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Commonweal and the Political Thought of
William Morris

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University of Sussex

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Summary

This thesis is an examination of the political thought of William Morris. In contrast to much of the scholarship which has placed great emphasis on the influence of Morris's other pursuits as poet, artist and craftsman in shaping his socialist outlook, this thesis instead locates Morris in the intellectual world of late-nineteenth century British socialism. It does so through a close engagement with *Commonweal*, the official journal of the Socialist League, which Morris wrote for, edited, and funded during the years 1885-1890. It argues that as its editor, *Commonweal* as a whole should be read as part of Morris's political project of 'making socialists' and that the journal in turn played an important role in shaping Morris's own political outlook, demonstrating a greater need for scholars to pay closer attention to sites of publication in the history of British socialism, and in the history of political thought more broadly. As a result of this approach, several key aspects of Morris's political thought are considered in a new light. The perennial question of Morris's relation to Marx is reformulated to consider what role Marx's thought, and theory more generally, played in Morris's project of 'making socialists' and also shows how *Commonweal* was a site of contestation in the creation of what would become 'Marxism'. Anti-imperialism, rarely accorded its due place in Morris scholarship, is shown to be not peripheral but a core component of Morris's political thought. The importance of the idea of freedom to Morris's politics is stressed across the thesis, particularly so in re-evaluating his thought on the relationship between labour and art. Also considered in depth across the thesis is the transition stage from socialism to communism and the role this played in differentiating Morris's thought from many of his contemporaries.

I hereby declare that this thesis has not been and will not be, submitted in whole or in part to another University for the award of any other degree.

Signature: Peter Halton June 2021

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This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my GCSE History teacher, Stephen Head. He taught me, among many other things, that the study of history could be fun. I hope some of the enjoyment I have had during this project is evident within its pages.

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Abbreviations

AWS – *William Morris: Artist, Writer, Socialist*, ed. May Morris, 2 vols.

New York: Russell & Russell, 1966.

CW – *The Collected Works of William Morris*, ed. May Morris, 24 vols.

London: Longmans Green & Co., 1910-15.

Commonweal – *The Commonweal: The Official Journal of the Socialist*

League, vols. 1-6. London: 1885-1890.

IISH SL – Socialist League (UK) Archives, International Institute of Social

History, Amsterdam.

CL – *The Collected Letters of William Morris*, ed. Norman Kelvin, 4 vols.

Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984-1996.

JWMS – *Journal of William Morris Studies*.

A Note on Referencing

References to works by William Morris are given, wherever possible, as they appear in *Commonweal*. In the case of texts subsequently revised and republished, such as *News from Nowhere*, any differences between the two texts have been indicated either in the main text or in the footnote.

Introduction

‘The work that lies before us at present is to *make Socialists*, to cover the country with a network of associations composed of men who feel their antagonism to the dominant classes, and have no temptation to waste their time in the thousand follies of party politics.’ *Commonweal*, July 1885¹

‘In few words, our function is to educate the people by criticising all attempts at so-called reforms, whose aim is not the realisation of equality of condition, but the hindering of it; and by encouraging the union of the working classes towards Revolution and the abolition of artificial restraints on life.’ *Commonweal*, 1 May 1886²

‘Our business, I repeat, is the making of Socialists, *i.e.*, convincing people that Socialism is good for them and is possible.’ *Commonweal*, 15 November 1890³

The answer to the question of what is to be done was always clear to William Morris. The answer was to ‘make Socialists’. Socialism as a term however could encompass a variety of viewpoints, and Morris’s goal was to make socialists of a revolutionary stripe. His was a task of not simply making socialists, but also of shaping them. A key plank in this education

¹ William Morris, ‘Socialism and Politics’, *Commonweal*, 1.6 (July, 1885), p.61.

² Morris, & Ernest Belfort Bax, ‘Editorial’, *Commonweal*, 2.16 (1 May 1886), p.33.

³ Morris, ‘Where Are We Now?’, *Commonweal*, 6.253 (15 Nov 1890), p.362.

towards revolution was the criticism of reformist versions of socialism and of reforms designed to stave off socialism entirely. This project of education in socialism was to be attempted through various means such as street speaking and lectures, but also crucially through the regular publication of the Socialist League's journal, *Commonweal*.

While scholars of Morris's politics have acknowledged the importance he placed on education and making socialists, insufficient attention has been given to the role and content of *Commonweal*. Attention needs to be given not only to Morris's own considerable contributions, but to the journal as a whole as an integral part of his political project. Morris edited and financially supported the paper from its inception in 1885 through to 1890, devoting much time and energy to its contents and its promotion. Individual articles in *Commonweal* were signed by their authors (occasionally pseudonymously), but Morris as editor was responsible for the final content of the journal, and to ignore these other contributions would be to misunderstand the collective and collaborative nature of Morris's political project.

Although Morris's status as a socialist thinker has been significantly higher than his contemporaries, in part due to the work of communist historians and the New Left's reclamation of him as a powerful figurehead of British socialism, he should not be seen as an isolated genius separate from his comrades. Morris saw his work as part of a collective project, it was 'our function', 'our business' and 'work that lies before us' that he was taking part, if a leading part, in. In looking at *Commonweal* as a site of intellectual production and exchange we can see how Morris both shaped and was shaped by this collective process. Political projects are collaborative, and intellectual history in examining these collaborative projects needs to pay close attention to the sites of publication where this collaboration is most evident. Paying close attention to *Commonweal* shows Morris to be a nuanced political

thinker who closely engaged with a range of important issues and one who thought deeply, not always with success, on the form and purpose of socialist education.

Morris's emphasis on education and the need to make socialists is not unique. Then, before, and since, socialists and radicals of all kinds have understood the importance of spreading their ideas. Increasing global economic competition, a perceived economic downturn, the growth of state regulation and new municipal bodies, the extension of the franchise, and the legacy of earlier movements along with the dissemination of new ideas all contributed to the emergence of a number of socialist groups in the 1880s. Many of these groups were small in size and fizzled out quickly while some had an influence beyond their numbers. Though all shared a dissatisfaction with the capitalism of late-nineteenth century Britain, often this was all they shared. How society should be organised and the method of getting there varied from group to group, from land taxes to labour parliaments to dynamite. Reform minded followers of the progressive American economist Henry George had little in common with the anarchists of the Freedom Group who argued and disagreed with the state socialists in the Social Democratic Federation, but all understood the need for propaganda.

All groups faced a common difficulty too. As Anna Vaninskaya notes, 'not everyone wanted to be educated. Audiences...could be apathetic, or downright hostile, and making socialists of people against their will was a tough business.'⁴ One aspect of Morris's thought that stands him apart from most of his contemporaries was the wide variety of form and genre he utilised in his socialist propaganda in an attempt to overcome this apathy. Within *Commonweal* alone he contributed commentary and editorial notes, short essays, longer essay series, re-prints of lectures, poems, dialogues, and serialised fiction alongside his broader editorial commitments in shaping the content and direction of the paper. All of these are

⁴ Anna Vaninskaya, *William Morris and the Idea of Community: Romance, History and Propaganda*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010, p. 181.

important in his political project of making and shaping socialists. In *Commonweal* these stood side by side with articles from other socialists and regular reports of events and labour disputes across the country, all with the purpose of fostering a collective sense of socialist purpose but also of educating readers towards a revolutionary perspective. Outside of *Commonweal* could be added more lectures and speeches, pamphlets, letters, a play, revised versions of his *Commonweal* fiction, and arguably also his work as a preservationist, poet and designer too.

Duncan Bell has pointed out how historians of political thought ‘frequently overlook the manner in which arguments are constructed and framed to resonate with particular groups of individuals and the way in which the prejudices and perspectives of those groups are reinforced, flattered, or contested by certain lines of thought.’ He also stresses that it is ‘not simply the logical consistency or even the “rationality” – however that may be defined – of discrete arguments that counts most in motivation (or in attempting to motivate) political action, but rather their persuasive force when addressed to audiences that are already immersed in their own ideological universe.’⁵ The point is pertinent to both Morris and *Commonweal*. Morris used various forms and genres to reiterate ideas and arguments in differing ways, repeating his points so that they would stick. Moreover, they were presented inside a journal alongside other writers making similar arguments, with each reinforcing the other. Certainly, within any individuals thought and more so within a collective production over time there will be inconsistencies, disagreement and even contradiction, but these should not distract from the core messages being repeated by differing voices in different forms.

One area where there is sometimes a tension and sometimes a productive interplay in *Commonweal* and Morris’s thought is the relationship between the project of making

⁵ Duncan Bell, *The Idea of Greater Britain: Empire and the Future of World Order, 1860-1900*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2007, p.120.

socialists and a belief in the historical inevitability of socialism. In his lecture ‘The Hopes of Civilization’ Morris stated that the new school of socialist economists with Karl Marx at its head had shown that history was governed by laws of evolution and ‘was able to point out to us that the evolution was still going on, and that, whether Socialism be desirable or not, it is at least inevitable.’⁶ Quite how inevitable was an open question and the answer changed over time. E. P. Thompson characterised these two strands as ‘necessity’ and ‘desire’.⁷ The material conditions of capitalist development would create crises of production and also by necessity forced workers into combination while it was the job of propagandists like Morris to accelerate the movement of ideas in making people desire socialism, or to use a more Morrissian word, to have hope in the possibilities ahead. While Morris always held that man was capable of shaping events and influencing the direction of the coming socialism, there will always be a tension between political agency and a determinist conception of history. Throughout *Commonweal* we see these two issues repeating and interacting and they both form a part of Morris’s educational project. People had to be persuaded that socialism was on its way and they had to want it enough to be a part of shaping it.

Historiography

Commonweal, of course, has not been completely overlooked. Elizabeth Carolyn Miller in her study of late-nineteenth century print culture writes that Morris’s ‘print ventures in the 1880s and 1890s [*Commonweal* and then the Kelmscott Press] expose and critique the political effects of mass print culture, but they also establish print literature as a utopian space

⁶ Morris, ‘The Hopes of Civilization’, *CW XXIII*, p. 75.

⁷ E. P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1955, pp. 827-841.

in which one can imagine the possibility of a future detached from present conditions.’ This utopianism was both the League’s ‘all-or-nothing insistence on a complete break from existing social reality’ but also importantly its art and literature which was an attempt at ‘the creation of a new culture’ within the print sphere.⁸

Miller has also presented a stronger version of her argument, stating that *Commonweal* ‘has often been misrepresented or underestimated in historical accounts of the movement precisely because it depended heavily on literature and aesthetics to formulate its politics.’ This political goal, for Miller, ‘was to teach a certain disposition and feeling toward the world.’ Moving away from a Marxist emphasis on class-consciousness in making socialists Miller argues instead for conceptualising *Commonweal* and Morris’s socialism in aesthetic terms. Miller’s summation of Morris’s literary work in *Commonweal* is worth quoting in full:

‘In all three works [*The Pilgrims of Hope, A Dream of John Ball, News from Nowhere*], Morris’s aesthetic purpose is to reimagine the human species in terms of a wider sphere of influence that extends backward into the past, forward into the future, sideways to other nations, and upward and downward into the very atmosphere and soil that constitute the earth. Such wide political ambitions could not be achieved through journalism but required the speculative and epic forms that Morris brought into the pages of the *Commonweal* through his literary contributions.’

One problem with this characterisation of Morris’s political goal, or its shorter articulation as an ‘aesthetic project of resituating and reimagining human life within wider spheres of

⁸ Elizabeth Carolyn Miller, *Slow Print: Literary Radicalism and Late Victorian Print Culture*. Stanford University Press, 2014, p. 35, 42, 51.

existence', is that in its all-embracing totality it's also rather vague.⁹ The move away from the strictures of Marxist orthodoxy has in many respects been welcome and necessary, but the retreat from class has not been an unalloyed good, and Miller's articulation of Morris's politics in aesthetic terms can obscure at the same time as enlighten. Moreover, Miller overstates the role of literature in *Commonweal* and creates an artificial separation between the journalism and creative work when in reality they were connected and part of the same project. Even during the serialisation of *News from Nowhere* in 1890, literature rarely took up as much as two full pages out of eight. Outside of serialisations, literature, mostly poetry, typically took up about half of one page. To argue that Morris and the League's political project could only truly be articulated through literature is not only to discount Morris's own considerable journalistic output but also that of the vast majority of other contributors.

In the Postscript to the revised edition of his *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*, E. P. Thompson argued that Morris's utopianism had an educative function. For Thompson, drawing on the work of Miguel Abensour, in Morris is found the 'proper and new-found space' for utopia, '*the education of desire*.' 'Morris's Utopianism, when it succeeds, liberates desire to an uninterrupted interrogation of our values and also to its own self-interrogation'.¹⁰ While this is more succinct than Miller, it is still very open, and indeed this openness is seen as the point. But in doing so it misses the immediate political arguments Morris is making in his utopian work and separates out the utopian and non-utopian aspects of Morris's thought rather than bringing them together towards the same goal.

The most historically acute reading of the utopian aspect of Morris's thought has come from Owen Holland's *William Morris's Utopianism: Politics, Propaganda and*

⁹ Miller, 'William Morris and the Literature and Socialism of the *Commonweal*', in Florence S. Boos ed., *The Routledge Companion to William Morris*. Routledge, 2021, pp. 422-441, p. 422, 435, 425.

¹⁰ E. P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (1976). The Merlin Press, 2011, p. 791. For a summary of the scholarly and political arguments on Morris's utopianism and its relation to Marxism, see Chapter 2 of Owen Holland, *William Morris's Utopianism: Politics, Propaganda and Prefiguration*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, pp. 29-48.

Prefiguration. Holland persuasively argues for a reading of *News from Nowhere* that places emphasis on the now-here as opposed to the no-where and situates the text within the discourses of the first-wave feminist New Woman writers, back-to-the land advocates, and cultural proponents of the New Imperialism. Holland is right is not seeking a distinction of purpose between Morris's *Commonweal* literature and journalism, arguing that *Nowhere*'s 'serialisation in the pages of *Commonweal*...invites consideration of the text as a distinctive kind of propagandistic prose concerned with the practical and ideological realities of the now-here, rather than with 'the future society' per se.'¹¹

Seamus Flaherty has also argued *that News from Nowhere* had immediate political targets and that the text was not written solely as a response to Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* but was also aimed at countering the reformist version of socialism promoted by the Fabian Society. Flaherty also points to the often-overlooked importance of John Stuart Mill to not only Morris but also to Henry Mayers Hyndman and Ernest Belfort Bax. He argues that Mill's 'texts formed part of a discussion in the periodical press, between 1878 and 1880, in which socialist ideas were remade' and were part of longer continuities of socialist thought that challenge the notion of a 'revival' of socialism in the 1880s popularised by Friedrich Engels and followed by historians within the Marxist tradition.¹²

In her account of how literature, history, and politics combine in the figure of Morris, Anna Vaninskaya has noted how the project of education and of 'making socialists' was one of 'community creation' central to 'every variety of socialism on offer' and that 'propaganda alone could not suffice if political activity did not shore up its message.' Vaninskaya also brings Morris's utopian work together with his propaganda as instrumental genres deemed successful by the effect on the reader, their 'ability to convince, persuade, convert. Both

¹¹ Holland, *William Morris's Utopianism*, p. 19.

¹² Seamus Flaherty, *Marx, Engels and Modern British Socialism: The Social and Political Thought of H.M. Hyndman, E.B. Bax and William Morris*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, p. 13.

forms attempted to achieve this end by presenting dichotomies, painting the status quo black and their particular favoured alternative white.’¹³

The importance Morris attached to education in making socialists was, for Ruth Kinna, a reflection of ‘the premium he placed on the transforming power of ideas’ and that ‘the value of education lay in the explicit teaching of socialist principles.’¹⁴ Kinna notes Morris’s practice as a public speaker, the fact he converted the coach house at Kelmscott House into a lecture hall for discussion and his underwriting of *Commonweal* as further material support to establishing a basis for continuing education and the dissemination of ideas. Kinna quotes often from Morris’s journalism, sometimes bringing direct attention to *Commonweal* as the site of publication but doesn’t reflect on the significance of *Commonweal* as a collaborative site of propaganda and its impact on Morris’s thought.

