Research Notes

TECHNOLOGY, CORPORATION, AND UTOPIA: GILLETTE'S UNITY REGAINED

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In the late 18th century Michel Guillaume St. Jean de Crèvecoeur attempted to answer the question "What Is an American?" by offering a tableau featuring the independent farmer and his son. It was an image of a one-man farm: one man, one simple plow, one horse, and one "little boy on a chair which screws to the beam of the plough." The "odoriferous furrow exhilarates" the boy, just as it had invigorated the father when he was a child and would, the farmer hoped, stimulate his son's child a generation hence.¹ Had Crèvecoeur's noble farmer suddenly nodded from the plow and slept beyond that future generation for a century, he might have had great difficulty resurrecting this utopian image of a personal and harmonious union of Nature and Machine gliding along an uninterrupted time continuum. By the late 19th century one-man operations seemed to be outdated—squeezed out, to borrow Richard Hofstadter's words—by growing organizations and institutions that represented forces beyond the individual's control. Furthermore, the icons of American technology were much more complex and confusing than the yeoman's simple plow. Would this bumpkin dare to place his son atop George Corliss's great steam engine or Henry Adams's dynamo or John Roebling's Brooklyn Bridge?

One of the many late-19th-century responses to these and other exhilarating and dislocating post-Civil War changes in America was utopian fiction, a rather close generic relative to the idealistic early chapters of Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer*. Between 1888, the publication date of Edward Bellamy's best-selling *Looking*

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¹Michel Guillaume St. Jean de Crèvecoeur [J. Hector St. John], *Letters from an American Farmer* . . . (London, 1782), pp. 26–27. This tableau does not appear in the "What Is an American?" sections but in "On the Situation, Feelings, and Pleasures of an American Farmer."

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Backward, and the beginning of World War I, approximately 200 utopian works appeared offering descriptions of imaginary better worlds—prescriptive alternatives designed to alter readers' perceptions of the present and the future.²

A fascinating characteristic of much, though certainly not all,³ of this literature was a tendency to speculate about the possibility of regaining the idyllic unities experienced by Crèvecoeur's imaginary farmer by increasing the power and complexity of the very elements that seem to be the most confusing and threatening to this yeoman: large organizations and complex technologies. The best-known American examples of these utopian metamorphoses are found in Bellamy's *Looking Backward*. Julian West, Bellamy's late-19th-century narrator, awakens to the Boston of the year 2000 to discover that individuals can find happiness and fulfillment within the hierarchical framework and merit system of a gigantic bureaucracy, the industrial army, to which practically all citizens between the ages of twenty-one and forty-five belong. Bellamy's technology is not as extensive as the technologies imagined by the technocrats of the 1930s or the Herman Kahns of the 1960s and 1970s, but his transportation systems, centralized production and distribution network, and video communications demanded technologies that make the yeoman's plow and even the Corliss engine look like museum pieces.

As grand as Bellamy's utopian organizations and technologies are, they do not represent the extreme of the late-19th-century utopists' visions of unity and individual power regained through organizational and technological transformations. That honor belongs to a man known primarily for his inventive and organizational skills: King C. Gillette (1855–1932), the father of the safety razor and founder of today's multi-billion-dollar Gillette Company. Gillette's rise from a small Wisconsin town—a setting that would have been familiar to Crèvecoeur's farmer—to the urban centers of the Northeast, to fame and fortune, are recorded in Russell B. Adams, Jr.'s, lively biography *King C. Gillette* (1978). Gillette's utopian writings and reform activities

²See Lyman Tower Sargent, *British and American Utopias 1516–1975: An Annotated Bibliography* (Boston, 1979); Kenneth M. Roemer, *The Obsolete Necessity: America in Utopian Writings, 1888–1900* (Kent, Ohio, 1976); Kenneth M. Roemer, ed., *America as Utopia* (New York, 1981); and, published after this article was written: Jean Pfaelzer, *The Utopian Novel in America 1886–1896: The Politics of Form* (Pittsburgh, Pa., 1984); Charles J. Rooney, Jr., *Dreams and Visions: A Study of American Utopias, 1865–1917* (Westport, Conn., 1985); Howard P. Segal, *Technological Utopianism in American Culture* (Chicago, 1985).

