

<p><b>RETHINKING UTILITARIAN ETHICS AND THE GOSPEL OF WORK IN WILLIAM MORRIS'S NEWS FROM NOWHERE (1892)</b></p>		<p><b>Literature</b></p> <p><b>Keywords:</b> Utopia, utopian mentality, revolution, “Nowhere”, work play, utilitarian ethics, trade unionism, socialist, liberal, ideology, fellowship, garden-environment, happiness.</p>
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**Abstract**

This paper discusses William Morris’s idea of a socialist revolution as envisioned in his utopian romance *News from Nowhere* (1892). It explores the factors which prompted the author to engage in the heated debates and actions of his time to reconstruct a commonwealth out of the late nineteenth century British society, plagued by growing inequality, shabbiness, injustice, ill health and unhappiness of the labouring majority. Drawing upon Karl Mannheim (1936) and Michael Bakhtin (1996), I attempt to situate Morris’s utopian mentality among the authors of the utopian tradition; and I read the text both as a perpetuation of the utopian tradition to inspire transformative action in times of crisis, and as a polemical rejoinder both to the conservatives’ “cacotopia”, and the liberals’ “Idea” of his time. Morris’s insistence on the baneful effects industrialism and urbanisation on the individual, the community, and environment are still relevant to our world.

**Introduction: Historical Background of the Novel**

Morris’s *News from Nowhere* (1892) was written in a period characterized by the consolidation of the Industrial Revolution in England. The term “Revolution” finds its justification in the deep transformations that industrialisation had wrought in the physical, social, economic, as well as the political spheres. England, with a traditionally rural agrarian economy, witnessed rapid urbanization caused by the massive shift of country people, forced to idleness by enclosures and the modernisation of farming, to the urban industrial centres in quest for jobs. The development of mining, industry, and trade resulted in the construction of a dense network of roads, railways, and canals which profoundly altered the natural environment. The rapid increase in mass produced wares for an expanding market turned England into “the Workshop of the World”, and gave economic power and political control to the rising capitalist class. The technological utopia, prophesized by Francis Bacon in *The New Atlantis* (1626) was beginning to materialize.

However, the growth of the factory system did not lead to the land of plenty and rest envisioned by Bacon. Rampant industrialisation caused the decline of craftsmanship; and with it the economic importance and social pre-eminence of craftsmen and their traditional organizations: the guilds. Paradoxically, pauperization and the plight of the labouring classes increased in proportion to industrial growth and urbanisation; and the poor were looking forward to the reign of equality, peace and rest that the new millennium was expected to herald. This precarious situation of the working man described by Friedrich Engels in (1886), was exacerbated, as Mathew Baumont(2005) writes, ‘by the effects of the “Great Depression” from the mid- 1870s to the mid-1890s [which exposed]the decline of Britain’s industrial supremacy, [and] fissured the middle classes’ confidence in the capitalist system (p. 6).

There had been growing among the workers and members of the middle classes who had developed a social conscience, another critic notes, the conviction that ‘the system was as bad as it can be’ and that in consequence ‘many schemes more or less philanthropic or revolutionary are proposed for its regeneration’ (Carpenter, 1885, 3). Actions toward regeneration had taken a variety of forms such as Luddism, Chartism, and the failed 1848 Socialist revolutions in Europe. Liberals and reform-minded socialists, who had lent their voices to the working classes had secured comfortable legislative majorities for the adoption of Free Trade measures. However, once the captains of industry had achieved political supremacy over the Tories, there followed a period of economic prosperity during which the liberals, who assumed political power, concerned themselves more with trade and imperial expansion than with the relief of the working classes.

Feeling betrayed, the workers retaliated by combining their powers through trade unions. Indeed, Henry Pelling writes that ‘the effects of “The Great Depression”, which threatened British economic pre-eminence, exacerbated workers’ discontent’ [...while] the emergence of Marxian Socialism made them easy converts to New Unionism’ (1993, p.83). This historian states further that signs of a pervasive crisis, and imminent confrontation pervaded the social body as the formation of the Social Democratic Federation which ‘took the lead in the great unemployed demonstrations of 1886-1887 [...and] was advocating a law to establish the eight-hour day’ reinforced the legitimacy of the workers’ claims. Last but not least, the election as union leaders of young men imbued with socialist ideas such as Tom Mann, and James Keir Hardie who were critical towards their elderly union leaders’ leniency and sense of compromise (pp. 83-84). The fighting spirit insuflated by the new union leaders resulted in the frequent conflicts in labour such as strikes, picketing, and demonstrations in the late 1880s.