Commonweal barely receives a mention in Mark Bevir’s account of Morris in his book *The Making of British Socialism*. Without entirely dismissing the importance of Marx and socialist theory, in Bevir’s account Morris must be understood through the traditions of romanticism and Protestantism. Romanticism led Morris ‘to seek self-realization through an art based on naturalness and harmony’ while Protestantism ‘led him to do so in the everyday worlds of work and home.’¹⁵ One problem with Bevir’s account, stemming from his methodological reliance on ‘traditions’ through which political actors are situated, is that all of Morris’s socialist positions are then read through this concern for art in everyday life. These traditions have a determining effect and are taken to have ‘defined his political strategy’.¹⁶ There is also little sense in Bevir’s account of the interplay of ideas, of influence, collaboration and disagreement between Morris and his socialist contemporaries such as

¹³ Vaninskaya, *William Morris and the Idea of Community*, p. 7, 8, 188.

¹⁴ Ruth Kinna, *William Morris: The Art of Socialism*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000, p. 170, 172.

¹⁵ Mark Bevir, *The Making of British Socialism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011, p. 17.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 96. For discussion of some of the difficulties Bevir’s methodology leads him too, see Flaherty, *Marx Engels and Modern British Socialism*, pp. 9-10, 232-233.

Hyndman, Bax, and Sidney Webb, who are also presented in Bevir's book in intellectual portraits as individuals bringing different traditions with them into socialism in the 1880s.

Rather than offering a wholesale reconstruction or intellectual portrait of his political thought, this thesis uses *Commonweal* as a way of examining not just what Morris was saying but also what he was doing in this thought by situating it within ongoing political discourses and within the pages of *Commonweal* itself. In order to provide the necessary depth and detail this thesis focuses on the period between 1885-1890, the years of Morris's involvement in the Socialist League and *Commonweal*. This is not however to suggest that the years before and after this period are unimportant to the study of Morris's political thought. His brief time spent in the Social Democratic Federation is, for example, an important part of the development of his socialist outlook too easily overlooked or viewed through the prism of the later disagreement with Henry Mayers Hyndman. Although beyond the scope of this study, a closer examination of Morris's political activities after leaving the Socialist League and forming the Hammersmith Socialist Society would also be meritorious in illustrating the choices Morris made in directing his political energies in a period of declining health. Consideration here is given where necessary to the longer trajectory of Morris's thought and practice, particularly on art and labour from the mid-1870s, and how this impacted and influenced his socialist thought, but these are not here taken to have had a determinative effect on the positions he later adopted. It points towards the need in studies of late-nineteenth century British socialism, and the history of political thought more broadly, to pay greater attention to the sites of publication of such thought and to the manner and form in which it was presented to its audience. Sites of publication such as *Commonweal* were not only venues or vessels for the transmission of ready-made ideas but also played a role in shaping those ideas and their authors.

Commonweal

It is important to note that *Commonweal* was not a first point of contact between the League and the working classes. As Thompson stated, in this early stage of the movement it was important that socialists ‘took to the streets and the parks, where they could show themselves openly to the people and explain their message’. For Thompson this and the resulting struggles against the authorities, ‘which continued in London and the provinces until the end of the decade, were the most important form of advertisement for Socialism at this stage of the propaganda.’¹⁷ Alongside subscriptions it was at these engagements that *Commonweal* was sold. Its readers were mostly members of the League, other convinced socialists who read widely, and those who may not consider themselves definite socialists but were interested enough to buy and read socialist literature. Morris’s writing in *Commonweal*, then, is not aimed at a general audience, but is rather a contribution towards the ongoing issues and arguments taking place within wider political and socialist debate.

As Miller has shown, the late-nineteenth century saw a proliferation of radical print production. Print culture had long been a part of popular political movements in Britain and though ‘the rise of mass print was a long historical process, the final decades of the nineteenth century were a watershed moment because of such innovations as mechanized composition, cheaper paper, and photomechanical reproduction and such cultural shifts as universal education and widespread literacy.’¹⁸ *Commonweal* was sold for 1 penny an issue and had on average a weekly circulation of 2,500-3,000 copies, not enough to recoup costs.¹⁹

¹⁷ E. P. Thompson, *William Morris* (1955), p. 465.

¹⁸ Miller, *Slow Print*, p. 2.

¹⁹ The shortfall for the year before the May 1888 Conference was £83. 7s. 10 1/4d. For more on the publication details, see Eugene D. LeMire, *A Bibliography of William Morris*. London: Oak Knoll Press, 2006, pp.104-106.

This circulation, along with its regular publication from the beginning of 1885 to the end of 1890, first as a monthly before moving to a weekly, ranks *Commonweal* as one of the more successful publications of the era.²⁰ Its 6 years as a regular paper stands up well considering that, as *The Labour Prophet* put it in 1892, labour papers were ‘coming and going like the leaves on the trees of the forest’.²¹ Its circulation does pale next to a paper such the *Clarion*, which averaged between 40,000-50,000 a week and hit a high of 90,000, but again in comparison to other elements of the radical press it was not inconsequential and was read by the leading socialist figures of the day. In 1889 Sidney Webb noted that though it now probably had a smaller circulation than the Social Democratic Federation’s paper *Justice*, *Commonweal* was still a notable paper that ‘often contains poems and articles of high literary merit’ but that it was also ‘marked by an equally acrid denunciation of all politicians’.²²

While writers in *Clarion* usually assumed pseudonyms, articles in *Commonweal* were by and large signed with the writers’ names. Contributors to *Commonweal* were varied and included many luminaries of the socialist movement such as Ernest Belfort Bax, George Bernard Shaw, Friedrich Engels, Paul Lafargue, Eleanor Marx, and Edward Aveling, alongside Morris himself. Engels’s article ‘England in 1845 and in 1885’ would be repurposed by him for the introduction to the English edition of *The Condition of the Working Class in England*.²³ More frequent contributions came from people such as the old Chartist and radical turned socialist John Sketchley, the trade unionist Thomas Binning, the former engineer John Lincoln Mahon, the anarchist and radical populist activist Frank Kitz, and future anarchist *Commonweal* editor David Nicoll. Articles and essays by these and

²⁰ A fortnight after Morris’s final article in November 1890 the paper became a monthly again. In early 1891 the name changed to *Commonweal, A Revolutionary Journal of Anarchist Communism*, and appeared irregularly until 1894.

²¹ Quoted in Miler, *Slow Print*, p. 23.

²² Sidney Webb, ‘Socialism in England’, *Publications of the American Economic Association*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (Apr., 1889), pp. 7-73, p. 26.

²³ Frederick Engels, ‘England in 1845 and in 1885’, *Commonweal*, 1.2 (March 1885), pp. 12-14.

many more figures were not the only regular features of the paper however. Each issue carried reports on recent labour struggles, strikes and notes on working conditions throughout the country. Branches were encouraged to send in material related to their activities and also to advertise future meetings, lectures and propaganda outings. Short commentary notes, often pithy and sarcastic, on clippings taken from the more mainstream press were a regular feature too alongside clippings and quotes from other papers (including from many American papers) supportive of the socialist and labour cause.

Characteristic of the collaborative nature of their socialist project, the League was supportive of other labour papers as part of a counterweight to the bourgeois press. League leaflet ‘The Workers’ Claims and ‘Public Opinion’’, written by Andreas Scheu and revised by Morris, warned workers: ‘Beware of the Capitalist Press, and look out for and support those few papers that are working for your freedom!’. The capitalist press was ‘like all private enterprise, a profit-mongering, mercenary concern.’ Public opinion was not something simply found or that actually emanated from the public itself, but was a creation of the press. It was in the form of the press that ‘the Money-Bag wields its most corrupting, its most deadly power over you, because it influences and actually *makes* Public Opinion, the opinion of the great mass of the people, aye, *your own opinion*, the opinion of all of you who are simple or indifferent enough to buy it, and take for genuine what is the *basest coin in the market!*’ But, help was on hand in *Commonweal*, started by the League ‘by workers and in the interest of the workers only’ and that ‘speaks out plainly, without fear or favour *on behalf of the suffering.*’ *Commonweal* promised to show ‘your actual position’ was that of being ‘*down-trodden Slaves*’ who instead ought to be ‘*the Rulers of yourselves.*’ Workers were encouraged to give it ‘countenance and support in every way; write to it, speak for it, and preach from it! Then it will grow in strength and influence. It will be the most powerful

weapon in your hands to fight the battle for the freedom of the toilers *all over the civilised world!*'²⁴

In Morris's introductory article he stated that articles 'will, for the most part, be of an educational nature'.²⁵ A few months later Scheu wrote on the importance of education itself as part of a series under the classic revolutionary question 'What's to be Done?'. The three parts were expositions of the 'Agitate! Educate! Organise!' slogan, and in the second Scheu argued that for 'the revolution of society to evolve apace, *Educate*, though this task be even harder than to *Agitate*, the people.' Education was vital because 'the battling to be done needs men and women of clear intellect' and of 'sympathetic social impulse'; both 'reason and emotion' would be needed in order 'to stand forth in protest and rise in rebellion against the rule of brute force, fraud and hypocrisy.' But it was not just the work of the press, 'of professional idiots, of quacks and cheats,' that needed combatting, 'but you have also to counteract the influence of those very circumstances and surrounding which are the cause of, and continually recreate, the boundless misery and ignorance of this world.'²⁶ In support of this education the League established a library, reading groups and recommended books that were 'distinctly helpful to a right understanding of the social problem.'²⁷

Commonweal was one vehicle that the League used to spread their message, but from its beginning there was significant debate as to what its exact purpose should be. Thompson was probably correct when he stated that it 'never seemed to reconcile the twin tasks of a theoretical journal and a popular propaganda weekly.' It should be noted that this is by no means an easy balance to strike, and despite this Thompson still considered that *Commonweal* 'would rank among the best of Socialist journals at least until 1888 or 1889.'²⁸

²⁴ 'The Workers' Claims and 'Public Opinion', Socialist Leaflets No. 5, *ISH SL*, No. 587.

²⁵ Morris, 'Introductory', *Commonweal*, 1.1 (February 1885), p.1.

²⁶ Andreas Scheu, 'What's to be Done? Agitate! Educate! Organise! II', *Commonweal*, 1.5 (June 1885), p. 50.

²⁷ 'Books for Socialists', *Commonweal*, 2.22 (12 June 1886), p. 88.

²⁸ Thompson, *William Morris* (1955), p. 462.

Trying to strike the right balance was something the League discussed at the First General Meeting in July 1885. Morris and Aveling as editors reported they were ‘quite conscious that the *Commonweal* has not been a newspaper. As a monthly journal it could not assume this character. In discussing, as you will, the question of keeping the paper as a monthly or making it a weekly, we feel sure that you will bear in mind the relative expense and amount of literary work involved in the two cases.’²⁹ Morris as Chairman of the meeting stayed quiet during the ongoing discussion, but in the evening after official business was finished he affirmed that he ‘was very anxious that the literary character of the paper should be maintained. He, for one, could not offer to the workers what he did not himself think good. The journal must be Socialistic.’³⁰ From its outset, Morris had intended for *Commonweal* to become a weekly, and he still wished for this, though the work involved in editing just the monthly editions had made him realise quite how much time and effort such an undertaking would entail.

During the main meeting Bax moved a resolution, not passed, calling for a cheaper four-page weekly, believing ‘the contents of the paper should be Socialist news, scientific articles being published as pamphlets.’ Lewis Lyons argued that the paper should continue in its current form as it was ‘on all hands admitted to be superior to any other journal in the cause.’ ET Craig shared this view and ‘was confident that if it were kept at its present high level the *Commonweal* would force a success by sheer merit’, even if he did also think that ‘there was a little too much science in it for the reading public’. How much ‘science’, or articles of a theoretical nature, should be in the paper was a hot topic. Lyons clearly knew different workers and members of the public as he argued against reducing the scientific content as ‘workers, he knew by personal experience, to a large extent bought the paper just

²⁹ ‘First General Meeting of the Socialist League. Sunday, July 5, 1885’, *Commonweal*, 1.7 (August 1885), p. 66.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

on account of the scientific articles on Socialism.’ Another member strongly disagreed, stating that anyone who ‘wanted scientific Socialism could get Marx’ book.’³¹

Some members of the League ‘wanted to see other things besides Socialism in the paper’ with one suggesting that to aid their financial problems they should set aside two pages (a quarter of the paper) for advertisements as there ‘was nothing detrimental to the principles of Socialism in advertising Pears’ Soap’. Tom Maguire agreed, thinking the ‘reason the paper had not been successful was because it was not adapted to the working classes. What was wanted was to get the attention of the superficial and frothy men. The *Labour Enquirer* was the sort of paper he meant. We must tempt the people with something attractive and superficial.’ Robert Banner took a very different view. ‘Banner wanted a weekly paper. He wanted a daily, as probably the rest of the members of the League did. In fact, he wanted a Social revolution, but he had to wait for it.’ Banner questioned if the League needed ‘a Socialist rag, with no literary ability in it’. If workers ‘did want the superficial light stuff that some of them had been talking about, let them buy other papers. Socialists had been told long enough and often enough that their ideas were unscientific. And now, when this being shown to be false, actually some of the Socialists themselves objected.’ Socialism was a complex issue, ‘and therefore can’t be dealt with superficially’ and one of the first important tasks was to make the working class ‘understand our language.’³² Aveling, speaking in the evening agreed with Banner’s position, reminding all ‘that Socialism was essentially a scientific question’ and that while people’s feelings should be appealed to, ‘these once aroused, the solid, reasoned basis on which the whole thing rested should be shown.’³³

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 66, 67.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 67.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

A few months after this General Meeting the League sourced a printing press (previously they had been using a commercial yet progressive printers) and preparations were made to move to a weekly publication, with the first weekly edition beginning 1 May 1886, still priced one penny. With this Aveling stepped down from his editorial role, explaining that ‘the necessary demands of a weekly on an editor’s time can only be met by those in relatively more fortunate positions.’³⁴ Bax replaced him in the sub-editor role until he in turn resigned from the position in January 1887, at which point Morris’s future son-in-law Henry Halliday Sparling was appointed. Morris and Sparling would remain in position until the 1890 conference, where they were both replaced by D. Nichol and Frank Kitz as the anarchists in League confirmed their hold over the group.³⁵

Thesis Outline

Chapter One examines the place of Marx within *Commonweal*. Rather than reassessing the influence of Marx on Morris it seeks to understand the role of treatments of Marx in the project of educating socialists. Through an analysis of Edward Aveling’s ‘Lessons in Socialism’ and Morris & Bax’s ‘Socialism from the Root Up’ it is shown how different approaches were taken to communicating socialist theory and the work of Marx, one rigid and emphasising its scientific nature, the other more historically aware and attuned to its audience. While offering different presentations of Marx’s work what both these examples share is an emphasis on Marx as the chief theorist of a ‘Scientific Socialism’ that had deduced laws of history showing the inevitable collapse of capitalism and the dawning of

³⁴ Edward Aveling, ‘An Explanation’, *Commonweal*, 2.16 (1 May 1886), p. 36.

³⁵ On the anarchists within the League and the history of *Commonweal* after Morris’s departure, see John Quail, *The Slow Burning Fuse: The Lost History of the British Anarchists*. London: Freedom Press, 2017.

socialism. The implications of this deterministic conception of history are then explored with reference to Morris's historical romance *A Dream of John Ball*.

In Chapter Two Morris's thinking on the State in socialist and subsequently communist society is considered. Morris's critique of the state socialist thought of Edward Bellamy and the Fabians is outlined before demonstrating Morris's own political strategy for achieving socialist power. This was only the first stage for Morris however; socialism to his mind would have to transition to communism to be complete. The chapter looks at how Morris considered this communist society would be organised not with a centralised coercive state but with a small-scale self-managed federal system, and shows how dialogue and debate with the anarchist faction in the League helped to sharpen his views.

Chapter Three gives a full account of Morris's anti-imperialism, arguing that it was a core component of his socialism often overlooked through lack of attention paid to *Commonweal*. It shows how anti-imperialism was a key factor in transition to socialism and played an important role in the shaping of that socialism in an anti-parliamentary direction. Morris was heavily influenced by Bax's *Commonweal* articles and developed an understanding of imperialism as capitalism's search for new markets and resources to renew its vitality and stave off revolution at home. Therefore, it was necessary to educate socialists to this reality and also to persuade workers away from nationalist and patriotic celebration of Empire.