³For example, there were utopias, including W. D. Howells's *Altrurian Romances*, that stressed pastoral ideals, though even Howells included rapid transit and urban centers in his utopia. In England, William Morris's *News from Nowhere* (1890) came closer to a pastoral utopian vision.

are surveyed in a chapter in James Gilbert's *Designing the Industrial State* (1972) and in my introduction to a facsimile edition of Gillette's *The Human Drift* (1894; reprint ed., 1976).⁴ My intent in this essay is to concentrate on how Gillette hoped to arrest the declining power of the individual and the increasing disunities of his era by envisioning complex technologies, especially those related to city planning, and mammoth corporate institutions. I will first briefly examine relevant writings and then focus attention on the neglected illustrations whose images offer striking contrasts to Crèvecoeur's blending of man and machine.

Gillette's first and most interesting book was *The Human Drift* (1894). Even the cover (fig. 1) expresses Gillette's preoccupation with unity; the title, the globe, the slogans on the banners, and the radiating lines tying the United States together all signify a desire for a unified human experience. The text of the book makes this desire explicit. Gillette's major response to post-Civil War changes was a global joint-stock company that would eventually replace the thousands of separate companies in existence and oversee the world's production and distribution. This company would be governed by the people, each stockholder having one vote on company policy decisions. In later writings, Gillette changed the name of the company from "joint-stock company" to "World Corporation" and then to "People's Corporation." He also refined many details of the development and operation of the company and changed it from a producing to a holding company.

In one of these later writings, an essay entitled "World Corporation (Unlimited)," Gillette offered his most coherent and concise statement of how his nonexistent organization would evolve.⁵ After the legal incorporation of the company, an international chain of World Corporation banks would be established. Each dollar invested in an account would represent one share of stock. The company would

⁴King C. Gillette, *The Human Drift* (Boston: New Era Publishing Company, 1894; reprint, Delmar, N.Y.: Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints, 1976). I would like to thank the reprint publisher for granting me permission to incorporate general biographical information from my introduction into this essay. Hereafter all page references to the reprint edition will appear in the text. Other valuable sources of information about Gillette include Sterling G. Slappey, "Gillette: Changing the Faces of the Earth," in *Pioneers of American Business* (New York, 1973), pp. 84–90; Dolores Hayden, *The Grand Domestic Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981), pp. 138–39, 142–43; and George B. Baldwin, "The Invention of the Modern Safety Razor," *Explorations in Entrepreneurial History*, December 1951, pp. 73–102. See also the 1895–97 issues of *Twentieth Century, a Weekly Radical Magazine*, especially January 17, 1895, p. 1; February 7, 1895, pp. 4–5; and February 14, 1895, pp. 2–3. Melvin L. Severy's *Gillette's Social Redemption* (Boston, 1907) and *Gillette's Industrial Solution* (Boston, 1908) are not very useful sources.

⁵King C. Gillette, "World Corporation (Unlimited)," *National Magazine* 24 (July 1906): 433–40.

FIG. 1.—Cover of the first edition of *The Human Drift* (1894)

guarantee a fixed rate of interest on these deposits; thus, the greater the investment, the greater the return. Each depositor, however, would have only one vote on matters of corporation governance. All the deposits would flow into National Boards of Finance. These would invest the deposits in safe, productive securities. The securities would then be passed on to the World Corporation Congress, where elected administrators would determine how to run the corporation's companies. Eventually the efficiency and power of this gigantic organization would crush all competitors and become a universal monopoly, not unlike the Great Trust described by Dr. Leete as the forerunner of the industrial army in Bellamy's *Looking Backward*.

After the World Corporation had triumphed, the construction of a colossal American city, Metropolis, would begin. The work force would consist primarily of the millions who lost their jobs as the World Corporation defeated competitors. Construction on similar cities would begin in other parts of the world. Within a few generations most production and distribution activities and most of the research related to new technologies would be concentrated in one or two such cities on each continent. The rest of the earth's surface would be used as large-scale farms, sources of raw materials, and recreational areas. The labor force would be organized in an institution similar to Bellamy's industrial army directed by an international labor bureau. A sliding pay scale would insure that the work force was in the right place at the right time: when the demand was high for a particular type of work in a specific location, the pay would rise, and vice versa.