The English state representing the moneyed and industrial interests refused to yield to workers’ claims. Worse, employers resorted to pressure and blackmailing against unionized workers. Recourse to blackleg labour, and repression of workers demonstrations were the usual responses. Indeed, against a European background dominated by scenes of mob violence of the Paris Communards; violence inflated, as Baumont (2005) notes, by the cacotopian novels published in the 1880s to demonize popular democracy, the ruling classes met workers’ pleas with fear mingled with suspicion. Pelling observes that

[...] ministers of the crown in most cases knew very little about the lives or the feelings of the manual worker; and any signs of organization among them were frequently regarded with alarm, as being potentially criminal and even seditious (1993, p.3).

This led to the split of the social scene into two antagonistic factions separated by an abyss of mutual ignorance, class prejudice, contempt and hatred. Time seemed ripe for action, and in face of the ruling classes’ negative responsiveness to their demands, workers and their

representatives grew more and more convinced that only collective revolutionary action and the socialization of the means of production was likely to put an end to their slavery.

The success of the Paris Commune in 1871, and the experiment by their French neighbours with proletarian democracy sharpened British workers' hope in the near advent of socialism. However, having no direct political representation in the Parliament, English workers had no other choice, Pelling notes, than resort to 'lobbying, petitioning, pamphleteering and even to disturbance of the peace (1993, p.3)'. Agitation was conducted by workers' New Unions to claim an eight-hour work day and to limit wage cuts claimed by the capitalists who argued that they were necessary for English products to stand competition against U.S. and German ones. It was during one of these demonstration, that the police and army ruthlessly charged the peaceful demonstrators killing five protesters and making a large number of victims among whom were women and children. (Baumont: 2005, 28) These events referred to as " Bloody Sunday" were to have immediate and lasting effects.

The immediate effect was the split of the socialist movement into two factions which, though in accord on the end, disagreed on the means to achieve it. In a country where people had still vivid in their minds the excesses of the French Revolution, 'It precipitated', in *E.P.* Thomson's words, 'the turn towards Fabianism and gradualism, and the spread of disillusionment in revolutionary organization and tactics'(1977, p. 502). Playing on the fears of the English people and their traditional animosity toward the French, the reformist trend within the socialist movement reinforced themselves on the political scene. Marxian socialists became more than ever before convinced that the lukewarm attitude of reform minded socialists turned them into objective allies of the capitalists. Socialists believed that only a large scale alliance of all the workers determined to sweep away the capitalist system, based on property and exploitation, could bring about the socialist state. It was in this period of disillusion mingled with hope and aspirations that William Morris wrote *News from Nowhere* (1892).

Morris's text is apprehended in its dialogic relation to the backdrop of near insurrection that prevailed in the 1890s, and to the polyphony of voices contending to shape the future of the English capitalist society at the "fin de siècle". If the majority of critics agree on the richness and originality of Morris's romance, its function as a backward glance to Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1888), and its reconsideration on the British Utilitarian tradition have not been given fair attention.

### **Review of the Literature**

Most critics considered two facets of Morris's personality in discussing *News from Nowhere*: its author's varied artistic inclinations, and his commitment to Marxist ideas. To art and the triumph of socialism, he devoted his time, money, and intellectual genius. These two passions, have finally used up his energies (Wilmer: 1993, ix). Revauger (2004) considers William Morris

together with his master John Ruskin as the spiritual guides of the Guild Socialists; while George Claeys(2004) notes the difficulty to categorize Morris as a socialist, but underscores the authors' merit in transcending 'the artificial dualism of the utopian/ scientific distinction' highlighting further Morris's insistence on the individual and the local over the systemic standardizing trends of the traditional utopias which places him close to anarchism (p.164). Beaumont (2005) reads *News from Nowhere* as a form of political discourse with a dual function. On the one hand, it engages in a dialogue with the cacotopian discourse of the conservatives, and the Liberals' "idea", which attempted to dramatize the effects of "mob rule" in France to arouse aversion to and scare English public opinion away from communist revolution and popular democracy. On the other hand, 'it presents an ideal socialist society that negates the empty present of capitalism [. . .] and depicts a present [in a future socialist "epoch of rest"] characterized by plenitude and transparency' (p. 172).

### Issue and Hypothesis

Although critics have discussed at length Morris's conception of happiness at work, the author's attitude to Victorian utilitarianism and the "Gospel of Work", together with his relationship to nature and the atavistic drive that inform his work seem to have been overlooked. Presenting him as a romantic opponent of modern civilization, critics have not sufficiently investigated the long run effects of his pastoral utopia and the focus it lays on the particular, the individual, and the local over the systemic, the typical and the global.

The present research aims, accordingly, to situate the complex personality of the author as a speaking subject, but more importantly as a social agent involved in a struggle to renegotiate the social, economic and political compact of his society. With hindsight and reflection on the practices, the impact, and the fate of technological development in Asia and Eastern Europe, we can better appreciate Morris's visionary "Kropotkinesque" form of decentralized socialism, and his distrust of the totalitarian ideologies of our time, be they liberal or communist. Later dystopias such as Aldous Huxley's Brave *New World* (1932), and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1948), were to prove him right; "ideal" systems may lead to totalitarianism which is deadly to genuine happiness and individual freedom.

