

Utopia & Cosmopolis



GLOBALIZATION IN THE ERA

OF AMERICAN LITERARY

REALISM

THOMAS PEYSER



Utopia & Cosmopolis

New Americanists

A series edited by

Donald E. Pease

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Globalization in the Era
of American Literary Realism



Thomas Peyser

Duke University Press Durham & London 1998

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Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper ♾

Typeset in Trump Mediaeval by Keystone Typesetting, Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data appear
on the last printed page of this book.

Contents

Preface vii

Introduction: Realism and Utopia,
Nation and Globe i

Part One. Dreams of Unity

1. The World a Department Store 29
2. The Imperial Ghetto 63

Part Two. Forms of Multiplicity

3. The Culture of Conversation 95
4. The Imperial Museum 135

Notes 169

Index 191

Preface

In his 1905 book *World Organization*, the American social reformer Raymond L. Bridgman noted, "Time and space are not nearly as much against the organic unity of the world now as they were against the organic unity of the United States a hundred years ago," arguing that a world government would be "directly in line with the marked tendency of our age toward the consolidation of small enterprises and organizations into large ones."¹ The prevalence of such rhetoric at the turn of the century is what first prompted me to examine the literary responses to what many thought was the imminent consolidation of the globe. Such a study seemed worthwhile not simply because it might show that literature of the period was "grounded" in the historical contingencies of its moment, but because in the face of so radical an alteration of the fundamental categories by which human experience is organized ("time and space"), a space itself opens for the kind of reimagining of society and of human nature that must almost of necessity be literary in quality: if there were to be a final organization of the world, there would be a need not only for pragmatic ingenuity in constitutional engineering, but also for a poetic re-vision of the ground of human being and human association, a ground that previously involved the givenness of national identity.

Although Bridgman usually warmed to the more mundane

tasks of global unification, in his chapter on "the mind of the world" he himself notes the need for another kind of mental labor: "When we talk about the world getting together in order to promote the peace of the nations or for the regulation of transportation or for better sanitation of ports and ships, it all seems businesslike and practical. But joint action by the nations of the world would not be possible unless there were an identity in the world corresponding to the identity of any one people but greater. . . . National self-consciousness has been attained but world self-consciousness has not. Will it ever be attained?"² Before the work of sanitizing ports and regulating railroads on a supernational scale can proceed, there needs to be a motive, a frame of mind, a vision that will make such projects seem worthwhile or even thinkable. Bridgman calls this entity, as yet unthought, "world self-consciousness" or "the mind of the world." The emergence of this mind is the necessary precondition of world organization. In the following chapters, we will see how Bridgman's question—"Will it ever be attained?"—was answered in turn-of-the-century American fiction.

When I began to plan this study, at first I thought to restrict myself to the remarkable outpouring of utopian writings of the period, as they seemed the natural place to look for a renovated conception of human solidarity. The further along I got, however, the more I realized that my initial conception was too narrow, because the pressure, so to speak, of global consolidation expressed itself in other kinds of writing as well. In particular, I became convinced that the work of Henry James, the most penetrating explorer of international themes in the fiction of the period, bore importantly on my topic. Rather than attempt a survey of utopian thought, therefore, I have brought together discussions of the careers of the three authors whose utopias are widely known today—Bellamy, Gilman, and Howells—with a consideration of James's most ambitious novel of international amalgamation, *The Golden Bowl*. Although I make no claim to have mounted an exhaustive study of this theme in the literature of the period, I have, I hope, opened up the topic for further consideration.

Even when considering the utopias, moreover, I have tended not to concentrate on the mechanical contrivances—sanitation and transportation—by which they achieve the perfect ordering of society. In part this is because such authoritative works as Arthur Lipow's *Authoritarian Socialism* have already covered this ground so thoroughly, at least so far as Bellamy is concerned. My aim, however, is to suggest something of the novelty and even strangeness of the very basis of Bellamy's and others' imaginary institutions, namely, their attempts to grasp the world as a whole.