In his last two books, *"World Corporation"* (1910) and *The People's Corporation* (1924; edited by the novelist Upton Sinclair, one of Gillette's friends), Gillette attempted to work out many of the details of his grandiose plan.⁶ He listed the directors and reproduced the legal papers of incorporation (dated June 8, 1910) in *"World Corporation."* Gillette even offered former President Roosevelt a million dollars to be the first president of the corporation. Roosevelt never accepted.

The illustrations Gillette included in *The Human Drift* and *"World Corporation"* complement his utopian visions and send strong visual messages about how technology and corporate structure could transform the frustrations and chaotic diversity of the late 19th century into a unified and understandable experience that would reassert the power of the individual.

Like many of the utopian authors of his generation, Gillette argued that the misuse of technology could lead to oppression. It is also true that several other late-19th-century writers imagined more sensation-

⁶For example, he elaborated on his views about agriculture, education, and labor.

alistic technologies than Gillette—solar energy devices, prototypes of Polaroid cameras and television, space vehicles, and multicolored suns to light up suboceanic artificial worlds.⁷ But as Gillette's series of seven illustrations of his utopian city in *The Human Drift* reveals, no other author of his era, or possibly any other era, turned to technology so enthusiastically as a means of unifying the American population and the American landscape.⁸ Gillette's megalopolis would cover the area of several counties in New York State east of Lake Erie and south of Lake Ontario. (Niagara Falls would power enormous generators supplying the city with electricity.) The clutter and confusion of different types of buildings in the typical 19th-century city would be reduced to four basic types of living/service complex—high-rise apartments, schools, recreation areas, and food-storage-shopping buildings—neatly arranged in a regular honeycomb pattern.

The apartment buildings, whose multistoried atriums foreshadow today's Hyatt Regency design, dominate the landscape (see cover and fig. 2). Each complex is:

six hundred feet in diameter, twenty-five stories in height, and consists of eighteen tiers of apartments, so arranged and connected at the back that it makes a single building in circular form, with an interior court four hundred and fifty feet in diameter, the central portion of which is occupied by a dining-room that is two hundred and fifty feet in diameter. [*HD*, p. 97]

Drawing inspiration from the "Chicago School" and recently completed buildings in New York City, Gillette described his apartments as being constructed "of a steel framework that is filled in between its network of beams and girders with fire brick, which constitutes floors and walls. These floors and walls are then covered by a facing of porcelain tile in every part of the building, both inside and out" (*HD*, p. 107). Although the shape of each complex is the same, the designs on the exterior vary and the interior courtyard/dining areas offer a wide variety of lighting effects and "exquisite paintings" so that "no two [apartments] need be alike in artistic treatment" (*HD*, p. 105). Expansive open areas—punctuated by walkways, shrubs, flowers, trees, fountains, and glass-covered flower conservatories—surround each of the apartments. Eventually there would be 36,000 of these buildings,

⁷See Roemer, *Obsolete Necessity*, pp. 110–18.

⁸One of Gillette's contemporaries, Chauncey Thomas, envisioned colossal city-pyramids in *The Crystal Button* (Boston and New York, 1891), and Paolo Soleri's arcologies are certainly grand technological schemes. But neither of these men prescribed the migration of the American population to one city, as Gillette did.

FIG. 2.—“Section. Side Elevation of Apartment Building, Showing Interior Court, Dining-Room, &c,” *The Human Drift*, p. 104

enough to accommodate 60 million people (the approximate population of the United States at the turn of the century).

Just as fantastic (frightening?) as this grand and homogeneous vision of the buildings of a nation-city was the control Metropolis would exercise over the land. Crèvecoeur's farmer manipulated the landscape by transforming parts of it into regular patterns of furrows. Gillette's city required a total dominance of the land. The entire landscape is covered by three platforms. The lowest level (A in fig. 2) "is utilized for sewage, water, hot and cold air, and electric systems." The second level (B) houses the "transportation system," which links up with rapid transit systems to the rest of the country. The upper chamber (C) is "fifty feet in height" and receives much of its light from huge glass domes. It provides storage space for goods and "facilities" and a spacious walkway, which is "especially desirable in inclement weather" (HD, p. 105). (Gillette knew his nation-city was in the New York snow belt.)