Chapter Four re-locates Morris's thought on labour in the concept of freedom, and shows how writers in *Commonweal* developed an understanding of capitalism as a site of unfreedom. The similarities and connections between this understanding and the 'labor republicanism' of the Knights of Labour in America is highlighted to show how Morris and *Commonweal* used the discourse of wage-slavery to educate readers as to their real condition. The chapter also uses freedom as the crucial connection between Morris's thought on labour

and art, arguing that freedom within the labour process and society at large are the conditions in which a revival of art would be possible and how the simplification of life through the transition from socialism to communism resolves the tension between socially necessary production in an unmechanised society with abundant time for free and pleasurable labour.

Chapter Five turns to focus on Morris's *Commonweal* fiction and gives a close reading of *The Pilgrims of Hope*, *A Dream of John*, and *News from Nowhere* through the lens of the town/country divide. These fictional works, situated within *Commonweal*, are treated as propaganda works in which Morris is pushing a consistent political strategy. Despite the pull of the rural Morris used the town/country divide in his fictional works to demonstrate the need for socialist energy to be directed to the city as the dominant site of capital and the location of political power and contestation. The creation of England as a garden would have to wait until the successful revolution. Again, the transition from socialism to communism is shown to be important in how Morris understood the town/country divide being overcome.

In the Conclusion Morris's own assessment of the project of making socialists is considered. Additionally, suggestions for future avenues of research are suggested.

Chapter 1: Marx & Theory

In November 1887 William Morris penned a dialogue for *Commonweal* between neighbours Mr. James Brown, ‘a business man’, and Mr. Olaf Evans, ‘a kind of artist and literary man’. Called ‘Honesty is the Best Policy; or, the Inconvenience of Stealing’, the dialogue moves from stolen pears to a confession of being a member of the Socialist League on to an exposition of how all capitalist manufacture is itself theft. The piece is typical of how Morris used genre and self-referential humour in his propaganda writing, and of how he used the dialogue form as a means of expounding socialist theory and critiquing capitalism. It is also an example of Morris directly utilising Marx in his own work. Mr. Brown is angry that ‘blackguards’ who spend all their money on beer have been stealing pears from his garden:

‘E. Doubtless; and the pears would come refreshing to them after hot-coppers – if blackguards ever *have* hot-coppers!

B. Refreshing! don’t be a fool! Don’t you know that they would sell ‘em and buy more beer with them, blast them!

E. Touching instance of the Marxian formula, C-M-C! Never mind me, Brown, my mind wanders a little sometimes.’¹

There is a slight hesitation or apology, ‘never mind me’, for introducing this simple bit of Marx into the dialogue, and as will be seen, this hesitation is not without reason.

That Morris was heavily influenced by the work of Karl Marx is beyond doubt. John Bruce Glasier’s questionable recollection of Morris at a meeting in Glasgow emphatically

¹ William Morris, ‘Honesty if the Best Policy; or, the Inconvenience of Stealing’, *Commonweal*, 3.95 (5 November 1887), p. 356.

stating that ‘I do not know what Marx’s theory of value is, and I’m damned if I want to know...It is enough political economy for me to know that the idle class is rich and the working class is poor, and that the rich are rich because they rob the poor’ is now impossible to take at face value even if there is an undercurrent of truth in the fact Morris cared little for the ideological purity that has often dogged the left.² A hint towards this lack of interest in purity can be found in the name given to a character in another of his *Commonweal* dialogues. ‘Whigs Astray’, from January 1889, features ‘an architect (unsuccessful)’ by the name of ‘Owen Marx Bakounine Jones’.³ There is more self-referential humour here too, in that the young Morris had for a while been apprenticed to the architect George Edmund Street.⁴ The four figures in the name also neatly point towards four of the most important political currents that went to make up the Socialist League. The utopian socialist Robert Owen, the anarchist Mikhail Bakunin, and the Chartist Ernest Jones were all part of the radical heritage that late-nineteenth century socialists drew upon, along with, of course, the ‘scientific socialist’ Karl Marx.

This chapter looks at the treatment of Marx in *Commonweal* with regards to the theories of ‘Scientific Socialism’ and its conception of history. It questions the role of theory more generally in the journal and what role it played within the project of making and shaping socialists. It will be argued that while the leaders of the Socialist League thought expositions of Marx’s work – particularly *Capital* – were important, they struggled to find a way of incorporating them effectively into the journal. More important for them was the claim that Scientific Socialism had discovered the developmental laws of history that made end the end of capitalism and the advent of socialism inevitable. This belief had many

² John Bruce Glasier, *William Morris and the Early Days of the Socialist Movement*. London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1921, p. 32. For critiques of Glasier see E. P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1955, Appendix IV, pp. 886-899; and Paul Meier, *William Morris: The Marxist Dreamer*. Sussex, The Harvester Press, 1978, pp. 205-211.

³ Morris, ‘Whigs Astray’, *Commonweal*, 5.158 (19 January 1889), p. 18.

⁴ See Fiona MacCarthy, *William Morris: A Life for Our Time*. London: Faber and Faber, 1994, pp. 102-108.

consequences for their analysis of society and also on their strategies and tactics as political organisers.

Seamus Flaherty has recently asserted that the ‘time...for pontificating on the Morris/’Marxism’ relation has long since passed’.⁵ Nevertheless, before outlining the content of the chapter and seeing how the relation can be framed in a new way, it is necessary to say a few words on this relation.⁶ Sven Eric Liedman in his recent work describes Morris as ‘the most significant follower of Marx in the nineteenth century’.⁷ The word ‘follower’ here is appropriate and allows us to think about the relationship in a fruitful way. The affirmation of Morris as Marxist raises more questions than the one it answers. As John Goode suggested, the Morris Marxism relationship ‘depends on how you read Marxism and this depends in turn on how you read history.’⁸

The historiography affirming Morris as Marxist has, unsurprisingly, largely come from historians themselves within the Marxist tradition. Robin Page Arnot, E. P. Thompson, Paul Meier, and even Perry Anderson have all identified Morris as a Marxist. They have all, also, identified a different Morris to one another, and one that speaks more closely to their own political inclinations and positions with relation to the contemporary direction of Marxism. That this happened is understandable and even desirable. It has given great vitality to much of the work and produced historical scholarship that is conscious of the contemporary importance of the contested legacies of the past. There are though dangers in history writing that tries, consciously or not, to claim the past or past thinkers for the present.

⁵ Seamus Flaherty, *Marx, Engels and Modern British Socialism: The Social and Political Thought of H.M. Hyndman, E.B. Bax and William Morris*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, p. 229.

⁶ For the most recent discussion of this, see Owen Holland, ‘Morris and Marxist Theory’, in Florence S. Boos ed., *The Routledge Companion to William Morris*. Routledge, 2021, pp. 465-485.

⁷ Sven Eric Liedman, *A World To Win: The Life and Works of Karl Marx*. London: Verso, 2018. Morris is also the one British thinker noted by Gregory Claeys in the chapter ‘Marxism and Social Democracy, 1883-1918’ in his *Marx and Marxism*. UK: Penguin Random House, 2018, p. 284.

⁸ John Goode, ‘E. P. Thompson and ‘the Significance of Literature’’, in Harvey J. Kaye and Keith McClelland eds., *E. P. Thompson: Critical Perspectives*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990, pp. 183-203, p. 192.

E. P. Thompson's self-reflective remarks at the end of the Postscript to his revised biography of Morris are interesting in this respect. Thompson denies that he has been purposely acting as a claimant on Morris 'in the attempt to attach him to an idiosyncratic Thompsonian position.' Rather, he asserts that by 1955, the year his biography was first published, Morris had claimed him. 'To say that Morris claimed me,' he continues, 'and that I've tried to acknowledge that claim, gives me no right to claim him...But at least I can now say that this is what I've been trying, for twenty years, to do.'⁹

The first thing to note is that 'Marxist' is not a term Morris used to describe himself for the simple reason that during his most active years as a socialist very few people, especially in Britain, used the term and when they did it was often a term of opprobrium. It also needs to be stated that Marxism as a system of thought came into being gradually in the decade or so following the death of Marx in 1883 and that Engels played a crucial role in this both in the continued publication of Marx's work and through his own.¹⁰ The establishment of Marxism as an intellectual system was closely related to the political project of the social-democratic parties in Europe, particularly Germany, during the period of the Second International and up until the First World War, following which it became more closely tied to the Bolsheviks and the Soviet Union. Morris's relationship to this political movement complicates his relation to Marxism further. He was present at the founding Congress of the Second International and was respected by many of its leaders. But Morris was never involved in a mass-based social democratic party of the sort that dominated the European left of the period for the simple fact that there was no such party in Britain during his life and arguably since. Moreover, he didn't term himself a social democrat, but a socialist or communist. If Morris is to be described as a 'Marxist' as a shorthand identification for his

⁹ Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (1976). London: The Merlin Press, 2011, p. 810.

¹⁰ See George Lichteim, *Marxism: An Historical and Critical Study*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980, pp. 234-243.

politics, which is a reasonable position to take, he was not an ‘orthodox’ one, and was someone who took more from Marx than he did from Marxism.

This chapter interrogates the relationship between Morris and Marx by looking at work in *Commonweal* that deals closely and specifically with Marx’s work to see how Morris and the League used this in their project of making socialists. First, ‘The Manifesto of the Socialist League’ will be considered as an initial programmatic statement of Morris and the League. Next is a comparison of two series that offered expositions of Marx’s main ideas, Edward Aveling’s ‘Lessons in Socialism’ and Morris and Ernest Belfort Bax’s ‘Socialism from the Root Up’. Both of these series present Marx, particularly the Marx of *Capital*, as the primary theorist of a ‘Scientific Socialism’ that had confirmed the historical inevitability of socialism. Whereas Aveling gave a technical presentation of *Capital* as a strictly scientific text, Morris and Bax’s series offered a historical portrait of society from Ancient Society through to the 1880s and the future that drew significantly from Marx but also from other Victorian historians. This historical picture will then be explored and it will be seen how Morris used this knowledge in his historical romance *A Dream of John Ball*, a work in which he attempted to translate the more theoretical and historical insights from elsewhere in the journal into popular propaganda.

The Manifesto

In his ‘Introductory’ to the first edition of *Commonweal* Morris wrote that it had one aim, ‘the propagation of Socialism.’ ‘Our articles will, for the most part, be of an educational nature: there will be a series on historical revolutions, expositions of the scientific basis of

Socialism, and contributions from men of various nationalities.’¹¹ As the ‘Manifesto of the Socialist League’, jointly written by Morris and Bax, put it, the League ‘will do all in its power towards the education of the people in the principles of this great cause’.¹² With the goals of propagation and education it was important that articles be pitched at the level for its audience.

Morris ended his ‘Introductory’ piece with ‘a word of appeal, to the workers chiefly.’ Showing some confusion as to who exactly the audience was at this early stage and reflecting his own difficulties in learning to communicate effectively, he proceeded to talk about the workers rather than to them. ‘We cannot pretend to think that they, the workers, as yet know much of the principles of the cause that rests upon them, or their own cause, in fact.’ It was the aim of the League and of *Commonweal* to set that right, so they needed to reach a wider audience of workers and bring them in to the movement because as Morris put it, ‘it is that through them alone, through the slaves of society, we look for its regeneration.’¹³

Appearing in the first issue and starting on the front page to the right of Morris’s ‘Introductory’ piece, the League’s Manifesto, written largely by Morris and Ernest Belfort Bax was signed collectively by the members of the League’s Provisional Council. Beginning by addressing its readers as ‘FELLOW CITIZENS,’ the Manifesto’s opening statement declared that ‘We come before you as a body advocating the principles of Revolutionary International Socialism; that is, we seek a change in the basis of Society – a change which would destroy the distinctions of classes and nationalities.’¹⁴ In the analysis presented society is constituted by two classes, designated not as bourgeois/capitalist and proletariat but as a ‘possessing class’ and a ‘producing class’. In his 1884 lecture ‘Useful Work versus Useless

¹¹ ‘Introductory’, *Commonweal*, 1.1 (February 1885), p. 1.

¹² ‘The Manifesto of the Socialist League’, *ibid*, p.2.

¹³ ‘Introductory’, *ibid*, p. 1.

¹⁴ ‘The Manifesto of the Socialist League’, *ibid*, p. 1.

Toil' Morris had given a more complicated class analysis with society divided into three classes. Here the 'possessing class' was split into an aristocracy and middle class where the aristocracy do no work and the middle and richer classes who may work but don't produce. There is also an acknowledgement that many people in what here is termed the working class, for example those working in service roles, don't actually produce goods in the way that the term producing class would imply.¹⁵ In the Manifesto, a short document written for political impact, this complexity of analysis is necessarily simplified. In this it is similar to *The Communist Manifesto* in presenting the development of capitalism as creating two ever polarising and opposing classes, a picture complicated considerably by the analyses given in Marx's historical and journalistic work.

In both analyses though, the classes 'are necessarily in antagonism to one another.' The possessing class, owning the wealth and the instruments of its production, 'can only live as a class on the unpaid labour' they can wring out of workers. The producing class on the other hand, whose only possession is 'the power of labour inherent in their bodies', can only live by working, they 'are forced to sell their sole possession, the power of labour, on such terms as the possessing classes will grant them.' These terms are that after having 'produced enough to keep them in working order, and enable them to beget children to take their places when they are worn out,' when they have produced the equivalent of the means of subsistence, 'the surplus of their product shall belong to the possessors of property'.¹⁶ Though not named explicitly in the Manifesto, the analysis it gives is clearly a simplified account of Marx's ideas in language that would be more familiar to readers of popular socialist and working class political literature.

¹⁵ William Morris, 'Useful Work versus Useless Toil', *CW XXIII*, pp. 98-120.

¹⁶ 'The Manifesto of the Socialist League', p. 1.

Marx, and for that matter Engels who was close to Leaguers Eleanor Marx-Aveling and Edward Aveling, was invoked through a quotation from *The Communist Manifesto*. Conflict arises not just between the classes but also within them. The producing class compete for work and the possessing class including middlemen compete for ‘the share of the profit wrung out of the workers.’ This competition, or ‘veiled war’, also happens among nations for a share of the world market with the rivalry of nations now ‘a degrading struggle for their share of the spoils of barbarous countries to be used at home for the purpose of increasing the riches of the rich and the poverty of the poor.’¹⁷ Thus they quote the more famous Manifesto’s lines that “‘under penalty of ruin the Bourgeoisie compel by competition the universal adoption of their system of production; they force all nations to accept what is called civilization’”.¹⁸

Such an open quotation from Marx & Engels in the League’s first significant publication shows they had no problem in declaring the influence of foreign writers or theories. As Richard Biernacki as written, Marx was recognised as the most important theorist for the socialists of the late 19th Century, even if often misunderstood, and this was used against the socialists when ‘opponents of the labor movement in Britain criticized its members for inviting “German” theory into the land.’¹⁹ For the League this importation of ideas from abroad was nothing to be ashamed of. Morris, in a speech in 1893, in reference to such attacks remarked it was often said that “‘Socialism was a foreign import. It was nothing the worse for that.’” He added, quite possibly as a sop to those still hostile to foreign ideas, that ““Socialism is English now.””²⁰

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ ‘The Communist Manifesto’, quoted in *ibid*, pp. 1-2.

¹⁹ Richard Biernacki, *The Fabrication of Labor: Germany and Britain, 1640-1914*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995, p. 419.

²⁰ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 420.

Biernacki argues that the British socialists of the late 19th Century, like their forerunners earlier in the century, placed the site of exploitation in capitalist society in the market place, in the unequitable exchange of products. Capitalists, in this analysis, ‘were portrayed as usurious lenders, empowered by the unequal division of wealth to manipulate relations in the market.’ In Germany, however, ‘Marx’s dissection of the extraction of surplus at the site of production enjoyed a magnified resonance.’²¹ Biernacki’s argument needs to be qualified in the case of the Socialist League. As has been seen, the Manifesto of the League argues that the possessing class can only live on the unpaid labour of the workers with this unpaid labour being the surplus produced by workers after having already produced the equivalent of the means of subsistence. The Manifesto also states that this relation between the two classes ‘is the essential basis of the system of producing for a profit, on which our modern Society is founded.’²²

This isn’t to say that the marketplace is a place of fair and equal exchange for the Socialist League. If the manufacturer extracts a surplus from their workers in order to sell at a profit, the broker ‘in his turn makes a profit to the retailer, who must make his profit out of the general public, aided by various degrees of fraud and adulteration and the ignorance of the value and quality of goods to which this system has reduced the consumer.’ This system of distribution is more noted for its waste than its exploitation, ‘for it employs whole armies of clerks, travellers, shopmen, advertisers, and what not, merely for the sake of shifting money from one person’s pocket to another’s’.²³

By placing emphasis on both production and distribution the Manifesto sought to emphasise ‘the *people*, who are the only really organic part of society, are treated as a mere appendage to capital – as a part of its machinery.’ The workers have no control over any

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 407, 393.

