Michael Robertson's 'Last Utopians': The American habit of reaching for perfection

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In a letter to his friend Henry James in 1888, William Dean Howells responded to the evils of the Industrial Revolution.

“After fifty years of optimistic content with ‘civilization’ and its ability to come out right in the end,” Howells declared, “I now abhor it, and feel that it is coming out all wrong unless it bases itself on real equality.”

In the next quarter century, Michael Robertson indicates, hundreds of utopian novels were published, three of them by Howells. In The Last Utopians, Robertson, a professor of English at the College of New Jersey, and the author of Worshipping Walt: The Whitman Disciples, combines biography and literary analysis to examine how utopianism shaped the lives and work of Edward Bellamy, William Morris, Edward Carpenter, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman. He also explains how utopianism pervaded the intellectual life of the United States and England between the 1880s and World War I.

Robertson’s treatment of his subjects’ lives, and of both towering and less well-known books and essays, rarely departs from the interpretations of historians and literary critics who preceded him. On occasion, he exaggerates the influence of his utopians. He characterizes the decades after
1880, for example, as “The Age of Bellamy.” He claims Carpenter was “one of the greatest pro-feminist male writers of the Anglo-American nineteenth century.”

That said, The Last Utopians is an informative, incisive, well-written assessment of four fascinating individuals and a bunch of publications – Looking Backward, News from Nowhere, The Intermediate Sex, Love’s Coming of Age, Women and Economics, Herland – many of us have heard about but never read.

Robertson concludes with a survey of utopianism since 1920. Senseless and savage violence, he points out, gave rise to dystopian and anti-utopian novels like Nineteen Eighty-Four and Brave New World. The author revisits the founding of thousands of communes in the 1960s and ’70s, and “epoch-defining” books, including The Making of a Counter-Culture, The Greening of America, and Woman on the Edge of Time.

These days, Robertson acknowledges, authors and filmmakers are attracted to the dystopian genre. Nonetheless, he believes it premature to “compose utopia’s obituary.” After all, an extraordinary array of “everyday utopias” are flourishing, from Twin Oaks in Virginia to Takoma Village Cohousing in Washington to the Waldorf Schools to temporary gatherings like Burning Man, the “Spiritual Conference for Radical Fairies,” and Occupy Wall Street.

Like Bellamy, Morris, Carpenter, and Gilman, Robertson suggests, 21st-century utopians can help us remove our moral blinders and expose and “defamiliarize” us with the “intolerable realities” of our day. They can teach us that visions of a democratic, egalitarian, antipatriarchal, sustainable, and less-complicated society, and efforts to live some part of our existence here and now, “are crucial to a better future.”

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