Ideologically, Morris is a difficult agent to situate. With a comfortable annual income of 900£ at the age of 21, he was a well-to-do liberal who became the treasurer of the largely working class National Liberal League. In 1883, he left the Liberal party, which he suspected of leading the same imperialist policies as the conservatives, for the Social Democratic Federation under Hyndman before his disagreement with its gradualist strategy of permeation convinced him to found, with Eleanor Marx and others, the Socialist League. Morris himself writes that 'the only safe way of reading a utopia is to consider it as the expression of the temperament of its author' (1994, p. 420). We shall trust Morris's soundness of judgment and appeal to Karl Mannheim (1936) to read the writer's utopian mentality.

## Methodology

In his attempt to define a utopian mentality as opposed to an ideological one, Karl Mannheim writes:

[...] a state of mind is utopian when it is incongruous with the state of reality within which it occurs[ taking care to precise that] only those orientations transcending reality will be regarded as utopian which when they pass over into conduct tend to shatter, either partially or wholly, the order of thing prevailing at the time (1936, p. 192).

He explains further that certain ‘situationally transcendent ideas’ have always informed men’s lives, but these cannot be labelled as utopian for they do not transform the existing social order. On the contrary, they rather tend to maintain it by veiling its flaws from view, or providing a temporary escape from the incongruities of the present instead of altering it. As such, they perform an ideological function since they are interested in things as they are, not as they should be.

Before it performs its transformative function, Mannheim writes, a utopia goes through a series of stages. At its initial stage, the utopia germinates as a wish fantasy in the mind of a single charismatic individual. However, he warns us against the risk of overestimating the influence of the individual over his group, however gifted he may be. Unless the individual utopia conforms to emotions and ideas of the group, it will fail to mobilize its adhesion and therefore lack the human resources necessary to produce the desired change (1936, pp.207-208).

Mannheim (1936) identifies four types of utopian mentality. In his categorization of these utopian structures of mind, this sociologist considers the way the members of each group relate their thoughts and actions to time: past, present and future. Accordingly, he labels them as: ‘**the orgiastic chiasm**, the **liberal humanitarian idea**, the **conservative idea**, and the **socialist-communist idea**’ (emphasis mine). He considers that politics in the modern sense began with the peasant revolts of The Middle Ages. Chiliastic revolts were conducted under the leadership of monks like Joachim of Fiore, and later Thomas Muntzer. Orgiastic energies and ecstatic tensions, formerly of religious nature and oriented toward a realm beyond the present, assumed secular forms and were reoriented towards the satisfaction of worldly ends. The pleasures of heaven were given gratification, through violent action, in the here and now. This outlook has taken the form of anarchism in modern times.

The **liberal idea**, the second form of utopian mentality, is “the child of the Enlightenment”. It represents the utopia of the rising bourgeoisie and the Whigs which believed in progress and questioned the traditional world view of the Catholic clergy and the landed aristocracy. The liberal idea is oriented towards the future. It follows the dictates of reason and the teachings of experience to correct the flaws of the present which itself has evolved from the

original flawed state of nature. For the liberals then, history is a linear process of progressive improvement that will irretrievably culminate in the realization of the ideal state; the **liberal Idea**.

Unlike liberals, conservatives do not theorize. They trust in the soundness of the traditions, institutions, and practices which constrain social subjects' thoughts and actions. The conservatives' idea is the 'living reality'. They often dismiss their opponents' utopias as unrealizable chimera, or 'a mere opinion, vaporous and lacking concreteness'. The conservatives' idea is the "topia"; their ideal is the here and now. Conservatives may return to the past, but they do so only to show the present as an unchanging continuity of long living ideas and practices. Their perpetuation is proof enough of their validity and legitimacy. To the conservatives then, any change of the present ideal order can lead but to chaos and anarchy; and is therefore strongly opposed.

The last form, **the socialist- communist utopia**, can best be analyzed in its relation to the other utopias. Like the liberals, socialists believe in history as a process of improvement that will lead gradually to the socialist state. However, unlike the liberals, socialists set the realization of their utopia at a definite time in the future which coincides with the collapse of the capitalist mode of production and culture. For socialists, ideas are not dreams or mere wishes. They are rational, realistic aspirations based on the observation of the historical process, and as such, they turn into motive power for transformative social action under clearly identified circumstances. The road which had led from the past to the unsatisfactory present, and which will lead to the projected socialist state of the future is scientifically investigated so that adequate means are mobilized, and appropriate strategies implemented to achieve the projected ideal: the socialist state. (pp.211-245)

These different forms of utopia often coexist, albeit conflictually, in modern society. The culture of society is, thus, a conglomerate of these different worldviews; with varying degrees of dominance, and in perpetual dynamic interaction (Baumont, 2005, p.21). Hence, Morris is apprehended as a member of a social stratum whose fears and apprehensions are reflected in the aspirations he gives voice to. In this article, I draw upon Bakhtin (1996) and read Morris's utopia as an utterance by means of which he enters into a dialogue with the other utopian mentalities about the future of the English society (pp. 41-42). It is no surprise, then, that Morris's *News From Nowhere* starts with the account given by a friend about a meeting of the Socialist League in which there was 'a brisk conversational discussion, as to what would happen on the morrow of the revolution [...] (1993, p. 43)'. During the meeting, the narrator points out the divisions among the workers represented by conflicting factions, insisting on the majority of delegates having 'strong but divergent anarchist opinions' (p.43).