The need for such a focus may become clearer if we consider for a moment how the story of Bellamy's Julian West, who is miraculously translated from the strife-ridden Boston of 1887 to the utopian world of 2000, is rewritten by a much more recent author of world consciousness: Thomas Pynchon. Like West, Pynchon's Lyle Bland is a wealthy Bostonian whose living room becomes a kind of time machine in which he "imagines that he has been journeying underneath history." As a result of such travel through "Earth's mind," this tremendously successful financier, who has done more than his share of the "grim rationalizing of the World," discovers that at the end of this process an entirely new world comes to light: "Earth is a living critter, after all these years of thinking about a big dumb rock."³ As we shall see, Bellamy is also inclined to the ecstatic (even if his ecstasy is brought on by something like the rationalizing of the world Bland rejects), but the main point here is that the process of global consolidation, carried out by traditional organizations (nations, corporations) for traditional reasons (dynastic aggrandizement, profit), ends up producing an amalgamation with which the old organizational concepts cannot grapple.

There is, to put it a bit differently, something of a Peter Principle at work here: Every organization will expand to the point at which the concept behind it no longer makes sense. The success with which the organization expands the scope of its command leads finally to the abortive integration of the unassimilable, which then assumes a problematic place half in and half out of the organization, calling its very foundations into question; the unas-

similable element, which stubbornly refuses to fit in with the smoothly functioning system, or even defies comprehension by falling outside the classificatory system that the organization fosters, reveals the merely artificial or ad hoc status of rules that, before encountering such an obstacle, appeared fully consonant with the conditions of the world. Although tinkering with the parameters of the organization might solve the problem, it is also possible that the entire structure will collapse like a house of cards—as it does for Lyle Bland—and that the result of the encounter with the limits of the organization will result not in fine-tuning, but in what Thomas Kuhn refers to as a paradigm shift, a fundamental change in the rules according to which mind organizes the data confronting it in, or rather *as*, the world.

The particular paradigm shift we shall consider here is one that in recent decades has come fully to light: *the shift by which the nation is replaced with the globe as the fundamental unit of human association*. Although it is certainly true that this shift has percolated through to American popular culture only rather recently, manifesting itself, for example, in bumper stickers adjuring us to “think globally,” global thinking permeated the literature of the realist period to an extent that has not been appreciated, and for the most part not even noticed. But if the writers we will consider here did not usually announce such thinking with spectacular assertions about the world’s status as a full-fledged “critter,” they at least paved the way for such a conception by thinking of it as, in Bridgman’s phrase, an “organic unity.”

In this book, then, I am trying to broaden the context within which the writers I discuss are usually placed, building on, rather than discarding, many of the important recent examinations of the period. Studies as various as Alan Trachtenberg’s *The Incorporation of America*, Walter Benn Michaels’s *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism*, Amy Kaplan’s *The Social Construction of American Realism*, and Miles Orvell’s *The Real Thing* have all situated turn-of-the-century literature within a national context, namely, the consolidation of a market economy presided over by corporate capitalism. The works on which I concentrate, however, all have an intercontinental character that calls for the

supplementary perspective I attempt to provide. Whereas much of the criticism of the past decade and a half has with good reason focused on the ways America was beginning to resemble a vast corporation—this is the primary implication of Trachtenberg's alluring title—I hope to bring into the foreground the way turn-of-the-century authors understood the process by which that metaphorical corporation was itself being incorporated into something even broader in scope, something simultaneously more majestic and more potentially threatening, crisply summed up in what the sociologist Roland Robertson has called "the crystallization of the globe as a single place."⁴

J. C. Levenson, my dissertation director, gave me invaluable detailed suggestions as I worked out the core of my argument. Paul Cantor read portions of the manuscript and led me to rethink the matter of cosmopolitanism. Philip Kuberski and Allen Mandelbaum read the entirety of a late draft, offering encouragement and suggestions for the final revision. Others who offered advice after reading portions of this book include Stephen Arata, Jillian Beifuss, Julie Grossman, Harold Kolb, Eric Lott, and Mark Parker. I am indebted to my anonymous readers at Duke University Press, to Reynolds Smith and Miriam Angress, who shepherded the manuscript through its initial stages there, and to Judith Hoover, who copyedited it. I am very grateful for a dissertation fellowship from the University of Virginia, a Mellon Fellowship in the Humanities, and a Bradley Foundation Fellowship, all of which allowed me the time to develop my thinking and get it on paper. Two chapters of this book were previously published in different forms. Chapter 4 is an expanded version of "James, Race, and the Imperial Museum," which appeared in *American Literary History* 6 (1994): 48–70, and is here reproduced by permission of Oxford University Press. Chapter 2 is a much altered version of "Reproducing Utopia: Charlotte Perkins Gilman and *Herland*," which appeared in *Studies in American Fiction* 22 (1994): 1–16. I am grateful to the editors for their interest in my work and for their permission to reprint.

