Imagined futures [A Utopian Dream Examined]

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Imagined Futures

Ruth Kinna

The romance of News From Nowhere, Morris’s best known utopia, imparts a feeling of comforting familiarity. Rather than being propelled into a new, sophisticated and exaggeratedly modernised future, Morris takes us to a place that is coloured by the past. The appearance of Kelmscott Manor, both in the frontispiece to the book, and at the end of the story, encourages us to think that utopia is a place we can consider home, even if it transpires that we cannot stay there, any more than Guest, the visitor to Nowhere, is able to do. These aspects of Morris’s imagined future are easily misconstrued. On the one hand, his openness to the possibility that historical change entails loss is read as a yearning for a return, a desire to turn the clock back. On the other, his pointed rejection of modern methods of industrial production is too quickly dismissed as regressive. An audio-clip from the 1970s played on the BBC’s The Reunion referred to Morris’s ‘back-to-nature utopia’ as a recipe for ‘grinding agrarian poverty’, comparing his vision unfavourably with the goodness of life in the western world. Many of the ideas trialled by the pioneering ecologists to whom this critique was directed have entered the mainstream in the intervening 30 years. The taint of medievalism, however, continues to hang over Morris’s utopianism, and puts even some of his most dedicated champions on the defensive.

The gap between this interpretation of Morris’s utopianism and my own is vast and to outline my reading of his conception of the future and the role that history plays in it, I try to answer four questions: What was the nature of the transformation that Morris imagined? What assumptions informed his utopianism? How should we interpret his descriptions of the future? and, finally, What is the value of Morris’s utopia?
The nature of the transformation

The picture of society that Morris describes in *News From Nowhere* is utopian both in the sense that it describes a good place that does not exist and in the sense that it falls into the genre of utopian writing. The book is structured by a dream – of a comrade in the Socialist League who relates the dream to a friend. The powerful attraction of the dream causes the friend to treat it as his and he writes the account in the first person. A similarly transformative process is hinted at in the book’s close, as readers are invited to take possession of the dream and turn it into vision.

The literary design of *Nowhere* distinguishes it from the lectures, journalism and essays that Morris wrote during his period of active socialism, but the substance of the ideas it contains are entirely consistent both with this body of work and with the aspirations he expressed before he joined the Social Democratic Federation in 1883. The opening of *News From Nowhere* echoes sentiments voiced in *The Earthly Paradise*, written over 20 years earlier. The dreamer wakes up in Hammersmith to see ‘soap-works with their smoke-vomiting chimneys gone; the engineer’s works gone; the lead-works gone; and no sound of riveting and hammering’. Likewise the poem invites us to forget ‘countries overhung with smoke … the snorting steam and piston stroke’ and ‘dream of London, small and white and clean’.

The strong themes of light, space and unpolluted living, symbolised in Nowhere by the spread of gardens and Guest’s inability to distinguish the end of the city from the start of the countryside, emerge equally powerfully in Morris’s socialist essays. Emancipation is the promise that ‘every family should be generously lodged; that every child should be able to play in a garden close to the place his parents live in; that the houses should by their obvious decency and order be ornaments to Nature,
not disfigurements of it; for the decency and order above mentioned when carried to
the due pitch would most assuredly lead to beauty in building’. The essential
conditions for this transformation, the abolition of private property, of class divisions
and production for profit, were equally built into Nowhere. As Guest discovers from
Old Hammond, the change came only through collective struggle and successful
resistance to violent repression.

The dimensions of the change that Morris imagined were enormous. The communist
future was a beautiful place, enriched by the re-birth of art, which for Morris meant
craftwork and production for use and delight. The market had been abolished and
the love that individuals lavished on the things they produced was spread by gift-
giving. Guest is handed a pipe and tobacco on his arrival in Nowhere and his new
friend is both puzzled and mildly offended by his offer of money. Social relationships
were based on fellowship: friendship with strangers. Women, too, were part of the
fellowship, free to live with those they loved and no longer forced into legal or illegal
prostitution to maintain themselves and their children. And in the place of competitive
party politics, the people of Nowhere practiced a system of consensus decision-
making – very much like anti-capitalist activists today – finding a purpose for
Parliament by filling it with manure.

The Assumptions of Utopia

There was nothing inevitable about the revolution that Morris believed necessary to
secure the transformation to communism. Although he accepted that history tended
towards capitalism’s collapse, there was a basic tension in Morris’s thinking. On the
one hand, he believed that the productive efficiency of capitalism made well-being
for all a real possibility once wealth was redistributed, or, as he preferred, turned into
riches. On the other, he rejected the technological innovations on which economic development was predicated.