It was these divergences among the English socialists which irritated Morris and which made one of the delegates, apparently Morris himself, lose his temper at the 'foolish' schemes they drafted. At the end of the meeting, he caught the train back home on the bank of the Thames musing on the state of the new society repeating in his mind, 'If I could see a day of it! [...] If I could but see it!' (p. 44). It was with the same yearning that the narrator went to bed in his house

in Hammersmith on a winter night, to awake in the new society on a bright summer morning in the same place, but in the year 2103.

### **The New Society**

The story of William Guest's (the hero and mouthpiece of Morris) visit to the new society unfolds in the form of two journeys into the centre of London. Entry into the utopia "Nowhere" takes the form of a purifying and rejuvenating bath; 'a baptismal submersion in the now clean waters of the Thames' (Latham, 2004, p.55). A boatman by the name of Dick offers to drive him on a round trip by coach from "Guests' House" in Hammersmith, past the Houses of Parliament, to the British Museum, and back. The second journey is a boat-trip offered the visitor by Dick and his wife Clara, from Kelmscott House to Kelmscott Manor, two places familiar and dear to William Morris. Their object is to join in the year's haymaking festival in Oxfordshire on the upper parts of the Thames. On their way upstream, they meet Helen, a charming lively young woman with whom Guest falls in love.

In utopian writing, journeys and visits involve discovery, initiation and learning, and finally return of the visitor to his society, a changed man, and a missionary for change. His task now is to share his vision and enthusiasm to make 'others [...] see it as [he has] seen it' (Morris, 1993, p.228) to arouse enthusiasm and stir transformative action. This, however, Morris explains, will require 'strife, pain and labour to build up little by little the new day of fellowship, and rest and happiness' (1936, p.228).

Guest's experience then is not a mere fantasy, an escapist dream, but a realistic workable scheme on condition that others see it from the hero's perspective; in other words not from the philistine materialistic perspective of the Victorian society. Guest's visit to the new society has a dual impact. The first is a Marxist inquiry into the historical process which brought about the new society. The second involves an emotional, existential quest for self-fulfilment, rest and happiness. This form of happiness, Morris suggests, can be achieved only through the abolition of commercialism and utilitarianism which largely informed Victorian ethics, and through a redefinition of work and social organization.

### **A Marxist View of History**

Through his first trip, Guest learns from old Hammond, a 105 year old man interested in the history of Nineteenth century England that change came through a workers' revolution. When Guest inquires whether the change was peaceful, the old historian replied that 'it was bitter war till hope and pleasure put an end to it' (Morris, 1993, p.133). The revolution started with the demonstrations of Trafalgar Square which were repressed by the army in 1952. They were followed by a General strike of all the productive forces and the dissolution of parliament which was replaced by a Committee of Public Safety. The Committee was represented locally by

workers' committees whose task was to give relief to people by producing and distributing food. As old Hammond explains, the union of all the productive forces under the leadership of the Committee for Public Safety made the forces of reaction powerless. Besides, members of the Committee for public Safety, whose leadership and administrative skills had been sharpened by the civil war, took care to drop the word "revolution" and replace it by the more neutral name of "Board of Conciliation and its Local Offices" to avoid scaring public opinion. Unlike the liberals and the Fabians who believe in a gradual peaceful evolution towards socialism, Morris advocates revolution. He is not politically naïve and is quite aware, as old Hammond explains, that the forces of reaction had more than once launched counter offensives by fomenting 'a coup d'état' and later through an armed militia named 'the friends of order' composed mostly of members of the upper middle classes who collected arms and tried to defend the great industrial centres against the revolutionaries in vain (Morris, 1993, pp. 147-155).

By engaging in a sort of Socratic dialogue with old Hammond, William Guest learns that the new society had evolved laboriously. It assumed its present shape as a result of the abolition of property which was perceived as the source of all forms of evil plaguing society. With the abolition of capitalism based on the quest for profit, England had gradually recovered its pastoral aspects. People naturally returned to country villages, occupied the freed lands, and the villages became populous and alive again. Like old Hammond whom he makes his spokesman, Morris is horrified by the effects of capitalism on the country, its people and their values. 'This is how we stand', the old man declares,

England was once a country of clearings amongst the woods and wastes, with a few towns interspersed, which were fortresses for the feudal army, markets for folks, gathering places for craftsmen. It then became a country of huge and foul workshops, and fouler gambling dens, surrounded by ill kept, poverty stricken farms, pillaged by the masters of the workshops. It is now *a garden* (emphasis mine), where nothing is wasted and nothing is spoilt, with the necessary dwellings, sheds, and workshops, scattered up and down the country, all trim and neat and pretty (Morris, 1993, p. 105).