Clearly Gillette's Metropolis is a grandiose expression of his contempt for the chaos of the 19th-century cityscape and his faith in technology as a means of achieving physical unity and coherence. It also seems clear that Gillette's monolithic World Corporation would complement the unifying forces of his urban technology by replacing the bewildering separateness of competing inventors, scientists, businessmen, companies, states, and nations with one coherent and unified human organization. How Gillette's global corporation would reassert the power of the individual seems much less obvious, however. If anything, it would seem that, in spite of his voting power and the possibility that he could be elected to the World Corporation Congress, Gillette's future American individual would be swallowed up by this organization to a degree that would have made the late 19th century look like a utopia to Crèvecoeur's farmer. Gillette's corporation even utilizes an international Bureau of Vital Statistics (HD, pp. 125–27), which from our vantage point appears as an ominous forerunner of the depersonalizing information and numbering systems envisioned by Zamiatin, Huxley, and Orwell.

Again we can turn to Gillette's illustrations to see how he transformed this apparent threat into a saving grace that would restore the individual's grandeur and insure that this elevated stature would continue—not only to his children's generation, as Crèvecoeur's farmer had hoped, but forever. Using a type of rhetoric that we might associate with religious or military leaders, Gillette asserted that once an individual merged his identity with the World Corporation, he would assume all the power and glory of that suprahuman entity. In "*World Corporation*" he glorified this enhanced corporate identity by contrast-

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ing it to the isolated individual identity: "‘World Corporation’ will have life everlasting. Individual man will have his life and pass into the great beyond; but this great Corporate Mind will live through the ages, always absorbing and perfecting, for the utilization and benefit of all the inhabitants of the earth."⁹

Gillette reinforced his rhetoric with a visual message (fig. 3). "MAN CORPORATE," a muscular figure whose face bears some resemblance to Gillette, appears in a brief classical kilt, which visually links this Titan of the future with the magnificence of the classical past. The giant stares with authority at the world he holds, and apparently controls, in the palm of his hand. The caption reads: "He absorbs, enfolds, encompasses, and makes the world his own. He will do more; he will penetrate the confines of space, and make it deliver up its secrets and power, for Mind, the Child of the great Oversoul of Creation is Infinite and Eternal."¹⁰ Crèvecoeur's farmer enlarged his identity by merging it with the "odoriferous furrow[s]" of his one-man farm. Ralph Waldo Emerson longed to merge with the oversoul. Gillette put his stock in corporation.

If judged by comparisons with Crèvecoeur's late-18th-century farmer or from the perspective of our late-20th-century vantage point, Gillette's urban technology and global corporation may seem frighteningly complex and/or frighteningly naive. Such historical comparisons can help to define, by contrast, Gillette's utopia. Nevertheless, judgmental historical evaluations can obscure as much as they reveal, especially since in this case Crèvecoeur's idyllic tableau is only one of many images he used to define America (some of the later images he used to express his feelings about the Revolutionary War are rather dystopian), and since our "modern" suspicions of mammoth bureaucracies, technological quick fixes, and utopian planning in general are certain to bias our assessment of Gillette.

One plausible response to the problem of evaluating Gillette's utopia would be to relegate it to the status of one of those fascinating but ultimately idiosyncratic peculiarities of history that can occasionally be trotted out and dusted off for the amusement of viewers from later eras who assume their superiority over the past. Gillette's grand plans, even if they were grand delusions, deserve better. More than the idiosyncratic daydreams of an eccentric inventor-businessman, they illuminate basic 19th-century concerns about how to define self and how to impose unity and meaning on experience, and they suggest how these concerns could lead to the conception of technological and

⁹King Camp Gillette, "World Corporation" (Boston, 1910), pp. 45–46.

¹⁰Ibid., facing p. 94.

FIG. 3.—“MAN CORPORATE,” *World Corporation* (1910), facing p. 94

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corporate developments as entities that performed functions usually associated with religion. Such insights could in turn develop into provocative historical and cross-cultural speculations about the types of conditions that lead to fundamental shifts in the perception of technology and institutions—shifts that can transform technologies of convenience and efficiency and organizations intended to facilitate production and exchange into mediators and media that unify humanity, give meaning to experience, and promise “life everlasting.” Gillette’s “United Intelligence” banners, his Metropolis, and his “MAN CORPORATE” deserve places in these investigations.