²² ‘The Manifesto of the Socialist League’, p. 1

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 1, 2.

aspect of their lives. While the positive articulation of a society and system without exploitation will be explored in later chapters, it is interesting to note here that this future is referred to in the Manifesto as the workers gaining ‘economical freedom’ in opposition to the capitalist ‘so-called free labour system’.²⁴

Manifestos are important documents for establishing the identity and principles of political organisations. ‘The Manifesto of the Socialist League’ clearly declares a position within an ongoing class war and invites its readers to pick a side and join in the fight. In quoting directly from *The Communist Manifesto* Morris and the League were setting themselves firmly within a particular revolutionary tradition. Its analysis of capitalist society is necessarily simplified but it would not be long before *Commonweal* explored this in greater depth.

‘Lessons in Socialism’

If the Manifesto only draws on Marx, the first explanation of his work was Edward Aveling’s series ‘Lessons in Socialism’ that ran from April 1885 to April 1886. Aveling, who had also been one of *Commonweal*’s editors during this period, intended to carry on with the series, indicated as much in the April 1886 instalment and there is no overt reason given why this didn’t happen. However, a short note in the 1st May 1886 *Commonweal*, the first edition as a weekly publication, a note from Aveling asserts that this change to weekly publication ‘prevents my retaining the responsible position of one of its editors, as the necessary demands of a weekly on an editors time can only be met by those in relatively more fortunate

²⁴ *Ibid*, p. 2.

positions.²⁵ Aveling continued contributing to *Commonweal* but also at this point devoted more time to his role as one of the translators of Marx's *Capital*, at that time being prepared by Engels.

'My article begins,' Aveling wrote in the first instalment titled 'Value', 'what is as far as I know the first attempt to put the ideas of Marx, on which, as a scientific foundation, Socialism rests, simply and clearly before the English people, in their own language, with an honest acknowledgement that they are his.'²⁶ This last remark is a reference to H. M. Hyndman, whose 1881 book *England For All: The Text-book of Democracy* had borrowed heavily from Marx's *Capital* but only acknowledged this in the Preface by writing that for 'the ideas and much of the matter contained in Chapters II. and III., I am indebted to the work of a great thinker and original writer, which will, I trust, shortly be made accessible to the majority of my countrymen.'²⁷ This irritated Marx. He wrote to Friedrich Sorge that Hyndman had sent him 'stupid letters of excuse, for instance, that "the English don't like to be taught by foreigners," that "my name was so much detested, etc."' Despite his annoyance he did concede that Hyndman's book was useful propaganda 'so far as it pilfers the Capital' but that Hyndman was a "'weak" vessel'.²⁸

In the same letter Marx was much more positive, with qualification, about an article written by Bax in *Modern Thought* titled 'Leaders of Modern Thought: XXIII Karl Marx'. Despite parts of Bax's article being 'wrong and confused' in regards to its exposition of *Capital*, Marx praised it saying it 'is the first English publication of the kind which is pervaded by a real enthusiasm for the new ideas themselves and boldly stands up against Brit. Philistinism.'²⁹ Bax's article had also contained a biographical sketch of Marx's life and

²⁵ Edward Aveling, 'An Explanation', *Commonweal*, 2.16 (1 May 1886), p. 36.

²⁶ Aveling, 'Scientific Socialism: I. – Value', *Commonweal*, 1.3 (April 1885), p. 21.

²⁷ H. M. Hyndman, *England For All: The Text-book of Democracy* (1881). Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1973.

²⁸ Karl Marx to Friedrich Sorge, December 15th, 1881, in *Marx Engels Selected Correspondence*. London: Martin Lawrence, 1934, p. 397.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 398.

mentioned other of his published works including *The Holy Family* and *The Poverty of Philosophy*. Whereas Hyndman had read Marx in the French translation (Morris did the same) Bax was proficient in German having studied Musical composition in Stuttgart.

Aveling's intention in his series, which he also delivered as lectures, was to 'give some evidence of the fact that Socialism is based on grounds as scientific and as irrefragable as the theory of Evolution.' Echoing words Engels had spoken in his speech at Marx's graveside, Aveling wrote that just as 'Darwin was and is my master in biological science, so is Marx my master in economics, and for exactly the same reasons.'³⁰ This was a claim he repeated elsewhere in *Commonweal*, referring to Marx as 'the founder of that scientific Socialism on which the conclusions of his followers are based as securely as the biological science of to-day on the doctrines of evolution.'³¹ Aveling's intellectual background was actually in science, having trained in medicine and zoology and lectured in anatomy and biology at the London Hospital. He was active in the freethinking movement and had been Vice-chairman of Charles Bradlaugh's National Secular Society although the two men fell out, a common occurrence with Aveling.

The articles consist of explanations of the key concepts of the early chapters of *Capital* with 'Concise definitions' given at the end summarising the article. In the first article, 'Value', there are definitions of 'Natural object'; 'Product'; 'Commodity'; 'Use-value'; 'Exchange-value'; 'Value', 'and Measure of value of commodity'.³² After the first article on Value, there follows articles on 'Value Form or Exchange Value'; 'Money'; 'Capital, Surplus-Value, Labour-Power'; 'Labour-Power, Means of Subsistence, Essentials for Labour'; 'How Capital is Made'; 'Constant & Variable Capital, Rate of surplus-value'; 'The Product, The Working Day', and two shorter articles on 'The Lust for Surplus-Labour'.

³⁰ Aveling, 'Scientific Socialism: 1. – Value', *Commonweal*, 1.3 (April 1885), p. 21.

³¹ Aveling, 'Signs of the Times', *Commonweal*, 1.3 (April 1885), p. 23.

³² Aveling, 'Scientific Socialism: 1. – Value', p. 21, 22.

In these last two Aveling writes that by this point in the reading of *Capital*, ‘we now become students of history rather than of economics’ and these articles cover briefly ‘The Corvée System’ and ‘Value in England’.³³ In the framework of *Capital*, these articles finish early in the chapter on ‘The Working Day’, chapter 10 in the then as yet unpublished English edition.

Consisting merely of summaries of the main points of *Capital*, the intellectual content of Aveling’s articles need not concern us here, more important is the overall approach to theory and the articles reception. As a primer to the more difficult opening chapters of *Capital*, the articles are of a high quality and the concise definitions provide decent descriptions of what can sometimes be portrayed as quite abstract conceptions. It is perhaps because of the more abstract nature of the material being dealt with that the reception of the articles was certainly not what Aveling had hoped for. While Morris as an unsure student of Marx found Aveling’s lectures and explanations fruitful, the workingmen readers of *Commonweal* didn’t find them nearly as useful.³⁴

John L. Mahon, a prominent League member, sent a letter to the League’s Council from Leeds in January 1886 stating that ‘Aveling on Marx is a matter for general astonishment.’ The workers who read *Commonweal* ‘are utterly perplexed as to the meaning of it all. Only one member of the Branch reads them, and he does it to spite the rest of the members.’ He suggests that the articles be removed from the paper, potentially to be published separately on League’s “Socialist Platform” series of pamphlets, but that if this wasn’t possible they be moved to a less prominent place. The workers preferred the shorter and simpler comments on political events, noting that ‘Morris’ notes on Politics is the most popular part of the paper’.³⁵ Not everyone had a negative view of the series though. H. Davis

³³ *Commonweal*, 2.14 (March 1886), p. 18.

³⁴ In March 1885 Morris finished a letter by asking his correspondent if had ‘been to Aveling’s ‘lessons’ yet? ... they are well worth attending on all grounds.’ See *CL II*, p. 402.

³⁵ *IISH SL*, No. 2147-2148.

referred positively to Aveling's lectures and articles, writing that Aveling's account of 'Marx's analysis of the contract fallacy' was 'ingenious' and had 'thoroughly exposed' the trick of the free labour contract.³⁶

Criticism of the articles had reached Aveling sooner than Mahon's letter. In the fourth article of the series, published in July 1885 Aveling started with 'a word or two of explanation, called forth by one or two vivâ voce criticisms'. These concerned the use of formulæ in previous articles that touched on the different forms of exchange and also on the circulation of commodities. Aveling defended his approach arguing that the symbols had two functions, saving time and condensing complex truths into a memorable form. 'If the formulæ only are learned, no good is effected. But if the facts are mastered and the formulæ merely taken as concise representations of the facts, all is well.'³⁷ When Aveling expanded on his articles and lectures in *The Students' Marx: An Introduction to the Study of Karl Marx' Capital*, published in 1891, he extended his defence of the use of symbols. Firstly, he points out that Marx himself used mathematical forms in his own work. But more importantly Aveling argues that a 'science has only reached a stable condition when its truths can be expressed in mathematical terms' and 'the fact that Marx could express many of his generalisations in Political Economy in mathematical terms is so much evidence that he had carried that science further than his predecessors.'³⁸

Bax would reflect on Aveling's approach to the socialist movement that 'he worked hard at times, although in a rather mechanical way'.³⁹ This mechanical approach is evident in his desire to present Marx's work in as high a scientific light as possible. While Aveling's

³⁶ H. Davis, 'Freedom of Contract', *Commonweal*, 3.91 (8 October 1887), p. 322.

³⁷ Aveling, 'Lessons in Socialism: IV. – Capital, Surplus-Value, Labour-Power', *Commonweal*, 1.6 (July 1885), p. 57.

³⁸ Edward Aveling, *The Students' Marx: An Introduction to the Study of Marx' Capital*. London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1897, pp. x-xi.

³⁹ Ernest Belfort Bax, *Reminiscences and Reflections of a Mid and Late Victorian*. New York: Thomas Seltzer, 1920, p. 109.

presentation of Marx never reached the attempts of Engels' and later followers to characterise Marx's ideas as a comprehensive science of all society he is nevertheless part of the trend that, in seeking to elevate Marx as a scientific thinker on a par with Darwin also tended to rigidify his thought into a system that discouraged the cross-fertilisation of ideas from a variety of thinkers and traditions. Aveling's lectures and articles on Marx can be seen as the beginning of a process whereby 'British socialists...learned to see Marx as the author of a scientific, law-based model of historical development' rather than the historical economist he had earlier been primarily taken as.⁴⁰

'Socialism from the Root Up'

This tendency to regard Marx's writing as an end point in socialist thought is also evident in the introduction to Morris and Bax's articles on Marx in their series 'Socialism from the Root Up'. Their previous chapters on socialist thinkers of the 19th Century, they write, 'may be regarded as leading up to the full development of the *complete* Socialist theory, or as it is sometimes called, 'scientific' Socialism.'⁴¹ 'Socialism from the Root Up' as a series consisted of 23 chapters in 25 instalments (the final two chapters being split in two) published between May 1886 and May 1888. This timespan can be divided into three periods of activity. The first, from May to October 1886 consisted of historical articles running from 'Ancient Society' through to 'The Paris Commune of 1871, and the Continental Movement Following It' and an article on the Utopian socialists Owen, Saint-Simon, and Fourier. The

⁴⁰ Seamus Flaherty, *Marx, Engels and Modern British Socialism*, p. 12. See also Kirk Willis, 'The introduction and Critical Reception of Marxist Thought in Britain, 1850-1900'. *The Historical Journal*, 20:2 (1977), pp. 417-459.

⁴¹ Bax & Morris, 'Socialism from the Root Up: Ch. XV. – Scientific Socialism – Karl Marx', *Commonweal*, 3.59 (26 February 1887), p. 66.

second period from February to August 1887 started with an article on Proudhon and the transition from Utopian to Scientific Socialism, before seven articles on Scientific Socialism that consisted of an outline of *Capital*. The final period, from March to May 1888, had chapters on the contemporary socialist movement and also on the potentialities of the socialist future.

By the time the chapters on Marx were being written and published, the English translation of *Capital*, overseen by Engels and with the involvement of Aveling alongside Samuel Moore as a translator and Eleanor Marx-Aveling checking her father's quotations against the original sources, had just been published. Morris and Bax's quotations from *Capital* are taken from this new edition with the occasional doctored passage. It is interesting to note that, other than adverts placed by the publishers Swan Sonnenschein, no mention of the available translation is made in *Commonweal*.⁴² Given both the League's and Morris's statements on the importance of education in the process of 'making Socialists' and of learning its core principles, this omission seems all the more odd. It is possible to point towards the reception of Aveling's 'Lessons in Socialism' articles and that Morris and Bax had their articles on *Capital* in the pipeline, but this latter reason could fall down on the basis that their pieces could ably serve as an introduction to the now available book. Whatever the actual reason was – one could also point to the cost of the book being a barrier to the workers who read the paper – the omission is striking.

A prior translation of the early parts of *Capital* had been published in *To-Day*, beginning in October 1885. Translated under the pseudonym John Broadhouse, this was the subject of an article by Engels in *Commonweal* under the title 'How Not To Translate Marx'. Engels wrote it was known that a translation was being prepared under himself in his role as Marx's literary executor, but that as *Capital* was considered 'public property', 'nobody

⁴² The first advert appeared in *Commonweal*, 2. 45 (20 November 1886), p. 272.

would have a right to grumble if that translation were anticipated by another, so long as the text was faithfully and equally well rendered.’ The text in *To-Day* was not well rendered and as Broadhouse was taken as a pseudonym for Hyndman, of whom Engels had a low opinion, the translation for Engels was ‘deficient in every quality’.⁴³ One recent critic has shared this assessment, describing Hyndman’s prose as ‘bungled, conservative, devitalizing and mushily approximate’.⁴⁴

When Morris and Bax reworked ‘Socialism from the Root Up’ for publication in book form as *Socialism: Its Growth & Outcome* in 1893 they wrote that ‘the work has been in the true sense of the word a collaboration, each sentence having been carefully considered by both the authors in common, although now one, now the other, has had more to do with initial suggestions in different portions of the work.’⁴⁵ Entries in a diary kept by Morris from January to April 1887 confirm that the main thrust of the Marx chapters came from Bax. On February 16th he noted he had recently been to see Bax in Croydon ‘where we did our first article on Marx: or rather he did it: I don’t think I should ever make an economist even of the most elementary kind: but I am glad of the opportunity this gives me of hammering some Marx into myself.’ A week later he recorded spending all the day with Bax ‘trying to get our second article on Marx together a very difficult job: I hope it may be worth the trouble.’ In a sign that the hammering of some Marx into himself might have been working, on March 3rd he noted that ‘Tuesday I spend with Bax doing the next Marx article, which went easier’.⁴⁶ Morris was intellectually honest enough to admit to his difficulties with Marx. As he put it in 1894, ‘I put some conscience into trying to learn the economical side of Socialism, and even

⁴³ Frederick Engels, ‘How Not to Translate Marx’, *Commonweal*, 1.10 (November 1885), p. 97.

⁴⁴ Keston Sutherland, ‘The poetics of *Capital*’, in Peter Osborne, Éric Alliez, and Eric-John Russell eds., *Capitalism: concept, idea, image*. London: CRMEP Books, 2019, pp. 203-218.

⁴⁵ William Morris & Ernest Belfort Bax, *Socialism: Its Growth & Outcome* (2nd edition). London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1896, p. vi.

⁴⁶ Florence S. Boos ed, *William Morris’s Socialist Diary*. Nottingham: Five Leaves Publications, 2018, p. 77, 81, 85.

tackled Marx, though I must confess that, whereas I thoroughly enjoyed the historical part of *Capital*, I suffered agonies of confusion of the brain over reading the pure economics of that great work.’⁴⁷

In contrast to Aveling’s articles on Marx, Morris and Bax’s series covers the whole of *Capital* and the ‘historical part of *Capital*’ that Morris had enjoyed received more attention than Aveling had given it. Chapter XV, the first to deal with ‘Scientific Socialism’ starts with a brief biographical sketch and a list of Marx’s important published works, much like Bax’s earlier article in *Modern Thought*. The list of Marx’s works is the same except for the addition of *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. In a note at the beginning of their discussion of *Capital*, Morris and Bax write that ‘[W]e must remind the reader that we do not profess to offer more than some hints to the student of Marx’ because anything more would take up too much space, to which could be added that readers of *Commonweal* may not have been greatly interested, given the reaction to Aveling’s earlier pieces.⁴⁸

Given that Morris and Bax attempted to distil all of *Capital* into six relatively short articles, much of its treatment of key concepts is more concise and at times simplistic than the treatment found in Aveling’s earlier articles. In some areas the approach takes a different explanatory form. Both series, when exploring the circulation of commodities, use the formulas ‘C – M – C’, ‘M – C – M’ and its variants used by Marx. In ‘Socialism from the Root Up’ the different forms of exchange relations are followed, ‘to make this clearer’, by historical examples such as ‘the Craftsman of the time of Homer’, ‘the merchants of Amalfi, Venice, etc.’ and ‘the modern man of Commerce’.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Morris, ‘How I Became a Socialist’, *CW XXIII*, p. 278.