The factories by the Thames have gone, and the river which has recovered its purity abounds in perch and salmon. The abolition of private property and profit based activities has rendered obsolete the traditional institutions linked to capitalism. In much the same way as knowledge had caused the fall of Adam and Eve, industrialism killed the pastoral beauty and the innocent, care free society of late medieval England, Morris seems to suggest. The recovery of previous innocence and happiness requires, for Morris, the destruction of industrialism, and its economic and political expressions private property and "Laissez Faire" capitalism. This was precisely what the revolution had done in his "Nowhere", and this was the way to salvation in the nineteenth century England.



In the new socialist society, one institution after the other had withered away. The Houses of Parliament which were intended to be pulled down were finally preserved and turned ‘into a storage place for manure’ owing to the intervention of ‘a queer antiquarian society’ opposed to the destruction of ancient buildings (Morris, 1993, p.69). Morris hints at his Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings founded in 1877, and uses irony to suggest that dung, in the new, mostly agrarian society, is more useful than the corrupt politicians committed to the protection of private property in the old capitalist order. Courthouses, just like the august legislative institution, have also become useless. There being no private property that would stir envy, greed, or the quest for wealth which gives access to social prestige, most crimes such as theft, robbery, or swindling, have naturally died out. As old Hammond explained, ‘it is easy for us to live without robbing each other [because] this has become a tradition, a habit of life. [...] That is in short the foundation of our life and our happiness’ (p.112). Transgressions to this tradition do occur occasionally, but then, they are taken as mere errors to which the transgressor soon makes amend. Here again, Morris seems to suggest that the most stringent criminal laws would not prevent crime in a society where a good portion of the population is denied access to the basic necessities of life, whereas a more equitable distribution of wealth would be the best way to its prevention. Old Hammond further explains that the punishment inflicted by courts upon “criminals” used to express ‘the fears of the rulers of society [who] were dwelling like an armed band in a hostile country; but we who live among our friends need neither fear nor punish’ (p. 114).

Equally important is the change that has occurred in people’s constitutions, their social organization, and lives. All the “Nowherians” Guest meets are strikingly healthy, good looking, and merry. The men are strongly built and handsomely groomed in what looked like fourteenth century clothes. The young women, equally healthy and fair looking, free from the artificial coquettish inhibitions of Victorian women, were naturally sociable and graceful. Guest, who was asked his age, shocked his hosts when he replied that he was ‘hard on fifty-six’ because as one of the young women waiting on them at “the Guests House” explained, ‘you look rather old for your age’ (p. 57). Morris uses the young woman as his mouthpiece to account for Guest’s precocious ageing compared to the inhabitants of his utopia by remarking that ‘one ages very quickly if one lives amongst unhappy people’ (p.57). Even the centenary old Hammond doesn’t seem to have been affected by age considering his sharp wits and excellent memory.

The good constitution of the “Nowherians” seems to be the result of the healthful influence of the Earthly Paradise in which they live. They live in small communities in close contact with nature; in little villages and mansions beautifully decorated and scattered in the midst of fields, woods and forests. The ecology of the surrounding environment is reflected in the inner balance of the “Nowherians”, whose self ecology, in turn, irradiate outward through their kindness, human warmth, and happiness, all of which exert a healing influence on Guest. This quality of life is the result of the revolution which had led to the destruction of the ancient order, with society regressing ‘to a state as rude as barbarism’, until it led to the rebirth of a new world with a new spirit.

The spirit of the new days, of our days, [old Hammond explains] was to be delight in the life of the world; intense and overwhelming love of the very skin and surface of the earth on which man dwells, such as a lover has in the fair flesh of the woman he loves; this, I say, was to be the new spirit of the time (Morris, 1993, p.158).

What makes the happiness of the “Nowherians” is their absorption in the enjoyment of the pleasures of the present. They neither look with nostalgia toward a lost bright past nor dream of a promising future. They are not alienated from the present, the here and now, of which they intensely appreciate every moment, every detail.

