, and wholly overlooked their far more important primary effect in multiplying it. (411)
What this theory in fact failed to acknowledge was the effect that social change, more precisely the improvement and refinement that transforms the poor, has on fertility and birth rates. Since, in the new system, everybody would basically join the “well-to-do and cultured class” (410), which, as Julian concedes, even in his own time had a significantly lower birthrate, the Malthusian calculation of population growth is widely amiss. Earlier in *Equality*, Malthus is time and again referred to as a seer: explicitly because he managed to elucidate the destructive power of poverty, and—implicitly—because the very system on which the Nationalist economy in both *Looking Backward* and *Equality* is based is a statistical one. Malthus was one of the major innovators who made statistics central to political economy and its later embodiment, economics. But unlike Malthus’s contemporary critics, Bellamy sees the error not in the method, but in Malthus’s data set, which fails to account for the numerical changes wrought by revolutionary social developments. The claim that *Looking Backward* and *Equality* are making is that a moral and just social order can be based on a statistical, quantitative system, and—in spite of Malthus’s warning—that this life of plenty will become a lasting inheritance to mankind.

V. Improbable Possibilities

The possibility of living a life in which Dr. Leete does not have to worry about the future safety of his child, Edith, or of her potential children, is thus based on the conviction that the Malthusians have erred. Julian, meanwhile, could not have become a witness to the statistical workings of an ideal society and could not have verified that the Malthusian ratio was indeed wrong if not for a crass miscalculation of his own. At the beginning of *Looking Backward*, Julian West is plagued by insomnia, and he relates that he has built himself an underground chamber beneath his house where he can repose undisturbed by the noises of urban Boston, and also that he regularly resorts to the help of a mesmerist, Dr. Pillsbury, for inducing sleep. Julian’s fiancée, Edith Bartlett, is, however, entirely unaware of his doings, as he admits: “I had not hitherto told her this, because there was unquestionably a slight risk […]. The risk, of course, was that it might become too profound and pass into a trance beyond the mesmerizer’s power to break, ending in death” (*Looking Backward* 14). Dr. Leete, who has set his mind on building a laboratory in his garden, strikes by chance upon Julian’s underground safe-chamber and there discovers the nineteenth-century sleeper. How it came to be that neither Dr. Pillsbury, nor Julian West’s servant, Sawyer, nor Julian’s contemporaries awoke him in the nineteenth century can only be explained by constructing a sequence of accidents. With the help of Dr. Leete, Julian comes to the following conclusion:

The layer of ashes found above the chamber indicated that the house had been burned down. […] It only remains to assume that Sawyer lost his life in the fire or by some accident connected with it, and the rest follows naturally enough. No one but he and Dr. Pillsbury either knew of the existence of the chamber or that I was in it, and Dr. Pillsbury, who had gone that night to New Orleans, had probably never heard of the fire at all. (*Looking Backward* 26-27)
Though Julian West is well aware of the fact that mesmeric sleep has its risks, it is in no way possible for him to anticipate or even predict this improbable chain of events that transport him into the future of the year 2000.