*Introduction: Realism and Utopia,
Nation and Globe*

"Society" is, of course, a kind of fiction.

These words have the ring of the contemporary. They reject natural grounds for human association and imply that social order is radically and willfully arbitrary, based on what can be variously described as a noble lie or mystification. To write these words is to alienate oneself from an unselfconscious participation in an organic community. It is to stand outside the ring of myths that, according to Nietzsche, defines the horizons of a healthy civilization. In short, this sentence could apparently come from the pen of many contemporary intellectuals, among whom the laying bare of the fictiveness of social arrangements and of the mechanisms by which a culture reproduces itself is almost assumed to be part of an enterprise undertaken to liberate that culture from its repressive ideology.

It is all the more striking, therefore, that the author of this sentence was the influential sociologist Edward Alsworth Ross, writing in his important work advocating "social control" in 1901.¹ Ross's "survey of the foundations of order" (the subtitle of his study) is important because it shows that arguments now firmly associated with the rejection of such control—or "discipline," as it is now, following Foucault, more often called—were once used to advance its implementation.² For Ross's emphasis on

the fictive nature of social arrangements functions as a central justification for his plans to establish a program of control from above. As long as society is not arranged according to precepts laid down by nature, it ought at least to conform to the dictates of reason and of experts—like, Ross thinks, himself—who have gone about the task of studying society scientifically.

Announcing the fictive basis of group identity, Ross proposes rules of order that can, in principle, be laid down anywhere. Although different local circumstances might cause the sociologist to apply his or her precepts in different ways, Ross establishes a framework that can be used to penetrate the nature of any society. The social text may vary widely from place to place, but the fact that, for Ross, it is a fiction, a text, allows him to suppose that every society on the globe functions in accordance with a code that may be mastered through a universally applicable procedure of decipherment. Ross's insistence on the fictive foundations of order allows him to take in the different cultures of the earth as one might a group of different literary forms. Just as the grouping designated by the term "literary" authorizes the professional expert on literature to pronounce on a wide variety of texts that may have nothing in common but their supposed "literariness," the uniformly textual nature of social order allows for the creation of a science that can arrange a staggeringly varied array of materials under one heading, "the social," and warrants the emergence of an authority, the sociologist, who takes this category as his or her area of expertise. Even one of the greatest of those early authorities, Georg Simmel, worried about the vast number of "specific problems" that came before the sociologist's eyes: "They might be too different from one another in content, orientation, and method of solution to be treated as if they amounted to a homogeneous field of inquiry."³ In spite of such anxieties, sociologists like Ross who set themselves up in the second half of the nineteenth century had managed to constitute all the civilizations of the globe as a unified object of scientific analysis.

Ross may seem a strange starting point for a study of Edward Bellamy, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, William Dean Howells, and

Henry James; indeed, this literary quartet may seem implausible to begin with. His example suggests, however, two ideas that are crucial to the authors to whom I devote the bulk of this book. First, and most obviously, the idea that society was in some fundamental way a construction (like a building) rather than a natural formation (like a leaf) lay behind the progressive impulse plainly visible in Bellamy, Gilman, and Howells. Progressives, that is, typically imagine society as a human fabrication that, like a novel, can be revised and improved. It seems unlikely that people in the City Beautiful movement or on the board of the Interstate Commerce Commission thought they were tampering with nature, or that the vast areas of human activity to which they turned their attention were not in fact amenable to consciously directed, centralized organization. One indication of the pervasiveness of the progressive ethos is its effect on even Henry James, a novelist not usually associated with visions of the destiny of humankind. Responding in 1870 to a letter from his father on "the amelioration of society," James writes of his "great satisfaction" in turning "to any profession of interest in the fate of collective humanity." He claims to be particularly scandalized, like Edward Bellamy and E. A. Ross after him, by the sheer mess and disorder of the modern world, "the absurdly clumsy and transitory organization of the actual social body."⁴ Here James's social critique is hardly distinguishable from his critique of many nineteenth-century novels, which he famously denigrated as "loose, baggy monsters." Indeed, one reason progressivism was the kind of political movement that could spontaneously generate a literary arm may well have been that it encouraged the belief that revising a society and constructing a novel in some ways resemble one another.