Another important factor of good health, happiness, and rest, is the relationship of the “Nowherians” to work. Morris was horrified by the alienating effects of the factory system and the modern organization of labour. In a lecture given to The Hampstead Liberal club in 1884, entitled “Useful Work versus Useless toil”, he argues that the Victorian society is divided into two distinct classes; the upper parasitical classes made up of aristocrats and middle class financiers and factory owners, who hardly ever do any work, and the working classes who spend all their life at work with little hope for rest or pleasure at work (Morris, 1993, pp.287-306). In such a society, workers are robbed of the fruit of their labour because what Engels call “surplus value” benefits to the masters and factory owners. Workers lead a life of slaves forced to toil according to a tempo imposed by the machine to ensure the bare necessities of life. To this ‘useless toil’, Morris opposes pleasurable ‘useful work’ as the work done by the craftsmen and the yeoman farmer in the Middle Ages. Work of this kind provides pleasure to the artisan who can contemplate the finished object of his creative genius and labour. It gives him an identity, satisfaction, and hope of rest. In Morris’s utopia, freely chosen pleasurable work has replaced alienating useless labour. This has been achieved through abolition of property, the modern division of labour, and the disappearance of the unproductive parasitical classes. One can say with Herbert Marcuse (1957) that Morris’s “*Nowhere*” is a society governed by the ‘Pleasure principle’ instead of the ‘Reality Principle’.

### **The Politics of a Revolutionary Aesthete**

The complexity of Morris’s personality and views may be attributed to his variegated artistic and intellectual pursuits ranging from architecture, restoration, decoration, tapestry, wallpaper, poetry, translation, prose and essay writing (Wilmer,1993). *News from Nowhere* reveals influences of the main texts of the utopian tradition. It also reveals the influence of socialist writings such as “The Communist Manifesto” (1848), Karl Marx’s *Das Kapital*, which he reads in French translation in 1883, and Particularly Bellamy’s *Looking Backward: 2000-1887* (1888), to which Morris’s romance was meant as a direct answer. What is worthy of notice is that Morris’s “Epoch of Rest” draws more heavily on the libertarian pastoral utopias than on the more

“serious” texts of the tradition such as Plato’s *Republic*, or Francis Bacon’s *New Atlantis*. One reason for this choice is that the triumph of commercialism and industrialism which were the materialization of the Enlightenment utopia in its liberal form had brought increased deprivation, dependence on new and more ruthless masters, and unhappiness for the working man in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Another reason lies in his fears that philanthropy in the form of readymade ideal commonwealths benevolently handed down by elites to passive, submissive and grateful subjects may prove deadly to the individual’s creative potential, his freedom, and his happiness.

Morris’s readings of the above mentioned communist literature had introduced him to the process of historical materialism. By contrast to the Liberals and the Fabians, Morris was convinced that in the 1890s, capitalism had reached its point of crisis, and that the social historical context was propitious for a proletarian revolution. Obvious signs of the crisis were the frequent strikes on the docks, in the mines, and the gas works, under the leadership of men imbued with Marxist ideas. In “The Hopes of Civilization”, a lecture that Morris gave before the Hammersmith Branch of The Socialist League in 1885, he explains at length the historical evolution of human societies from the slave revolts of the Antiquity, through the peasant revolts of the Middle-Ages, to the formation of the class conscious proletariat of modern capitalist societies.

Morris, like Marx, insists that dominant ideas and political organization reflect the material conditions of each epoch which they tend to foster and perpetuate. It follows that members of the politically dominant strata cannot be trusted in their promises to improve the condition of their ‘slaves’, and Morris to conclude logically that

[...] to a reasonable man, it seems unlikely to the last degree, or we will say impossible that a moral sentiment will induce the proprietary classes [...] that live by the labour of others to yield up this privilege uncompelled; all one can hope is that they will see the implicit threat of compulsion in the event of the day, and so yield with good grace to the terrible necessity of forming part of a world in which all, including themselves, will work honestly and live easily (Morris, 1993, pp. 309-328).

It should also be noted that the revolution for Morris will not be necessarily violent if the holders of the ancient order do not oppose change which has become a historical necessity.

As a Marxist, Morris’s analysis of class relations in the nineteenth century English society bears striking similarities to the analysis developed by Friedrich Engels (1845) in *The Condition of the Working Classes in England*. Both thinkers agree that the capitalist system of production and rule with its corollary imperial expansion have resulted in increased exploitation, pauperisation, ill health, and social unrest. In their view, the capitalist division of labour with its sacrosanct maxim of “maximum profit at the lowest possible cost” had forced the workers into insanitary dwellings, overwork, poor diets, precocious ageing and death. One positive thing of that

system is that it had sharpened workers class consciousness and increased their hatred toward their masters; two important preconditions for a proletarian revolution to start.

### Where does Morris stand?

Morris's romance reads like a blueprint tracing the steps of a revolutionary strategy that would lead to the communist society. He warns workers against the reformist temptations of bourgeois intellectuals who 'called themselves socialists', and who attempted to allure them into believing in a peaceful and gradual improvement of their 'state of slavery by forcing the rich to pay much' until a state of 'practical equality' was achieved (Morris: 1993, 134). For the communist society to come to life, three conditions must be fulfilled. First, total divorce should occur between the proletariat and the capitalist class or their representatives. Secondly, the change can occur only through revolutionary action which will result not only in a radical transformation of the economic structure, but also of the ideology, or "superstructure", which sustains it. Finally, the revolution must be spearheaded by a vanguard of particularly gifted workers' representatives organized as "The Committee for Public Safety". In this case, Morris's utopian mentality seems to fit Mannheim's "**communist –socialist**" category.