⁴⁸ Bax & Morris, ‘Socialism from the Root Up: Ch. XV. – Scientific Socialism – Karl Marx’, *Commonweal*, 3.59 (26 February 1887), p. 66.

⁴⁹ Bax & Morris, ‘Socialism from the Root Up: Ch. XVI. – Scientific Socialism – Karl Marx. – Money’, *Commonweal*, 3.61 (12 March 1887), p. 82.

‘Socialism from the Root Up’ stresses the historical nature of capitalism. Morris and Bax write that it is not just the labouring class that is necessary for the production of capital, but ‘the labouring class in a peculiar condition: the labourer, to be fitted for the purpose of the capitalist must be submitted to the operation of the free competition of the capitalist in the market’. The labourer must be a ‘free labourer’ and their ‘labour-power must be bought and sold in the market on the same terms as any other commodity’; as the labourer ‘has no other commodity to sell except his labour-power, he is compelled so to sell it – to be a ‘free labourer’’. This relation however, ‘is not common to all historical periods;’ it is not natural but ‘has developed from many economical revolutions, which have successively extinguished prior forms of social production.’⁵⁰

In the sixth article on Scientific Socialism Morris and Bax look at ‘Marx’s Deduction of the Historical Evolution of Modern Industry’. It was in this historical evolution that Morris found further proof, if he needed it, of the changing nature of the labour process over history that, in relation to art and architecture, he had first learned from John Ruskin. Summing up the changes in the work process from the point of view of the labourer, Morris and Bax write that the ‘workman once a handicraftsman, having all control over the article he produced, next became a part of a human machine, and finally has become the servant and tender of a machine; and by means of all this the fully developed modern capitalist has come into existence.’⁵¹

The last article points forward to the way out of capitalism by the continuation of this historical evolution. In the article on the Utopian Socialists, despite praising Owen, Saint-Simon and Fourier, Morris and Bax argue that it was a lack of knowledge of this evolution

⁵⁰ Bax & Morris, ‘Socialism from the Root Up: Ch. XVII. – Scientific Socialism – Conversion of Capital into Money’, *Commonweal*, 3.63 (26 March 1887), p. 101.

⁵¹ Bax & Morris, ‘Socialism from the Root Up: Ch. XX. – Marx’s Deduction of the Historical Evolution of Modern Industry’, *Commonweal*, 3.80 (23 July 1887), p. 235. This, and the influence of Ruskin will be considered in greater depth in Chapter 4.

that left their views incomplete. ‘They had not learned to recognize the sequence of events which *forces* social changes on mankind whether they are conscious of its force or not’.⁵² This continuing sequence of events will bring about the end of capitalism. Morris and Bax quote the famous lines from Part VIII of *Capital* that capitalist private property ‘is the first negation of individual private property, as founded on the labour of the proprietor. But capitalistic production begets with the inexorability of a law of Nature its own negation. It is the negation of negation.’⁵³ The important part of this passage here is the inexorability of the process. The continued development of capitalism will cause its own demise, whether socialists are ready for it or not.

An Inevitable Change?

The League’s Manifesto had asserted that signs of capitalisms demise could already be seen and that ‘everything points to the fact that the great commercial system is becoming unmanageable, and is slipping from the grasp of its present rulers.’ ‘The one change possible out of all this is Socialism.’ It was for this reason that so much emphasis was placed on education and the need to make Socialists, ‘so that when the crisis comes, which the march of events is preparing there may be a body of men ready to step into their due places and deal with and direct the irresistible movement.’⁵⁴ There is still place in this view of historical change for humans to influence and shape how society works. To use Marx’s phrase from *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, they had a belief that ‘Men make their own history, but they do not

⁵² Bax & Morris, ‘Socialism from the Root Up: Ch. XIII. – The Utopists: Owen, Saint Simon, and Fourier’, *Commonweal*, 2.42 (30 October 1886), p. 242.

⁵³ Quoted in Bax & Morris, ‘Socialism from the Root Up: Ch. XXI. – Scientific Socialism: Conclusion’. *Commonweal*, 3.82 (6 August 1887), p. 253.

⁵⁴ ‘The Manifesto of the Socialist League’, *Commonweal*, 1.1 (February, 1885), p. 2.

make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past.⁵⁵

Exactly when this crisis would come though was another matter. Laurence Gronlund, whose 1884 book *The Cooperative Commonwealth* was influential in spreading socialist ideas in America, wrote in *Commonweal* that ‘Socialism is – not the best, not the wisest (though that certainly it is as soon as the conditions are ripe) – but the INEVITABLY [sic] next stage in our development’. He continued that the socialists of Britain ‘have inaugurated an intellectual agitation, which will grow in magnitude and intensity till in twenty to twenty-five years hence a revolutionary thunder clears the atmosphere for ever.’⁵⁶

Most were more reticent to put a date to the revolution. Aveling wrote that the ‘signs of the past and of the present point with innumerable immutable fingers to the inevitable change hurrying on apace. Do we try to accelerate it? I do not think so...No man may make this revolution any more than any man may prevent it. Nor can any tell the day or hour or the occasion of its coming.’⁵⁷ Aveling was not the only League member to think that the revolution was inevitable to the point that the work socialists had before them was to guide it rather than start it. Fred Henderson wrote in a similarly determinist tone that it ‘is not our work to make this revolution; we can see it is coming.’ Furthermore, he emphasised the importance of education, ‘so that when the revolution comes (and the only fear is that it will come too soon) we may be ready for it’.⁵⁸

If capitalism was to reach its final crisis point by the continued workings of its internal contradictions, it could be argued that Socialists should not seek to interfere in the system and thereby delaying the crisis. In an editorial to mark the first weekly edition of

⁵⁵ Karl Marx, ‘The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte’, in *Marx Engels Selected Works*. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1970, pp. 96-179, p. 96.

⁵⁶ Laurence Gronlund, ‘The Work Before Us’, *Commonweal*, 1.6 (July 1885), p. 62.

⁵⁷ Aveling, ‘Objections to Socialism (A reply to Mr. Charles Bradlaugh, M.P.) II’, *Commonweal*, 2.17 (8 May 1886), p. 47.

⁵⁸ Fred Henderson, ‘The Work of Socialists To-Day’, *Commonweal*, 2.41 (23 October 1886), p. 235.

Commonweal on 1st May 1886 Morris and Bax explicitly make this point: ‘In a few words, our function is to educate the people by criticizing all attempts at so-called reforms, whose aim is not the realization of equality of condition, but the hindering of it.’⁵⁹ The League’s Manifesto had also sought to disassociate the League from other reform minded movements. Co-operative societies, by themselves, ‘would merely increase the number of small joint-stock capitalists, under the mask of creating an aristocracy of labour’ and schemes for land nationalisation popular among followers of the American Henry George ‘would be useless so long as labour was subject to the fleecing of surplus value inevitable under the Capitalist system.’ Similarly, they criticize what they called ‘State Socialism’, ‘whose aim it would be to make concessions to the working class while leaving the present system of capital and wages in operation’.⁶⁰

In his December 1886 piece ‘Is Trade Recovering?’ Morris warned against these types of concessions and against schemes that tend towards creating a new middle-class out of the better-off workers: ‘Socialists must consider that if that tendency becomes a fact and the new class does grow up, it will show that we have been mistaken in supposing that the present system was rotting to its end. It would mean that Socialism was put off not for fifty years, but for centuries.’⁶¹ This element of Morris’s thought has led Perry Anderson to write that it is in Morris’s political writings of this period that we find ‘the *first frontal engagement with reformism in the history of Marxism*.’ Anderson further notes an under recognised theme of Morris’s writing has been his ‘repeated warning that the development of capitalism would not necessarily lead to the social polarization that Marx had predicted in *Capital* and Engels generally assumed after his death.’⁶² State Socialism and its various reforms could not work

⁵⁹ Morris & Bax, ‘Editorial’, *Commonweal*, 2.16 (1 May 1886), p. 33.

⁶⁰ ‘The Manifesto of the Socialist League’, p. 2.

⁶¹ Morris, ‘Is Trade Recovering?’, *Commonweal*, 2.49 (18 December 1886), p. 300.

⁶² Perry Anderson, *Arguments Within English Marxism*. London: Verso, 1980, p. 176, 185n.

for Morris as for him the state in capitalist society is not a neutral body that can be engaged with and entered by socialists without being co-opted and irrevocably changed by it. The state will seek to maintain its position and the condition of society, even if that means reforms improving the condition of the workers and a partial restraining of the impulses of capital. These should be fought against, argued Morris, as a raw and unchecked capitalism, by leading to the immiseration of the working class will push them by necessity into consciousness of the class struggle and of their position as the revolutionary agent of society.

A Dream of John Ball

It is with these thoughts in mind that I want to read Morris's story *A Dream of John Ball*, a historical romance in which a barely fictionalised Morris falls asleep and finds himself in a Kent village on the eve of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381. *John Ball* was originally serialised in *Commonweal* in eleven instalments between the 13th November 1886 and the 22nd January 1887. This period is also the gap between the first and second rounds of activity for the 'Socialism from the Root Up' series and *John Ball* has many links with themes explored in those articles. In his Kelmscott Lecture of 1989 the Marxist historian of late-medieval society Rodney Hilton argued that we 'must understand that *A Dream* was not a political tract for the late 1880s but a vision informed by historical understanding.'⁶³ However, nowhere in Hilton's lecture does he acknowledge the story's serial publication in *Commonweal*, a journal with the explicit aim of making and educating socialists. Even if we were only to take *A Dream of John Ball* in the form in which it was published as a book in

⁶³ Rodney Hilton, *The Change Beyond The Change: A Dream of John Ball*. London: William Morris Society, 1990, p. 8.

1888, as Hilton seems to do, his distinction between a ‘political tract’ and a historically informed vision enforces a too rigid distinction between form and content.

In the first instalment on 13th November 1886 there is no indication given, other than the title, that what is being presented is a work of fiction. It stands in the pages of the journal alongside a range of standard articles, branch reports and updates on the international socialist movement. It makes sense then to treat *A Dream of John Ball* as part of Morris’s propagandistic writing aimed at educating the nascent socialist movement of the 1880s.

Nicholas Salmon helpfully situated the work within *Commonweal* as a piece in which Morris was exploring and explaining to readers in a new way the ideas featured in ‘Socialism from the Root Up’.⁶⁴ The Peasants’ Revolt itself had featured in the series in an article on ‘Medieval Society’. Morris and Bax wrote that by the mid-14th Century serfdom was already waning, Gilds had arisen in the towns protecting and regulating handicrafts and many field serfs were moving towards the towns, some becoming affiliated with the gilds and others becoming free men though living on rented plots of land. They continue: ‘This movement towards the break-up of serfdom is marked by the peasant’s war in England led by Wat Tylor and John Ball in Kent, and John Litser in East Anglia, which was the answer of the combined yeomen, emancipated and unemancipated serfs, to the attempt of the nobles to check the movement.’⁶⁵ The movement towards the break-up of serfdom would have happened without the Peasants’ Revolt, but like the socialists of the 1880s who saw the break-up of capitalism as inevitable, they attempted to shape the process in their own direction.

The view of the Peasants’ Revolt as an organised uprising with specific grievances and of John Ball as a forerunner of socialism was not imagined into existence by the

⁶⁴ Nicholas Salmon, ‘A Reassessment of *A Dream of John Ball*’, *Journal of William Morris Studies*, 14.2 (Spring 2001), pp. 29-38.

⁶⁵ Bax & Morris, ‘Socialism from the Root Up: Ch. II, - Mediæval Society’, *Commonweal*, 2.19 (22 May 1886), p. 61.

socialists. In *Socialism: Its Growth and Outcome*, Morris and Bax open the chapter on Feudal society by positively citing John Richard Green, Edward Freeman, and William Stubbs as ‘enlightened historians’, contrasting them against bourgeois historians whose aim, they argued, ‘was the praising of the escape of modern society from a period of more rapine and confusion, into peace, order, and prosperity.’⁶⁶ Green, in his 1874 work *A Short History of the English People*, wrote that ‘it was in the preaching of John Ball that England first listened to a declaration of natural equality and the rights of man.’ Following a quote in which Ball rails against how the rich live in luxury upon the labour of the poor Green comments that ‘[I]t was the tyranny of property that then as ever roused the defiance of socialism.’⁶⁷ John Burrow has argued that in the historical writing of Green, Freeman and Stubbs we can find ‘the patriotic and populist impulse to identify the nation and its institutions as the collective subject of English history, which made the new historiography of early medieval times an extension, filling out and democratising, of older Whig notions of continuity.’⁶⁸ If these historians sought to democratise the history of England, Morris was seeking to use it for revolutionary purposes.

The most important part of *A Dream of John Ball* is the final scene of dialogue between Ball and Morris’s narrator. Here the narrator tells Ball what will happen in the years and centuries to come, that the battle against serfdom and villeinage will indeed be won and men shall be free from their feudal ties, but this freedom will not last and the workers will instead come to know the freedom of selling their labour on the market. The narrator outlines how the people were cleared from the land in order for more sheep farming to produce wool to be sold in foreign markets and how the people, free in the sense that Ball understands (free

⁶⁶ Morris & Bax, *Socialism: Its Growth & Outcome* (2nd edition). London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1896, p. 76. On Morris’s use of Victorian historians and anthropologists, see Anna Vaninskaya, *William Morris and the Idea of Community*, pp. 75-134.

⁶⁷ John Richard Green, *A Short History of the English People* (1874). London: Macmillan & Co., 1919, p. 250.

⁶⁸ John Burrow, *A Liberal Descent: Victorian Historians and the English Past*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981, p. 227.

from serfdom), are now also free from having the means of production at their disposal and of the means of subsistence in order to live by. Therefore, they now must needs sell their labour in order to live.

Morris's thought on the purportedly 'free labourer' necessary for capitalist production will be considered in depth in Chapter Four, but it is worth noting briefly that although Morris was writing *John Ball* before he worked with Bax on the articles on Marx, the latter's influence on these passages is clear. In the dialogue, Ball struggles to understand the position of the worker in the future that the narrator explains to him. Explaining this he tells Ball that the worker 'must needs buy leave to labour of them that own all things except himself and such as himself.' Possessing nothing, he can only buy leave to labour 'with his body and the *power of labour* that lieth therein'. The worker has to do this to stay alive: 'he shall sell himself, that is *the labour that is in him*, to the master that suffers him to work, and that master shall give to him from out of the wares he maketh enough to keep him alive, and to beget children and nourish them till they be old enough to be sold like himself, and the residue shall the rich man keep to himself.' Ball responds that, and this is Morris's crucial point, 'man may well do what thou sayest and live, but he may not do it and live a free man.'⁶⁹ This prefigures the discussion of the 'free labourer' in the 'Socialism from the Root Up' series, so when that explanation came about the readers of *Commonweal* were already familiar with the ideas and the historical process behind it.

What the passage indicates is that Morris at times was able to bridge the gap between popular propaganda and theoretically informed journalism. *A Dream of John Ball* became a very popular piece with passages from it often read aloud at Socialist meetings.⁷⁰ In 1888,

⁶⁹ Morris, 'A Dream of John Ball', *Commonweal*, 3.51 (1 January 1887), p. 3. Emphasis added.

⁷⁰ *A Dream of John Ball* remained a popular work. Socialist intellectual Harold Laski recalled in the 1930s visiting 'the coalfields of Cumberland, and I saw again, in house after house of the miners there, the tattered pages of the paper-bound "A Dream of John Ball"'. Quoted in Stephen F. Eisenman, 'Communism in Furs: A Dream of Prehistory in William Morris's John Ball', *The Art Bulletin*, 87:1, pp. 92-110, p. 105.