Ross points to another fact, one that has not received sufficient attention in the study of turn-of-the-century American fiction and culture: the emergence of a global perspective. There was, of course, nothing particularly new about the fact that the various regions of the world were knit together through a patchwork of cultural and economic interchange, political domination and alliance. Ross's desire to grasp the world whole, however, accords

with the unprecedentedly global expansion of Western technological, economic, and imperial systems. As America and the European powers became more and more inextricably linked to remote corners of the earth, the very concept of a distinct national identity became problematic. In the United States, of course, the appearance of new kinds and numbers of immigrants provoked sometimes heated debate about national identity and alleged threats to its integrity, long before the nation itself attempted, belatedly and decidedly not in a fit of absentmindedness, to acquire a modest empire of its own. The recurrent, virulent outbreaks of xenophobia that accompanied, and even at times went hand in hand with, America's progressive movement give clear voice to the anxiety brought on by global consolidation and by the idea of the global society—whatever that could mean—that might emerge in its wake. To many, including a bewildered and fascinated Henry James, the globalized future was on display in Manhattan's Lower East Side, presenting a spectacular and perhaps hopeless challenge to many notions of an American or indeed any national identity. If society is a kind of fiction, what kind of fiction could accommodate a society drawn from, or even extending over, all of explored space?

This book argues that, in various ways, Bellamy, Gilman, Howells, and James all attempt to grapple with such a question. Of these four, only James is widely thought of as an important explorer of an "international theme," but there are connections between his cosmopolitan concerns and the global context evident in the utopian and realist writings of the others. As is well known, James shuttles his characters from America to Europe with great regularity, but his attempt to map the cosmopolis composed of such globetrotters is related to Bellamy's insistence that his utopian system be spread over all the earth, Gilman's decision to settle her utopia of parthenogenic European women in the heart of South America, and Howells's relocation of discontented Americans to the shores of the antipodal Altruria. All four authors are reaching forward to an understanding of what it might mean to be a citizen of the world, what the consequences might be of taking

that stock phrase literally. For Ross it means adopting a stance equally alienated from all cultures, establishing an outpost in an Archimedean space carved out by scientific method. Such attempts at complete objectivity and detachment are appropriately labeled utopian, because they seem to posit a nonexistent space outside all prevailing cultures from which to observe those cultures. The attempt to achieve a similarly global perspective prompted many literary figures, too, to embrace utopia explicitly and self-consciously.

Although James chose to work almost exclusively in an often experimental form of realism, his anatomy of cosmopolitan culture shows that he, no less than his utopian contemporaries, was trying to trace the emerging outline of the global future. Indeed, the lines of filiation between utopian and realist fictions will recur many times in this book, particularly when the realists turn their attention to the cosmopolitan city. Often the occasion for fiery metaphors—it is a “cauldron,” a “crucible”—the cosmopolis unites the forces of modernity that seemed to point the way to the future. In many works of the period, utopia and cosmopolis both promise the advent of a universality standing at the end of history; both announce the culmination of the modern will to simultaneous expansion and integration, even as they show that the absorption of ever more heterogeneous populations threatens traditional ideas about cultural integrity. Keeping in mind both the aspirations and anxieties that attended globalization at the turn of the century, we shall see that the utopias of Bellamy, Howells, and Gilman—which attempt to transcend the real—are more grounded in existing realities than their authors perhaps thought, and that realism, usually understood as an effort to capture what already exists, is at least potentially as oriented toward the future as is utopia.

This is not to say, however, that James’s cosmopolitanism is a species of utopianism, or that the utopias are all founded upon a cosmopolitan mingling of the races. Rather, the four authors are united by their responsiveness to the interlocking network of discourses—imperial, literary, sociological, technological—that ac-

accompanied the consolidation of the globe and the expansion of Western political and economic systems. Again, this does not mean that James, Bellamy, Howells, and Gilman all made common cause with each other or even with the ever more pervasively universalizing culture in which they found their own lives and writing embedded. There is, in fact, what might be called a division of labor among the four. Whereas James felt inspired to trace the effect of cosmopolitanism on the consciousnesses of exceptional individuals, Bellamy focused on the way relentlessly, globally expansive technological systems might alter the destiny of the collective. (As we shall see, however, James knew full well that cosmopolitanism was accompanied by particular forms of economic and political activity, just as Bellamy knew that vast, centralized organizations called forth a particular kind of consciousness.) Whereas Howells struggled to find the appropriate sphere for intellectual activity in a cosmopolitan world where all values seemed merely local prejudices, Gilman devoted her tremendous energies to a—in this regard, at least—reactionary defense against the encroachments of the global on the local. As we consider all four authors in the context of history and of each other, a discourse of globalization emerges that often startlingly anticipates debates many assume began only recently.