Yet, some of its other aspects show the new society to be closer to the other categories of utopian mentality identified by Karl Mannheim. It is a future society which goes back to The Middle-Ages, and even further back to recover a quality of life, values, and a social organization that industrialism had destroyed. Morris resuscitates the pastoral, largely rural England of the late Middle Ages; then freezes history into an eternal present which gives the "Nowherians", who rejoice in the immediate pleasures of the here and now, entire satisfaction. As such, one is at loss whether to consider William Morris as a romantic conservative clinging to an order of things that the triumphant advance of industrialism was threatening with extinction; or as an anarchist averse to any form of order, who does as he pleases, and whose energies are oriented toward the immediate gratification of pleasures in the present.

One aspect of Morris's personality is his declared 'desire to produce beautiful things [...combined with an intense] hatred of modern civilization' (cited in Wilmer, 1993, p. 381), and his commitment, together with medievalist figures like Dante Gabriel Rossetti, John Ruskin, and Thomas Carlyle to the revival and preservation of the simple pleasures of medieval lifestyles, its Gothic architecture, and handicrafts. Medievalists' aesthetics reveals both ethical and political pursuits. Ethically, it denotes the quest for a higher order pleasure that only the production and contemplation of art can provide. It shows the craftsman's quest for originality, freedom at work, and his joy in the creative process which is perceived as a process of self fulfilment and self construction. Politically it seeks freedom from the slavish imitation of classical art, and emancipation of the workers from the alienating effects that the division of labour and the mass produced wares of the factory system was forcing upon them. It appears, then, that Morris's aesthetic choices reveal his political commitment.

His political commitment and ethical choices acquire meaning when they are read against the philistine utilitarianism of the “nouveaux riches” of his time. Utilitarianism was roughly defined as ‘the quest for pleasure and the avoidance of pain’. Pleasure, however, was often associated with the material condition achieved by an individual or a social body through their actions. It follows that actions that would increase an individual’s or a nation’s material wealth are said to comply with the principle of utility; for material comfort, utilitarians believed, reduces pain and increases happiness.

Utilitarianism served as the ideological basis to a rising class of capitalists. It was this philosophy that glorified the achievements of technology and the advance of industrialism as the best way to individuals’ moral salvation, the nation’s wealth and the happiness of its members. It follows that the workers’ suffering is perceived as the direct result of their idleness and improvidence. It was again this philosophy that inspired such legislation as The New Poor Laws 1834, Free trade, and the Repeal of the Corn Laws. These laws were deemed necessary because they turned “idle, improvident workers” into “useful members of society and maintained the fragile balance between scarce resources and population”, “they introduced light through trade into backward communities”, and provided cheap bread to the workers. What actually happened, Thomson (1997) writes, is that this philosophy multiplied the wealth of the rich fivefold and so increased their political power at the expense of the workers’ health, dignity, and happiness (p.84). They also legitimated imperial expansion abroad.

Morris’s conception of happiness rests on totally different bases. In his ideal society, the abolition of property has created an equality of condition that has broken the vicious dichotomy of owner/labourer or master/slave relationship, and perpetual strife and competition for the accumulation of wealth. Men’s material possessions being no longer the measure of their happiness, property has been reduced to the basic necessities: a beautiful stone cottage in the midst of a wood or surrounded by a garden, good food, and colourful clothes, all of which are obtained through a freely chosen agreeable work. The choice and the nature of work are paramount in achieving happiness. Craftsmanship demands a personal emotional, mental, and physical investment for the creation of a beautiful useful object, and the construction of a personal identity. A craftsman is also the product of his work since his reputation rests to a large extent on the quality of his wares. His relation to his work is economical, but also, emotional, social and existential. He acquires a social status and an identity by virtue of the art he produces. Morton (1969) writes in this respect that ‘[Morris] had learned from Ruskin to see art not as a special activity producing a special kind of luxury goods but as an essential part of the whole life of man’ (P. 209). Morris’s conception of work as it is performed in his imagined communist society stands in contradistinction to the compulsory, mechanical, alienating labour resulting from modern industrial organization. ‘Art or Work Pleasure’, as old Hammond calls it, ‘is the source of people’s happiness’ (Morris, 1993, p.160).