Morris published it, with a few additions and alterations, in book form and this subsequently went through a number of editions in the following years.⁷¹

To conclude this discussion of *A Dream of John Ball* as a political tract, it is worth considering its most famous passage. Standing listening to Ball speak at the village cross, the narrator looks around him at the assembled villagers: ‘while I pondered all these things, and how men fight and lose the battle, and the thing that they fought for comes about in spite of their defeat, and when it comes turns out not to be what they meant, and other men have to fight for what they meant under another name’.⁷² For E. P. Thompson, who misplaces it within the structure of the text, this passage is the work’s central theme and, comparing it with a similar passage from Engels’s *Ludwig Feuerbach* published in the same year, states that it is ‘Morris’s reflection, from the standpoint of aspiration, upon man’s unmastered history.’⁷³

Without disputing this interpretation of the passage as a reflection of the historical process, it can also be seen to have more immediate messages to the readers of *Commonweal*. Firstly, the historical determinism of material in *Commonweal* sheds a positive light on the passage. They were the people fighting for what John Ball called Fellowship and they in turn call socialism, and its arrival was assured and not far away. Secondly, in light of Morris’s fears about the direction of the movement, the passage is also a warning to those who favour reform, palliative measures and engagement with the state. What you’re fighting for, Morris tells them, if it comes about will not be what you mean it to be and all you are achieving is a prolongation of the system you claim to be fighting against. Michelle Weinroth has rightly argued that *John Ball* is addressed to both general *Commonweal* readers and to a fractured League membership who disagreed over strategy. While the story can be read as politically energising ‘by construing political defeats as interim setbacks to be transcended by far-

⁷¹ Eugene D. LeMire, *A Bibliography of William Morris*, London: Oak Knoll Press, 2006, pp. 118-120.

⁷² Morris, ‘A Dream of John Ball’, *Commonweal*, 2.46 (27 November 1886), p. 274.

⁷³ Thompson, *William Morris* (1955) p. 836.

reaching future developments' it is also 'a moment of self-consciousness and reckoning, an occasion to take stock of the daunting nature of social transformation, since readying men for change is fraught with adversity.'⁷⁴ There is optimism but there is also caution. Socialists needed to be prepared for the momentous transformation of society and they had to be conscious of the right path.

Conclusion

That Morris and writers in *Commonweal* understood the end of capitalism and the arrival of socialism as historically inevitable is important context for the rest of this thesis. Equally important is the idea that this inevitability was premised on the logic of capitalist development leading to ever polarising class division and crises of production. The timeline was not secure though, and initiatives could be enacted that interrupted this process creating intermediate classes giving more people a stake in the existing system, and in the case of imperialism could provide new resources to draw upon to stabilise and even extend the capitalist system. This is the ground on which Morris's critique of reformism is based.

A strong belief, a faith even, that society was inexorably heading to socialism was an important part of Morris's thought and that of other *Commonweal* writers. But spreading this message and the supposed evidence for it was not in itself effective propaganda and could in the wrong hands become enervating. What need was there to make socialists if socialism was inevitable? Preaching that socialism was inevitable needed to be coupled with the message that this was a hopeful and welcome thing too. Moreover, socialism had to be shown as

⁷⁴ Michelle Weinroth, 'Redesigning the Language of Social Change: Rhetoric, Agency, and the Oneiric in William Morris's *A Dream of John Ball*', *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 53, No. 1 (Autumn 2010), pp. 37-63, pp. 44-45.

capable of being shaped in different directions to highlight that workers in co-operation still maintained the capability of directing and managing their own future. Though Morris believed that ‘individual men are the creatures of their surrounding conditions’ he also held that ‘it must be the business of man as a social animal, or of Society...to make the surroundings which make the individual man what he is.’⁷⁵ Making socialists was of paramount importance because the power of workers to direct events was in their collective agency.

‘Lessons in Socialism’ and ‘Socialism from the Root Up’ are the only two significant series in *Commonweal* to directly deal with *Capital* and the work of Marx. That the publication of the English edition of *Capital* was met with no fanfare in *Commonweal*, coupled with the fact that Marx rarely appears by name in Morris’s articles or lectures, suggests that Morris saw little utility in continued explication of his work for the project of making socialists. This is not to say that Marx was seen as unimportant, just that Morris thought there were more effective ways of propagating the cause. Of course, the works of Marx and primers would still be available for socialists to draw upon for socialists who wished to further their education, and this was always encouraged. The relation of Morris to Marx will no doubt continue to draw comment, but as this chapter has demonstrated just as interesting and important is examining the ways in which socialists used Marx and socialist theory as part of their educational project.

The growth of the state and its willingness to regulate and intervene more regularly in the economy and in society was taken by many to be a clear sign of the coming of socialism. It is the state, Morris’s critique of state socialism and his thought on how a communist society would be organised that is now turned to.

⁷⁵ Morris, ‘The Society of the Future’, *Commonweal*, 5.168 (30 March 1889), p. 98.

Chapter 2: The State

This chapter looks at Morris's thought on the question of the state in socialist, and subsequently communist, society. Morris, like nearly all nineteenth century socialists, rejected the market as a way of organising society. The association of the market as the supposedly free market of capitalism, a place of anarchic competition and domination, meant that it found no place as an organisational mechanism in any political programme, whether state socialist or anarchist. Instead the state, whether central or local, was emphasised as the most efficient and just way of organising production and wider society. As we shall see, however, for Morris this state-oriented society should not be the final goal of socialism, as its existence, particularly in its centralised form, denied to the workers full self-management and could become itself a site of power and domination over and against the workers.

Morris did not spend significant time in analysing different existing state or governmental formations. 'The Manifesto of the Socialist League' stated that as 'to mere politics, Absolutism, Constitutionalism, Republicanism, have all been tried in our day and under our present social system, and all have alike failed in dealing with the real evils of life.'¹ For Morris, the primary problem to be overcome was the 'present social system', capitalism. But this does not mean that the question of the political state was unimportant, as it was intimately connected to the social system. It did mean though that Morris, and other socialists, did not treat the issue with perhaps as much care as they could have done,

¹ 'The Manifesto of the Socialist League', *Commonweal*, 1.1 (February 1885), p. 2.

preferring instead to see it as an issue that would sort itself out once the bigger battle had been won.

As the focus of this thesis is Morris's thought during his time in the Socialist League and its place within *Commonweal*, the chapter does not explore Morris's writing in either the Social Democratic Federation or the later Hammersmith Socialist Society. During his time in the SDF Morris signed statements and publications, often with Henry Mayers Hyndman acting as the lead writer, adopting a broadly state socialist position he would only a year or so later criticise.² After leaving the League and forming the Hammersmith Socialist Society Morris is often perceived as having softened his anti-parliamentarism and accepting of the state socialist position.³ In 1893 he and the Hammersmith society combined with the SDF and the Fabians to produce a 'Manifesto of the Joint Committee of Socialist Bodies'. This manifesto argued that those reforms and adjustments 'of industry and administration which are Socialist in form will not be permanently useful unless the whole state is merged into an organised commonwealth' and also explicitly attacked both the doctrines and tactics of anarchism.⁴ Although he endorsed the rejection of anarchist doctrine he did not abandon his sense of comradeship with many of the anarchists themselves or his belief that they could still at times work together. In 1894 and 1895 he had pieces published in *Liberty: A Journal of Anarchist Communism*.⁵ After leaving the SL at the end of 1890 Morris was more willing to bend to the prevailing tendency towards parliamentarism and state socialism, but his fundamental views remained unchanged.⁶

² For example, *Socialism Made Plain: Being the Social and Political Manifesto of the Social-Democratic Federation*. London: The Modern Press, 1884. The manifesto was written in 1883, and signed by the Executive Committee including Morris as Treasurer.

³ On this shift away from anti-parliamentarism, see Ruth Kinna, 'William Morris and Anti-Parliamentarism', *History of Political Thought*, Vol. XV, No. 4 (Winter 1994), pp. 593-613, p 607.

⁴ *Manifesto of the Joint Committee of Socialist Bodies*, London, 1893, p. 4

⁵ For example, William Morris, 'As to Bribing Excellence', *Liberty*, May 1895, p. 131.

⁶ On the post SL years see E. P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1955, pp. 670-732. See also Anna Vaninskaya, 'William Morris: The Myth of the Fall', *JWMS*, 18.4 (Winter 2010), pp. 48-57.

There was much debate in the late-nineteenth century about the relationship between socialism and the state. Many people, both socialists and anti-socialists, thought that the gradual extension of the state into economic and social life was a sign that Britain was inexorably becoming a socialist entity. This ‘germ theory of Socialism’ was debated in the periodical press from the 1870s and reached its most famous articulation in 1884 with Herbert Spencer’s *The Man versus The State*, a collection of four essays originally published in the *Contemporary Review*.⁷ Spencer argued that the result of ‘socialistic changes made by Act of Parliament’ when ‘joined with the numerous others presently to be made’ will be the gradual imposition of ‘State-Socialism’. For Spencer this meant the road to slavery for if an individual ‘has to labour for the society, and receives from the general stock such portion as the society awards him, he becomes a slave to the society.’⁸ Spencer’s articles and book drew on sections taken from the programme of the Social Democratic Federation (of which Morris in 1884 was a member) and his arguments drew responses from socialists such as Henry Mayers Hyndman, Frank Fairman, and Paul Lafargue.⁹ If Spencer held that the extension of the state signalled a coming slavery, socialists held that it was in fact an attempt to alleviate the slavery caused by capitalism.

That the state would play a role in socialist society was undeniable for socialists of this outlook, but it was not entirely clear what that role would be. Whether the state would be a continuation of the old or if it needed to be a new formation and if it ultimately needed to

⁷ On the ‘germ theory of socialism’ see Seamus Flaherty, *Marx, Engels and Modern British Socialism: The Social and Political Thought of H.M. Hyndman, E.B. Bax and William Morris*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, p. 43-48.

⁸ Herbert Spencer, *The Man versus The State* (1884). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, p. 95, 96.

⁹ H. M. Hyndman, *Socialism and Slavery: Being an Answer to Mr. Herbert Spencer’s attack on the Social-Democratic Federation in the Contemporary Review, April 1884, under the title “The Coming Slavery.”*. London: The Modern Press, 1884; Frank Fairman, *Herbert Spencer on Socialism: A Reply to the article entitled The Coming Slavery, (In the “Contemporary Review” for April, 1884.)*. London: The Modern Press, 1884; Paul Lafargue, ‘A Few Words with Mr. Herbert Spencer’, *To-day: monthly magazine of scientific socialism*. June 1884, pp. 416-427. Frank Fairman has been identified as a pseudonym, mostly likely for Hyndman, see Duncan Bowie, *The Radical and Socialist Tradition in British Planning: From Puritan Colonies to Garden Cities*. Routledge, 2017, p. 145.

be overcome completely were open questions, and ones on which Morris differed to many of his contemporaries. This chapter first looks at Morris's opposition to two different state socialist positions. The first, that of Edward Bellamy and the advancing of a highly centralised state, and then the second, that of the Fabian Society who took a decentralised approach with a focus on local and municipal arms of the state. These two are focused on as not only were they influential, but they also drew direct responses from Morris in *Commonweal*. It was relatively rare for Morris to engage in lengthy reviews, but he found both Bellamy and the Fabians to be significant enough and too much on the wrong line that he sought to counter them in the pages of *Commonweal*.

Although critical of their positions, Morris believed that a stage of state socialism was necessary. The chapter proceeds, bringing in Morris's lectures, looking particularly at how he thought this stage should be reached. Because he believed that it was only a stage, Morris differed from other socialists in how it should be reached. The chapter then shows how Morris envisioned the state, or rather the lack of the state, in the communist society that would develop out of socialism. Finally, using a back-and-forth in *Commonweal* between Morris and the League's anarchists, the chapter looks at the question of fellowship and authority and the role they play for Morris in a communist society without either the market or the state. It also seeks to show how the issue of the development of a socialist or public conscience was not to be left simply to emerge in socialist society but had to be part of the struggle itself.

Edward Bellamy

Reviewing Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward in Commonweal*, Morris reacted strongly to what he described as the depiction of 'State Communism, worked by the very extreme of national centralisation.'

'I think it necessary to state these objections to Mr Bellamy's utopia, not because there is any need to quarrel with a man's vision of the future of society, which...must always be more or less personal to himself; but because the book, having produced a great impression on people who are really enquiring into Socialism, will be sure to be quoted as an authority for what Socialists believe, and that, therefore, it is necessary to point out that there are some Socialists who do not think that the problem of the organisation of life and necessary labour can be dealt with by a huge national centralisation, working by a kind of magic for which no one feels himself responsible; that on the contrary it will be necessary for the unit of administration to be small enough for every citizen to feel himself responsible for its details, and be interested in them; that individual men cannot shuffle off the business of life on to the shoulders of an abstraction called the State, but must deal with it in conscious association with each other.'¹⁰

A couple of years later Bellamy would return the critical favour:

'Mr Morris appears to belong to the school of anarchistic rather than to the state socialists. That is to say, he believes that the present system of private capitalism, once destroyed, voluntary cooperation, with little or no governmental administration, will be necessary to bring about the ideal social system. This is in strong contrast with the theory of nationalism which holds that no amount of moral excellence or good feeling on the part of a community will enable them to dispense with a great deal of system in order so to coordinate their efforts as to obtain the best economic results. In the sense of a force to restrain or punish, governmental administration may no doubt be dispensed with in proportion as a better social system shall be introduced; but in no degree will any degree of moral improvement lessen the necessity of a strictly

¹⁰ Morris, 'Looking Backward', *Commonweal*, 5.180 (22 June 1889), pp. 194-195.

economic administration for the directing of the productive and distributive machinery. This is a destination which anarchists too commonly overlook, when they argue against the necessity of government.’¹¹

It is a commonplace of scholarship on *News from Nowhere* to say that it was written as a response to *Looking Backward*. Recently Seamus Flaherty has rightly reminded us that while *News from Nowhere* was a response to Bellamy, it was not only that. Flaherty argues that a central target of Morris’s utopian romance, and indeed much of his other work, was the Fabian Society and the *Fabian Essays in Socialism*, published in 1889.¹²

The Fabians will be returned to but first it is still worthwhile revisiting Bellamy and Morris’s review. While attention is often placed on the differences between the societies depicted by Bellamy and Morris, it is worth noting a significant difference between their approach to how the new society will be reached. Bellamy’s future society is reached through the peaceful evolution of capitalism’s tendency towards monopoly, resulting in one giant monopoly that becomes coterminous with the nation and the state. For Morris this betrayed an ‘economical semi-fatalism’ common to some socialists that could be ‘deadening and discouraging’, especially ‘if events at present unforeseen bring back the full tide of ‘commercial prosperity’’. Morris thought that the process laid out by Bellamy ‘may be indeed the logical outcome of the most modern side of commercialism – *ie.*, the outcome that *ought* to be; but then there is its historical outcomes to be dealt with – *ie.*, what *will* be.’¹³ Despite believing in the ultimate inevitability of socialism, Morris held that this process was very prone to being disrupted and that the forces of competition and its defenders would do all they could to maintain the present state of society.

¹¹ Edward Bellamy, *New Nation*, 14 February 1891, quoted in Sylvia Bowman ed. *Edward Bellamy Abroad: An American Prophet’s Influence*. New York: Twayne Publishers, 1962, p. 94.

¹² Seamus Flaherty, *Marx, Engels and Modern British Socialism*, pp. 207-218.

¹³ Morris, ‘Looking Backward’, p. 194.

Because of this Morris argued that a ‘far better hope to trust to is that men having once got it into their heads that true life implies free and equal life, and that is now possible of attainment, they will consciously strive for its attainment at any cost.’¹⁴ This statement is part and parcel of Morris’s belief that the immediate work to be done was to make socialists. In *News from Nowhere* the change comes not through peaceful evolution but by a revolutionary struggle replete with strikes, a Committee of Public Safety, and a civil war. The development of the economy certainly plays a part in creating the conditions in which such a revolutionary struggle becomes possible but it is the organised workers themselves who usher in the new society.

One reason for this difference can be found in the two writers’ respective involvement in political organisation. Morris wrote *News from Nowhere* after over half a decade of activism and incorporated that experience into the fabric of his story. Bellamy, in contrast, wrote *Looking Backward* before his involvement in politics, and even then, his involvement was of a rather different sort. Bellamy was actively hostile to the labour movements of 1880s America, whereas Morris and the Socialist League had closely followed and supported them in the pages of *Commonweal*.