Rüdiger Campe has argued that in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the notion of the probable became transformed through the creation of statistical theories of probability. As a result, by the beginning of the nineteenth century, the probable had become synonymous with both scientific truth and reality (1-3). The chain of accidental events that transports Julian West into the future obviously defies all possible ideas of statistical probability and thus runs counter to a modern notion of verisimilitude that is consonant with statistical thinking. In his review of *Looking Backward*, Howells accordingly places Bellamy’s novel in “the region of pure romance,” a form that he contrasts with the realist novel. Romance provides the author with the poetic license to create characters that are not judged by the same standard “as with one portraying realistic people” (“Editor’s Study” 154). Bellamy makes use of the freedom provided by this genre, not just in his portrayal of the—rather schematic—characters, but also in his account of freak accidents such as the undisturbed century-long mesmeric sleep. Indeed, in the preface to *Looking Backward*, which functions as an open-ended narrative frame, its fictional author, a collective of historians at Shawmut College in the year 2000, self-consciously states that the aim of the book is to instruct its readers at the onset of the twenty-first century about the radical differences between the nineteenth-century and present-day society. In order to succeed in this “the author has sought to alleviate the instructive quality of the book by casting it in the form of a romantic narrative” (3). The “romantic narrative” alludes both to the romance of Julian West’s posthumous life in the Boston of the new millennium and to the love interest that develops between Julian West and Edith Leete, Dr. Leete’s daughter. At the same time, the description of “modern social institutions and their underlying principles” (3) is presented as representing reality and opposed to those elements of the discourse of the novel described as romance. Whereas the romance elements are predicated on luck (or fate) and the accidental, the description of the new society operates according to the laws of logic and probability. The accidental story logic would thus, according to the preface’s stated intentions, make the workings of a society based on the rational logics of statistics digestible, but at the same time, the story logic is bracketed as mere fiction, since it does not represent a probable reality.

William Morris, who, in contrast to Howells, classifies *Looking Backward* as a utopian text, describes the elements that Bellamy calls romantic in words highly reminiscent of those used by Thomas More in *Utopia*, the founding text of the genre, namely “as a sugar-coating to the pill” (501).24 Thereby Morris—author of *News from Nowhere*, one of the most influential British utopian novels—implicitly acknowledges that Bellamy, even in his preface, operates within

24 Thomas More’s wording in his second letter to Peter Giles is, “I do not deny that if I had decided to write about the commonwealth and a story such as this had occurred to me, I would not have shrunk from a fictional presentation which would make the truth slip more pleasantly into the mind like medicine smeared with honey” (138).
the logics of the genre. The mingling of rational description with narrative is as common to utopian fictions as is the accidental discovery of the ideal polity by a utopian traveler. Unlike More, Bellamy, however, localizes his utopian society not in an uncharted territory of the present but in the future, a device pioneered by Louis-Sébastian Mercier in *L’An Deux Mille Quatre Cent Quarante*. Whereas, as Reinhart Koselleck argues, utopias located in the present operate under the premise that the utopian space could, at least potentially, be reached and inspected by other travelers, the setting of a utopia in the future means that “the controllable ground of the present is abandoned” (87). Access to the future, probable or improbable, is only to be had as a fiction, as the future is and will always remain empirically inaccessible in the present (Koselleck 132). Like statistics, utopias are invested in the future; both temporalized utopias and statistics explicitly create possible scenarios of a potential future present and are in this way parallel projects. Since statistical probability in the nineteenth century is associated with truth and reality, the fiction of a society based on statistics is the fiction of a society that is realistic, a claim that is central to the narrative logic of *Looking Backward* and that is underscored by the preface’s exclusion of the romance plot from the novel’s claim to verisimilitude. But even though the preface intends to exclude, or rather, bracket the accidental, Bellamy’s utopian fiction nevertheless cannot exist without it: it remains a necessary condition for its very existence, and not just on the level of the plot. Statistics is a recoding of chance, and the aleatory is the very principle on which it operates. Both in *Looking Backward* and in *Equality*, Bellamy imagines his utopian statistics as more highly functional than statistics in the nineteenth century, but he still has to allow for a “margin of error” in the forecasts made. Bellamy’s utopian novels imagine a society where statistic rationality has proven successful to the degree that the accident is declared to be existent almost only as a fiction. But at the same time, the improbable accident, the unlikely miscalculation, the intrusion of chance has to be actually possible. The “spectre of Uncertainty” may be imagined to no longer form an existential threat, but it remains a presence that Bellamy cannot imagine his fictional future to exist without.

Works Cited


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25 Louis Marin’s analysis of More’s *Utopia* could equally be applied to Bellamy: “Narrative discourse in not completely absent from the utopian text. On the contrary, it constituted the framework of our descriptive picture” (55).