Morris's utopia may also be read as the quest for an original state of "happiness in innocence" proper only to young age. With growth and ageing come knowledge and the development of a moral sense, both of which constitute, according to Rabkin (1983), the first act of transgression of God's command, and which subsequently resulted in Man's feeling of guilt with its corollary human incapacity for real pleasure (pp. 3-4). This is true for individuals as well as societies. Guest's journey into the future socialist society of his dreams takes the form of a return to the rejuvenated England of his childhood; a society which communism had rid of the shabbiness, pollution and human misery introduced by industrialism and capitalism. To Guest who remarked on the 'childishness' of the "Nowherians" art as expressed in their love of legends and fairy tales, Dick, his guide, explains that 'it is natural to like these things strange; just as when we were children...' and old Hammond to add that

It is the child-like part of us that produces work of imagination. When we are children time passes so slow with us that we seem to have time for everything. [...] At least, let's rejoice that we have got back our childhood again. I drink to the days that are. [...] We are too happy, both individually and collectively, to trouble ourselves about what is to come hereafter. (Morris, 1993, p.132).

The inhabitants of Morris's "eutopia", like children, are fully reconciled with their present. They are neither romantics who mourn the loss of a golden age nor utopians who look forward to a time of rest and happiness to come. Their happy and carefree life comes from the recovery of their original state of innocence in close touch with nature; a state enjoyed by Adam and Eve before the fall, or by primitive peoples whose minds have not been spoilt by the pursuit and accumulation of property. The term "garden", evocative of Eden, is often used to refer to the new society. To Ellen's father who seemed to favour the competitive life of the nineteenth century on the ground that competition made people 'freer, more energetic, healthier and happier', Guest replies: 'To me, you seem here as if you were living in *a heaven* compared with us of the country from which I came' (p. 176). It is this heaven that Morris challenges his readers to envision.

What makes *News from Nowhere* such a rich and appealing romance? It is because 'into [it], as into no other book, Morris packed his hopes and his knowledge, all that he had accomplished and become in a life of struggle' (Morton, 1969, p. 209). What he had become, in the main, was a mature, humane social thinker doubled with an accomplished artist. His knowledge of history, and his readings into Marxist literature had taught him to apprehend ideas, morals, and art as ideological expressions of the material conditions of society. Hence, his vision of creative, pleasurable work and utilitarian ethics in a communist society constitutes a direct critique of the Victorian values and institutions and to E. Bellamy's industrial plutocratic utopia. Morris considers that the logic of the capitalist system enslaves both masters and workers. The former are bound all their life to stand competition against rivals on the national and world markets. They do so by tending their machinery, raising the cadence of work, increasing automation and specialisation. In short, they gradually turn into the servants of the machines,

which were originally meant to serve them. In the same process, the worker becomes part of the complex machinery of the factory system; a mere commodity whose price is subject to the law of supply and demand. This alienating effect of the capitalist system on the owning and the working classes alike is clearly evoked by Guest's interpretation of

Ellen's mournful look [which] seemed to say, [...] 'Go back again, then, and while you live, you will see all around you people engaged in making others live lives which are not their own, while themselves care nothing for their own real lives – men who hate life though they fear death' (Morris, 1993, p. 228).

Only in a classless society in which 'mastery has changed into fellowship' could this state of alienation be superseded and an epoch 'of rest and happiness' built up (p.228).

Morris uses his artistic sensitivity to construct the new society that stands as the antithesis of the Victorian one. It is mostly a rural, agro-pastoral society in which small town communities live close to the land and where individuals practise freely chosen activities in the service of their "neighbours". Decisions are made through direct participation of all the members in meetings held in the local church. This form of decentralized democracy seems to run counter to the totalitarian tendencies of utopian societies in which king philosophers, scientists, or aristocrats devise a system that reconciles social harmony with individual happiness. Morris shows his suspicion to the utopian systems imagined by Plato, Bacon, and Bellamy. In his attempt to provide an alternative to Bellamy's centralised industrialised system, he insists on the importance of the individual and the local, and the pastoral, over the collective, the urban, and the global.

## **Conclusion**

In a nutshell, Morris's democratic pastoral utopia prefigured the dystopian themes of alienation, cultural standardization, and corporate identities associated with modernity. It can best be appreciated in its dialogic relation with the texts of the utopian tradition: the conservative cacotopias of his time, and the liberal apostles of progress and modernity.

By Mannheim's standards Morris displays a socialist-communist mentality but takes care to replace the term "dictatorship" by the term "Fellowship" to supersede the dialectic of master/slave relationship. He also takes care to dissociate bloodshed and executions from his revolution. Although an admirer of the French revolution and an advocator of revolutionary action, he avoids any mention of executions or purges in the chapter "How the Change Came". Rather than leading to a global dictatorship of the proletariat, the author constructs a rejuvenated decentralised pastoral society which has recovered its original state of innocence, cleanliness, and purity.

Morris's message, that fellowship, rest, and happiness can be reached through other paths than material wealth, is still valid in a world dominated by the globalising trends of bourgeois

consumerist model. Art, individuality, cultural diversity, spirituality, or symbiosis with an unspoilt natural environment, may represent substitutes to the discourse of globalisation that is insidiously permeating our world.

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