In *Looking Backward* Dr. Leete replies to Julian West’s question on the role of the ‘followers of the red flag’ in the creation of the new society stating that they ‘had nothing to do with it except hinder it, of course.’ For Leete these groups, and here no doubt Bellamy had in mind the Haymarket affair of 1886, had been funded by the opponents of reform: ‘No historical authority nowadays doubts that they were paid by the great monopolies to wave the red flag and talk about burning, sacking, and blowing people up, in order, by alarming the timid, to head off any real reforms.’ Bellamy opposed the labour organisations of his day for their violent tactics, but also because, as Leete says, ‘their basis as merely class organizations

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

was too narrow.’ The national party, however, recognised that reform was in ‘the interest, not of one class, but equally of all classes’. The name was apposite because ‘its purpose was to realize the idea of the nation with a grandeur and completeness never before conceived’.¹⁵

Another reason for the ‘Nationalist’ appellation, as Matthew Beaumont argues, was that Bellamy’s vision ‘was premised on the idea that, in order to end class society, a democratic, though highly centralized, nation-state needed to control all those aspects of production and consumption currently monopolized by competing capitalist companies’.¹⁶ As Leete explains, the transition to the new society involved the ‘irresponsible corporations and syndicates of private persons’ who conducted business ‘at their caprice and for their profit’ being agglomerated into ‘a single syndicate representing the people’ that conducted affairs ‘in the common interest for the common profit.’ Put simply, the nation ‘became the one capitalist in place of all other capitalists’.¹⁷

Having the nation as the sole capitalist solved the issue of how to organise labour, simplifying the general task of organisation through the ‘axiom that the larger the business the simpler the principles that can be applied to it’. With the nation as ‘the sole employer, all the citizens, by virtue of their citizenship, became employees, to be distributed according to the needs of industry.’¹⁸ The application of the principle of universal military service to the question of labour resulted in a conscripted industrial army. The function of the state and of its operatives is reduced to the collection of information and its dissemination to the relevant sectors of industry in order for the correct amount of goods to be produced and for its correct distribution. Politics is just administration.

¹⁵ Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward 2000-1887* (1888). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009, p. 148, 149.

¹⁶ Matthew Beaumont, ‘Introduction’ to *ibid.*, p. viii.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 34, 36.

Though compulsory, service in the industrial army is considered normal. ‘Our entire social order is so wholly based upon and deduced from it that if it were conceivable that a man could escape it, he would be left with no possible way to provide for his existence.’¹⁹ The nation as owner of all land, capital, and goods, held for the common benefit, precludes the possibility of independent living. Yet, Bellamy thought, this did not reduce personal liberty.

‘You see that it is by virtue of the relation of individuals to the nation, of their membership in it, that they are entitled to support; and this title is no way connected with or affected by their relations to other individuals who are fellow members of the nation with them. That any person should be dependent for the means of support upon another would be shocking to the moral sense as well as indefensible on any rational social theory. What would become of personal liberty and dignity under such an arrangement?’²⁰

Dependency upon the state is not here an affront to personal liberty in the way that dependency upon another individual is. But, in Bellamy’s system all responsibility is also held by the state and individuals have no choice but to live within its parameters. They are able to, in Morris’s words, ‘shuffle off the business of life on to the shoulders of an abstraction called the State’.²¹

Citizenship within the state guarantees entitlement to support, but it also means adherence to its rules. Bellamy’s industrial army does not shy away from the discipline and order implied in the notion of its being an army. On entering service all recruits undertake three years of common/unskilled labour before choosing a vocation. Bellamy thought, as did many including Morris, that across society there would be enough variation in inclination

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 154.

²¹ Morris, ‘Looking Backward’, p. 195.

combined with incentives for certain jobs that all areas of work would be easily covered. This mandatory period of work is ‘a very strict one, in which the young men are taught habits of obedience, subordination, and devotion to duty.’ When it comes to negligence in the duty to work or ‘remissness on the part of men incapable of generous motives, the discipline of the industrial army is far too strict to allow anything whatever of the sort. A man able to do duty, and persistently refusing, is sentenced to solitary imprisonment on bread and water till he consents.’²² There is no suggestion from Bellamy that such an arrangement impinges upon the personal liberty or dignity of workers.

Bellamy’s vision had a distinctly American setting, yet its popularity in Britain alarmed Morris who thought it could serve as a prototype for visions of socialism centred around a strong centralised state. Whilst it does away with the anarchy of the market and dependence of workers on capitalists, it replaces that with a strong, dominant, potentially domineering state outside of which it is impossible to live.

The Fabians

Among those in Britain who admired Bellamy’s book were members of the Fabian Society. Annie Besant in her contribution to the *Fabian Essays*, despite opening by denigrating ‘the sketching of Utopia’ as ‘an intellectual gymnastic in which a power of coherent and vivid imagination is the one desideratum’, referred to the ‘ingenious author’ of *Looking Backward*, noting his solution to the apportioning of labour in a socialist society.²³

²² Bellamy, *Looking Backward*, p. 115, 72, 74.

²³ Annie Besant, ‘Industry Under Socialism’ in George Bernard Shaw ed., *Fabian Essays* (1889). London: Allen & Unwin, 1962, p. 184, 194.

Despite his misgivings, Morris welcomed the publication of the *Fabian Essays* in late 1889. His review in January 1890 stated that ‘I cannot help wishing that such a volume had appeared about three years ago...for such a book published at that date would have dealt almost wholly with the economical and practical side of the question, and would have formed a kind of text-book for Socialists of all shades of opinion’. His frustration at the *Essays* late appearance was due to his opinion that ‘a large part of the present volume is given up to the advocacy of the fantastic and unreal tactic [permeation] which the Fabian Society has excogitated of late’.²⁴

The Fabians believed that progress towards socialism was well under way in Britain. The principal cause of this was ‘the irresistible progress of Democracy’. Sidney Webb argued that there was a growing ‘consensus that the inevitable outcome of Democracy is the control by the people themselves, not only of their own political organization, but, *through that*, also of the main instruments of wealth production’. In short, the ‘economic side of the democratic ideal is, in fact, Socialism itself.’²⁵ The Reform Acts, especially the Act of 1884 significantly increased the franchise and many believed that it would only be time until it was extended further.

With the progress of democracy, the state became ever more willing to intervene in private enterprise in order to protect citizens from the dangers of untrammelled capitalism. Webb cites a long list of legislative acts in support of this and notes that gradually ‘the political power and political organization of the country have been used for industrial ends, until today the largest employer of labour is one of the ministers of the Crown (the Postmaster-General)’. He further notes that ‘the community’, by which he means the parish, municipality, or national government, ‘now carries on for itself, in some part or another of

²⁴ Morris, ‘Fabian Essays in Socialism’, *Commonweal*, 6.211 (25 January 1890), p. 28.

²⁵ Sidney Webb, ‘Historic’, *Fabian Essays*, p. 65, 67. Emphasis added.

these islands, the post office, telegraphs... the regulation of the currency and note issue... the making, sweeping, lighting and repairing of streets, roads and bridges... shipbuilding, stock-broking, banking, farming, and money-lending.' Summarising, Webb wrote that 'the steady increase of the Government regulation of private enterprise, the growth of municipal administration, and the rapid shifting of the burden of taxation directly to rent and interest, mark in treble lines the statesman's unconscious abandonment of the old Individualism, and our irresistible glide into collectivist Socialism.'²⁶

More often than not the Fabians used the term socialism 'in its strictest economic sense', with William Clarke offering the definition that a 'socialist is one who believes that the necessary instruments of production should be held and organized by the community, instead of by individuals within or outside of that community.'²⁷ The instruments of production being held by 'the community' meant being held by the community in the form of the democratic state. George Bernard Shaw wrote in one of his contributions that the socialist is one who thinks 'of the State as the representative and trustee of the people.' Shaw found the term 'Social Democrat' to be a useful one, considering it a 'distinctive term...indicating the man or woman who desires through Democracy to gather the whole people into the State' so that the state can be trusted with the organisation of national industry.²⁸ Clarke also argued that the problems still facing Britain and European society could only be solved by 'the state, *i.e.*, by the people in their corporate capacity.'²⁹

Bellamy thought that state governments in America would only 'have interfered with the control and discipline of the industrial army,' favouring central control instead.³⁰ The Fabians did not share Bellamy's extreme belief in centralisation. Clarke argued the reason for

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 78, 79, 92.

²⁷ William Clarke, 'The Influence of Socialism on English Politics', *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (Dec., 1888), pp. 549-571, p. 550.

²⁸ George Bernard Shaw, 'Transition', *Fabian Essays*, p. 215, 216.

²⁹ Clarke, 'The Influence of Socialism on English Politics', p. 568.

³⁰ Bellamy, *Looking Backward*, p. 122.

this was that the English were ‘rightly supposed, all the world over, to be devoted to individual liberty’. The ‘superficial student of socialism supposes that under it all individual liberty is lost and that every one is merely the agent of a huge central bureau.’ If socialism did rely on a large and centralised state, ‘it might be freely admitted that it would have no chance in England’, but that ‘he is blind to the signs of the times who does not perceive that a vast movement of decentralization is going on in England.’³¹

The Fabians, particularly Webb, were strongly influenced by John Stuart Mill and there are signs of his influence on this issue. In the chapter ‘Of Local Representative Bodies’ from his 1861 *Considerations on Representative Government* Mill argued that it was ‘but a small portion of the public business of a country, which can be done well, or safely attempted, by the central authorities’, and that even in less centralised Britain ‘the legislative portion at least of the governing body busies itself far too much with local affairs, employing the supreme power of the State in cutting small knots which there ought to be other and better means of untying.’ Mill thought that the details of local administration should be left to local bodies as they have the ‘advantage of a far more direct interest in the result.’³²

The growth and importance of local, parish, and municipal bodies was for the Fabians a crucial step towards socialism. Particularly important was the establishment of county councils following the 1888 Local Government Act. Besant wrote that this ‘created the machinery without which Socialism was impracticable.’³³ Shaw supported this, arguing that without ‘efficient local machinery the replacing of private enterprise by State enterprise is out of the question’, and that a ‘democratic State cannot become a *Social*-Democratic State unless it has in every centre of population a local governing body as thoroughly democratic in

³¹ Clarke, ‘The Influence of Socialism on English Politics’, p. 570.

³² John Stuart Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government* (1861), in *On Liberty and Other Essays*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 411, 422.

³³ Annie Besant, ‘Industry under Socialism’, *Fabian Essays*, pp. 186-187.

its constitution as the central Parliament.’ Local government would continue to develop and when fully achieved Shaw argued, echoing the words of Besant, ‘the democratic State will have the machinery for Socialism.’³⁴ Morris concurred with aspects of this in his speech to the Paris Congress of 1889, saying that the County Councils, especially in London, were ‘showing signs of life and tendency towards Socialism’ and he hoped that they would ‘form a rallying point for the people against the centralising bureaucratic Parliament which in England is sure to be reactionary up to its last days.’³⁵

Besant argued that the Local Government Act had created the machinery for socialism without meaning to. This raises a final and important point. Socialism, the Fabians argued, was being brought into place, unconsciously, by self-professed opponents of socialism. Graham Wallas referred to ‘the steady introduction of Socialistic institutions by men who reject Socialist ideas’, and Shaw also pointed to the fact that ‘we are already far on the road’ towards socialism, ‘and are being urged further by many politicians who do not dream that they are touched with Socialism – nay, who would earnestly repudiate the touch as a taint.’³⁶ It was a sign of ‘the irresistible sweep of social tendencies, that in their every act they worked to bring about the very Socialism they despised; and to destroy the Individualist faith which they still professed.’³⁷ The Fabians were not the first to realise this. Henry Fawcett, very much opposed to this tendency observed a decade earlier that ‘many of those who regard the spread of Socialism with so much alarm, have been unconsciously the chief promoters of the movement.’³⁸

³⁴ Shaw, ‘Transition’, p. 222.

³⁵ Morris, ‘A Report on the Progress and Condition of English Socialism’ (1889), in Owen Holland ed., *How I Became a Socialist: William Morris*. London: Verso, 2020, p. 164.

³⁶ Graham Wallas, ‘Property under Socialism’, *Fabian Essays*, p. 165; Shaw, ‘Transition’, p. 218.

³⁷ Webb, ‘Historic’, pp. 81-82.

³⁸ Henry Fawcett, quoted in Flaherty, *Marx, Engels and Modern British Socialism*, p. 46.

Morris & The Two Stages

In his review of the *Fabian Essays* Morris noted with approval remarks made by Hubert Bland. Bland, like the other essayists, saw the growth of the state as the best marker of ‘the trend of things to Socialism’. But, Bland argued, ‘it must not be forgotten that although Socialism involves State control, State control does not imply Socialism...It is not so much to the thing the State does, as to the end for which it does it that we must look before we can decide whether it is a Socialist State or not.’³⁹ Morris thought that the Fabians themselves were open to criticism on this front, that they had a ‘tendency...to overestimate the importance of the *mechanism* of a system of society apart from the *end* towards which it may be used.’⁴⁰

In stressing the machinery and mechanisms by which socialism would be delivered Morris thought the Fabians had the potential to ‘produce the impression...that we are already in the first stages of socialistic life’.⁴¹ In his 28th September 1889 ‘Notes on News’ Morris took a more strident tone against this line of thinking. On those who would echo ‘Sir William Harcourt’s humbug, “We are all Socialists now!”’, Morris replied:

‘Are we indeed? Well, I must say in that case we need not have taken the trouble to become Socialists; since the days are still so hard on the workers that it is considered a great victory for them when the hardest worked people in London can screw a very minute gain out of their masters, who are still living in luxury earned by the employment of doing nothing; while the slums in all our big cities are just as bad as they were ten years ago, and there is no prospect of their being bettered perceptibly by our present masters in the next ten years. We may be preparing the kingdom of

³⁹ Hubert Bland, ‘The Outlook’, *Fabian Essays*, p. 247, 247-248.

⁴⁰ Morris, ‘Fabian Essays’, p. 28.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

heaven on earth, but I think I can bring many credible witnesses to prove to the most sanguine that it has not reached them yet.’

The chief problem of ‘soft Socialists’ was that they did not acknowledge the class war and were thus ‘blind as to the essence of modern society.’ It was the class war that ‘explains past history, and in the present gives us the only solid hope for the future. And it must be understood that it is only by the due working out of this class-war to its end, *the abolition of classes*, that Socialism can come about.’⁴²

Yet, Morris does not deny that a form of socialism based around the state will be required. It will, however, only be a phase in the transition towards a more complete and decentralised socialism, called communism. In his lecture ‘True and False Society’ Morris attempted to outline the two different outlooks taken by socialists on the future organisation of society. In the first view:

‘the State – that is, the nation organised for un wasteful production and exchange of wealth – will be the sole possessor of the national plant and stock, the sole employer of labour, which she will so regulate in the general interest that no man will ever need to fear lack of employment and due earnings therefrom.’

In the second view:

‘the centralised nation would give place to a federation of communities who would hold all wealth in common, and would use that wealth for satisfying the needs of each member, only exacting from each that he should do his best according to his capacity towards the production of the common wealth.’

⁴² Morris, ‘Notes on News’, *Commonweal*, 5.194 (28 September 1889), p. 305.

Summing up these two views he argued:

‘These two views of the future of society are sometimes opposed to each other as Socialism and Communism, but to my mind the latter is simply the necessary development of the former, which implies a transition period, during which people would be getting rid of the habits of mind bred by the long ages of tyranny and commercial competition, and be learning that it is to the interest of each that all should thrive.’⁴³

The scholar who has most stressed the importance of these two stages in Morris’s thought was Paul Meier. For Meier it was proof of the ideological correctness of Morris’s Marxism and led him to assert that Morris must have been familiar with Marx’s then unpublished text *The Critique of the Gotha Programme* where he sets out how a transition stage is needed before ‘a higher phase of communist society’. Particularly important to Meier’s argument is that in Morris the first stage in the transition is marked by what Marx in the *Critique* called ‘unequal right’.⁴⁴ Despite his profound admiration for Morris, Meier found it ‘impossible to believe’ that Morris could have come to these same ideas, as expressed by Marx, on his own intuition. He said it was ‘difficult for me to believe that he was capable of rising to this theoretical level on his own.’⁴⁵

Asserting a direct influence of the *Critique* upon Morris is impossible though, as Meier acknowledged. Written in 1875 the *Critique* was not published until 1891 in *Neue Zeit*. The manuscript was in London though, among Engel’s papers. Meier throughout his work stresses the importance of Engels’s contact with Morris, and here asks whether it was ‘during the course of these direct contacts with Engels that Morris was introduced to the contents of

⁴³ Morris, ‘True and False Society’, *The Socialist Platform No. 6*. London: Socialist League Office, 1888, pp. 3-22, p.20, 21.