At first glance, of course, the writings of this period might seem precisely the wrong place to look for signs of an emerging concept of globality. The reasons for such an assumption are not far to seek. The half century following the Civil War has with justice been seen as the era in which America's national identity seemed to consolidate itself as never before, thanks in part to conscious efforts to reforge a cultural and political union from the sectional shards of the mid-century calamities, and in part to the effects of railroads, telegraphy, and the rise of massive trusts and syndicates operating across great swaths of the continent. Common sense suggests that such consolidations are the necessary precondition of the larger amalgams suggested by the idea of globalization. Globalization seems to build on the earlier development of nationalization, amalgamating nations just as nations had earlier

gathered to themselves politically, culturally, and even linguistically distinct regions. How then can the idea of globality be of much importance when the work of nation-building is still underway? How can the idea of the nation be overcome before it has been put firmly in place? The force of such questions might lead one to expect that if global and national consolidation were proceeding side by side, assuming that is possible, then they would have been the occasion of noisy conflict, because those desiring, in Whitman's phrase, to "condense a nationality" would have found themselves at odds with those pointing to wider filiations and vaster sympathies. Although such debates between nationalists and internationalists broke out around the turn of the century—as they have intermittently since the colonial period—one task of this introduction will be to show how imbricated the discourses of nationalism and globalization are. In fact, one of the principal findings of recent globalization theory has been the mutually constitutive aspect of nation and globe.

The other paired terms whose complex interrelations recur throughout this study are utopia and realism. Like nationalism and cosmopolitanism, realism and utopia seem remarkable for their apparent incompatibility, and literary criticism has, perhaps unintentionally, tended to reinforce this commonsense view. Except when examination of both modes in tandem has been almost forced on critics, as, for example, in some treatments of Howells's career, realism and utopia have tended to be treated as though they belonged to entirely distinct discursive universes. Much more attention has been devoted to the affiliations of realism and naturalism—often pictured as realism's pushy younger brother—than to the links between the former and the utopian mode that enjoyed such a vogue when the ferment of realism commanded the attention of the literary avant-garde.

There are many reasons for our reluctance to yoke realism and utopia to the same literary-historical cart. To read utopias as historical documents (to read them, that is, in the way realist novels often invite themselves to be read) is necessarily to read against the grain, for utopias—at least those not intended ironically—

explicitly present themselves as emanations from the realm of absolute truth, not as mere products of their age. The authors of utopias in fact frequently intend to alienate their readers from their society, and thereby to hasten its destruction and bring on the establishment of a new order as the final solution to the riddles of history. Utopia asks to be taken not as the statement of a particular human being at a particular historical moment, but as a message from the future or from afar that has somehow penetrated the ideological interference of the here and now with its pristine clarity intact. A timely utterance that masquerades as the voice of eternal nature, utopia appears, so far as its discursive strategies go, not as the opposite but as the mirror image of the ideology it seeks to supplant.⁵ The problem with utopia is often not, therefore, that it represents an impossible noplacé, but that, all unconsciously, it represents a place we already know very well. Masking from itself, and from its readers, its ground in the dominant culture, utopia seeks to place the widest possible distance between its own procedures and those associated with the realist novel, which prides itself precisely on being deeply suffused by the ethos of the times.

The historical biases of many late-nineteenth-century utopians are most evident in their desire to place a grid over reality, to rationalize existence, and this desire points to their enthusiasm for the move toward conscious organization that characterized the United States after the Civil War. Faced with the increasing breadth and intricacy of organizational networks—epitomized by the staggeringly extensive web of railroads that laced the continent—many Americans opted for an outright retreat from modernity, embracing the supposed humanity of the Middle Ages or the purifying asceticism of physical culture.⁶ Utopians like Bellamy, however, saw the economic and social disruptions of the Gilded Age as the birth pangs of a better time. The solution lay not in a disavowal of modernity, but in its radicalization; the problem was not that life was increasingly coming under the control of “experts” and “systems,” but that there still remained areas beyond the experts’ reach. Many utopians were therefore delighted by the