Morris confronted the tension between his understanding of the process of change and his desire for an alternative future in his approach to history. He described history as a non-linear movement. Accordingly, progress could not be described as a simple forward motion such that it was possible in retrospect to categorise all change as an advance. Instead, history traced a spiral, moving through complex turns. Past practices which seem to have been surpassed were not necessarily outmoded. Indeed, it was possible for them return in a different guise, in ways that revealed their real potential in the present.

Industrialisation and the concentration of economic power was one sort of change, but since it spelt the ruin of art, it was not progress. Equally, socialism, the abolition of ‘class-robbery’ Morris argued, was not enough to be called an advance. In addition, he demanded the reconstitution of work as leisure. This was the historical loss that he wanted to make good through the revival of craftwork. Just because individuals were compelled to labour in order to live, there was no reason why compulsion must be felt: ‘As long as the work is repulsive it will still be a burden which must be taken up daily, and even so would mar our life’. And in communism it would not be. Communism was not just beautiful. It required the transformation of labour through art, so that ‘work becomes a part of the pleasure of our lives’.

Utopia was the motivator for revolution, but it demanded collective action. In The Dream of John Ball, which tells the story of Morris’s encounter with the leaders of the 1381 Peasants’ Revolt, he identified the readiness to fight against oppression as the key to historical change. Reflecting on the courage of the rebels and the strength of
their fellowship, Morris discussed the disappointments of their cause in an effort to convince nineteenth century workers that their struggles were essentially the same. ‘Make no mistake’ he declared, ‘the cause for which Wat Tyler and … John Ball fell’ was ‘against the fleecing of the people by that particular form of fleecing then in fashion, viz.: serfdom or villeinage’. Betrayed by the King, the peasants won their freedom from feudalism only to be enslaved as wage-labourers. History was not on their side: the necessity of capitalism was the barrier to the realisation of their ideals. Yet seeing the fleecing still and understanding that the struggles of the nineteenth century were a continuation of those of the past Morris hoped that those exploited by capitalism would finally put a stop to it and achieve what the peasants were unable to do.

The future Morris imagined, far from representing a return, was a recovery of the artistic practices that reached their epitome in the medieval world, but on a new level and to be embedded through socialism in communism. The world ready to be created was natural, not because it was pristine, but because the recovery of art lent an artist’s eye to all production and facilitated cultivation in the place of construction.

A Literal Utopia

In common with many late nineteenth-century socialists, Morris appreciated the work of the utopian socialists who emerged in the early years of the century, particularly Charles Fourier. Nevertheless, he rejected the idea of blueprints, with which this tradition was associated. While he was firmly wedded to certain principles, notably the transformation of work through art, he resisted planning. The future was for others to create. Even in art. It was impossible to imagine what movements might result from the rediscovery of craftwork, notwithstanding Morris’s particular aesthetic
preferences. ‘I must warn you’, he said, ‘that you may be disappointed when you find that I have no elaborate plan, no details of a new society to lay before you, that to my mind to attempt this would be putting before you a mere delusion’. The abolition of capitalism was a necessary precondition for the alternative and so too, then, was revolution. But it was for people alert to fleecing to make the future, to fill the gaps in Morris’s picture and to find solutions to the issues that he, quite deliberately, left unresolved.

The Value of Morris’s Utopia

Morris’s keen interest in etymology and the corruption of language by Victorian moralists provides one way into the evaluation of the dream Morris describes. Morris did not elaborate the relationship between language and material life, but the inspirational quality of the future he imagined emerges from just four terms. Against those who confused competition with emulation, Morris distinguished between two kinds of social practice: the first was based on the ability to make ‘the worst of one’s neighbour’s capacity’ the second instead elevated the ability to make ‘the best of one’s own capacity’. He identified capitalism with the former and communism with the latter. Rejecting the common use of ‘craft’ as a contraction of statecraft and a synonym for deviousness Morris noted that the real meaning of the word was ‘the power to create’. This was the meaning that artists in communism would recover. Thrift, too, would take on a different meaning. In the mouths of Victorians, as well as their twenty-first century followers, thrift was an individual virtue meaning ‘the practice of starving into a mummy while you are young to prevent the robber class from sending you to the work-house prison when you are old’. In the future, it would assume its original usage: a collective practice, meaning ‘the art of thriving’. Finally, revolution, which was understood to mean ‘a change made mechanically in the teeth
of opinion by a group of men who have managed to seize on executive power’ would once more be understood to signal a ‘change in the basis of society’.