⁴⁴ Karl Marx, ‘Critique of the Gotha Programme’, *Marx Engels Selected Works*. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1970, pp. 311-325, pp. 320, 319-321.

⁴⁵ Paul Meier, *William Morris: The Marxist Dreamer*. Brighton: The Harvester Press, 1978, p. 282.

the manuscript?’⁴⁶ It seems unlikely. Engels and those close to the his household never took Morris very seriously as a thinker. As Sheila Rowbotham put it, there was a ‘cliquish rectitude’ to the Engels circle that maintained an ‘aura of absolute correctness’ which failed to appreciate Morris’s commitment and originality.⁴⁷ That Engels would discuss the contents of a decade old manuscript with someone he didn’t fully trust, whilst at the same time he was preoccupied not only with the general direction of European socialism but also the translations and publications of Marx’s papers including volumes 2 and 3 of *Capital*, seems far-fetched.

Yvonne Kapp’s account of the manuscript in her biography of Eleanor Marx places more doubt on Meier’s argument. According to Kapp, Engels only found the document after ‘a desperate search through Marx’s papers’, and if found earlier ‘he would have insisted upon bringing it to light before the Halle Congress (of the SPD) was held in October 1890’. When found it was not even the original manuscript but a copy ‘in an unidentified hand.’ Kapp suggests that it ‘is exceedingly doubtful whether Eleanor [Marx] had read or even knew of the existence’ of the document.⁴⁸ Eleanor Marx was particularly close to Engels following the death of her father, so if there is significant doubt that even she was aware of the content or of the existence of the *Critique*, it seems unfathomable that Morris had knowledge of its contents. None of this is conclusive proof that Morris was not, in some way, made aware directly or indirectly of the theory of the two stages and the idea of unequal right, through his proximity to Engels. Such proof, either way, likely doesn’t exist. Indeed, the exact provenance of the ideas in Morris’s writings matters less than the role they play in his political thought.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 283.

⁴⁷ Sheila Rowbotham, ‘Introduction’ to *The Daughters of Karl Marx: Family Correspondence 1866-1898*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984, p. xxxiv.

⁴⁸ Yvonne Kapp, *Eleanor Marx: A Biography*. London: Verso, 2018, p. 608. Initially published in two volumes in 1972 and 1976, Kapp’s book doubles as a biography of the latter years of Engel’s life. Meier’s study was initially published in French in 1972 so would not have had Kapp’s account to draw on.

The Policy of Abstention

‘The Policy of Abstention’ was one of Morris’s clearest expositions of his two stage approach. A lecture given in the summer of 1887 to branches of the Socialist League, it saw Morris fleshing out and justifying his position in the pro- and anti-parliamentary debate that had flared up again at the League’s Annual Conference in May.

Morris starts by affirming the difference between socialism and communism, with the latter being a development from the former. Because the latter develops out of the former, all socialists and communists agree on the necessity of reaching that first stage. Communists, then, could adequately lay claim to the name of socialists, but not all socialists could (or would) claim the name of communists. Both share belief in ‘the necessity of transforming the means of production from individual into common property’ and that if no other options were available, ‘all Socialists would feel themselves bound to support the party that had this platform to the utmost’, and this change in itself ‘would bring about such a revolution as the world has not yet seen.’⁴⁹

One of the crucial differences Morris outlines between socialism and communism is how far the abolition of private property would be extended. Many ‘think that the abolition of private property in the means of production only would bring about a stable condition of society’ and that ‘the *product* of labour working on raw material and aided by instruments which were common property, should not be common, but would be the prize of energy, industry, and talent’; distribution should be along the lines of ‘to each one according to his deeds.’ Morris thought, along similar lines to Spencer, that socialists who propose ‘the

⁴⁹ Morris, ‘The Policy of Abstention’, *WM: AWS II*, p. 434.

abolition of private property merely in the means of production do contemplate a society in which production shall be in tutelage to the state.’ In such a society, ‘the centralized state would draw arbitrarily the line where public property ends and private property begins and however benevolent its intention ‘in many ways would act as a master, and take the place of the old masters.’ Due to this state interference which would be carried out ‘with conscious artificiality and by means of the employment of obvious force’, it would not be a stable society and could either ‘lead us backward for a while, or might carry us forward into a condition of true Communism according to the ripeness or unripeness of the State Socialist revolution.’⁵⁰

The League’s Manifesto stated that once ‘all means of production and distribution of wealth’ had been ‘declared and treated as the common property of all’ then each would ‘receive the full value of his labour, without deduction for the profit of a master’. To ‘receive the full value of his labour’ was the same as ‘to each one according to his deeds’. In their Notes to a new edition of the Manifesto published towards the end of 1885, Morris and Bax asserted that the maxim of true socialism, after going through a transition period, would be ‘*from each one according to his capacity, to each one according to his needs*’.⁵¹ The phrase is, of course, used by Marx in the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, but it does not originate there and had been in frequent use by socialists on the continent for some time. In ‘Socialism from the Root Up’ Morris and Bax make specific reference to Louis Blanc’s 1840 ‘Organisation of Labor’ where he put forward this ‘genuine Socialist maxim’ as ‘the basis of the production of a true society.’⁵²

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 435, 436.

⁵¹ *The Manifesto of the Socialist League: A New Edition, Annotated by William Morris and E. Belfort Bax*. London: Socialist League Office, 1885, p. 6, 10.

⁵² Bax & Morris, ‘Socialism from the Root Up: Chapter XIV The Transition from the Utopists to Modern Socialism’, *Commonweal*, 3.56 (5 February 1887), p. 43.

In addition to what Morris saw as the centralised and potentially authoritarian state necessary to enforce ‘to each one according to his deeds’ there was the problem of actually calculating how much each person had done. Morris argued that under socialism ‘the production of wares and the service of the community must always be a matter of co-operation’ and that therefore ‘you cannot, if it were desirable, find out what each man’s ‘deeds’ are.’⁵³ The very idea that each worker should receive the full value of their labour was made unenactable due to the social nature of production.

Moreover, even if it were possible to accurately give to each according to their deed, Morris saw ‘no reason for setting up a higher standard of livelihood for A because he can turn out more work than B, while the needs of the two are just the same’. In this case, ‘if society is to be of use to B, it must defend him against the tyranny of nature’. This is the idea of unequal right. The equal right to the full reward of labour (according to their deed) sets up a society of inequality, or of unequal rights, as different people have different capacities for work. Communists, such as Morris, ‘say that it is not possible really to proportion the reward to the labour’ and that even if it were possible it would create a society of inequality and privilege (thus open to the development of class division) and that to fight this ‘you would still have to redress by charity the wrongs of the weak [strong] against the strong [weak], you would still not be able to avoid a poor-law’.⁵⁴

Morris thought many agreed with this analysis but chose not to call themselves communists ‘because they do not wish anything to be put before people at present except the transitional state of things’ as this in itself would be a significant gain. On the other hand were those who declare themselves as communists and ‘are willing to admit that the communization of the means of production will inevitably lead to the communization of the

⁵³ Morris, ‘The Policy of Abstention’, p. 436. While the text states ‘the wrongs of the weak against the strong’, context would suggest this is a printing error, as Morris’s point is the reverse.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

products of labour also' but that this first phase 'is a programme sufficiently big to put before the people of our generation'. Both however took the immediate aim to be 'the transformation of the raw material and the instruments of labour from private into common property.' Despite this sharing of the immediate aim Morris took time to spell out the differences because he felt strongly that those different opinions 'would be likely to influence people's views as to the means of its realization.'⁵⁵

Morris outlined two policies facing the socialist movement, the Policy of Parliamentary Action and the Policy of Abstention. At root, the difference between the two was the question of whether the existing state could be used as the vehicle for socialist transformation. The aim of the Policy of Parliamentary Action was 'to convince the voters that they ought to send Socialists to Parliament who should try to get measures passed in the interests of the working-classes,' transforming Parliament 'into a body which should destroy monopoly, and then direct and administer the freed labour of the community.' The Policy of Abstention had at its foundation 'the necessity of making the class-struggle clear to the workers, of pointing out to them that while monopoly exists they can only exist as its slaves' and that Parliament was 'maintained for the purpose of upholding this slavery; that their wages are but slave's rations, and if they were increased tenfold would be nothing more.'⁵⁶ Parliamentary action had the aim of improving the condition of the workers whereas Abstentionists viewed the actual goal to be changing the position of the working class.

Morris's abstentionist policy was based on a critique of the existing state, and thus also of the Policy of Parliamentary Action. Although existing to uphold their slavery, workers are allowed to take some part in the existing institutions: 'they are asked to vote and send representatives to Parliament (if 'working-men' so much the better) that they may point out

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 437.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 438, 439.

what concessions may be necessary for the ruling class to make in order that the slavery of the workers may last on'.⁵⁷ In an earlier lecture Morris said of those who wish to go to Parliament and 'take a part in carrying on Constitutionalism by palliating the evils of the system' that 'I for one, and so far as their action therein goes, cannot call them Socialists at all.'⁵⁸ Parliament, or the 'Committee for the Continuance of Slavery' as he also termed it, was not a body that could simply be got hold of and administered for socialist ends.⁵⁹ The existing state would 'not suffer itself to be dismembered, not to lose anything which really is its essence without putting forth all its force in resistance; rather than lose anything which it considers of importance it will pull the roof of the world down upon its head.'⁶⁰

Up to this point it could with fairness be said that the Policy of Abstention, consisting of preaching socialism and not participating in electoral politics, isn't really a policy at all, or at least not an inspiring one even if one agreed with its critique of parliamentary action. Morris was cognisant of this, understanding the need to 'offer your recruits something to do beyond merely swelling the army of preachers in one way or another.' The Policy of Parliamentary Action, whatever its limitations, was at least a policy that could be mobilised behind with clear goals. Despite thinking it misguided he thought that 'it is a hopeful sign that it should be put forward'. It having been put forward 'compels us who do not agree with it to put forward some alternative to it, even though we think, as I confess I for one do, that all plans of action are at present premature.'⁶¹

Morris's alternative was the establishment of 'a vast labour organization', a 'labour parliament' that would exist outside and against the 'Westminster Committee.' The trades unions, at this point, he saw as little more than benefit societies who accepted 'the rights of

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 439.

⁵⁸ Morris, 'Whigs, Democrats, and Socialists', *Commonweal*, 2.25 (3 July 1886), p. 107 This lecture was first delivered to the Fabian Conference on Political Action in June 1886.

⁵⁹ Morris, 'Anti-Parliamentary', *Commonweal*, 6.230 (7 June 1890), p. 181.

⁶⁰ Morris, 'Whigs, Democrats, and Socialists', *Commonweal*, 2.25 (3 July 1886), p. 106.

⁶¹ Morris, 'The Policy of Abstention', p. 441, 442.

capital' and only claimed 'a proportional share in the profits'. To become socialist, they 'must aim at managing their own business, which is indeed the business of the world'. It was this idea that the organised workers must become 'the masters of their own destinies, their own lives', that animated Morris's 'labour parliament'. 'Let them settle e.g. what wages are to be paid by their temporary managers, what number of hours it may be expedient to work; let them arrange for the filling of their military chest, the care of the sick, the unemployed, the dismissed: let them learn also how to administer their own affairs.'⁶²

This 'labour parliament', once established, 'will find its duties divided into two parts, the maintenance of its people while things are advancing to the final struggle, and resistance to the constitutional authority'. Its weapons of resistance 'will be co-operation and boycotting, the latter including all strikes that may be necessary' and 'whether it will be driven to use further weapons depends on the attitude of the Reaction'. Morris hoped for such a body 'which without heeding Parliament can force from the rulers what concessions may be necessary in the present and whose aim would be the total abolition of the monopolist classes and rule.' This body would 'educate its members in administration, so that on the morrow of the revolution they would be able, from a thorough knowledge of the wants and capabilities of the workers, to carry on affairs with the least possible amount of blunders,' thus offering 'no opportunity to the counter revolution.'⁶³ Perry Anderson notes that this plan 'seems to have been the first Marxist scenario for dual power since the Address to the Communist League of 1850, a text unknown to Morris and left without subsequent development in Marx himself', and 'a notion entirely absent from Engel's writings at the time.'⁶⁴

Morris also offers thoughts on what he considers the likely outcome of the Policy of Parliamentary Action. Like the abstentionist plan it too has to start with preaching, only in

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 444, 446, 443.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 448, 452.

⁶⁴ Perry Anderson, *Arguments Within English Marxism*. London: Verso, 1980, p. 180.

this case it will 'have to preach an electioneering campaign' with a 'programme of reforms deduced from the principles of Socialism'. They will 'have to appeal for support (i.e. votes) to a great number of people who are not convinced Socialists' with this programme of reforms, but 'to the ordinary voter it will be this bait which will be the matter of interest' and 'not the principle' on which they are based. If successful, 'the Socialist members when they get into Parliament will represent a heterogenous body of opinion, ultra-radical, democratic, discontented non-politicals, rather than a body of Socialists; and it will be their opinions and prejudices that will sway the action of the members in Parliament.' Even if such a plan could 'by means of tormenting the constitutional Parliament into cumulative reforms manage to bring us to the crisis of revolution, their difficulties would be far from an end'. Because the people themselves had not been prepared for socialism, 'they would not have the education which their helping in the organization of the society of production would have given them, teaching them as it were by the future and forming the habits of social life without which any scheme of Socialism is but the mill-wheel without the motive power.'⁶⁵

With the people not into the habits of social life and not actively taking part in the administration of society the potential for counter revolution would be high. Morris thought that through the experience built up in the 'labour parliament' the workers would have a tried and tested administrative and organisational body to take the place of the old state structure. It would be this structure that would form the state in Morris's version of state socialism. But it would also be this form of the state that would give way to a more decentralised and federal structure in the transition from socialism to communism.

Morris wrote little on the immediate steps to be taken upon the seizure of power. This was the subject of an exchange in *Commonweal* between Bax and Paul Lafargue. Bax's article 'The Morrow of the Revolution' proposed three initial measures to ensure a

⁶⁵ Morris, 'The Policy of Abstention', p. 449, 450, 451.

programme of collectivisation could proceed. It was necessary that ‘the *purely economic* action’ of the new administration be ‘supplemented by legislative and judicial action for the former to have the chance of taking effect.’ The first action was ‘the reduction of the working day to eight hours or less; the second, the all-important correlative of this action...the enactment of a law of *maximum* and *minimum*; and the third the abrogation of “civil” law, especially that largest department of it which is concerned with the enforcement of contract and the recovery of debt.’ That Bax was influenced by the French political tradition is clear, and his article refers to the actions of the Paris Commune and to the “Code Napoleon”.⁶⁶

Paul Lafargue, himself a part of that revolutionary French tradition and Marx’s son-in-law, responded across two issues. Lafargue pays less attention to judicial matters and instead argues that a revolutionary government ‘should immediately satisfy the needs of the workers in town and country’ by taking over provision stores, big shops and housing in order to feed, clothe and lodge all citizens, ‘and that it should begin the transformation of capitalist property.’⁶⁷ Lafargue unfairly characterises Bax as representative of English socialism and as having their ‘ideal’ of the state as ‘the capitalist public service (post-office, telegraphs, police, etc.), brought to perfection.’ This would be a fair summary of the Fabians but not Bax or Morris. For Lafargue the point of the revolutionary government was the make the state disappear: ‘The State is a machine cunningly organised to serve the interests of the capitalists, and to keep the proletarian mass in slavery. The revolutionary government which will temporarily replace it, will have to disorganise the bourgeois machine and to draw all its power from the proletarian mass, and so to lay the foundations of the new order.’⁶⁸

Bax did not see any significant difference between his view and that of Lafargue, writing that ‘I entirely agree with his paper, which is, as he describes it, a formulation of

⁶⁶ Bax, ‘The Morrow of the Revolution’, *Commonweal*, 3. 72 (28 May 1887), p. 173.

⁶⁷ Paul Lafargue, ‘The Morrow of the Revolution’, *Commonweal*, 3. 78 (9 July 1887), p. 220.

⁶⁸ Lafargue, ‘The Morrow of the Revolution’, *Commonweal*, 3. 79 (16 July 1887), p. 227.

“desiderata.” My article was, on the other hand, an attempt to formulate a plan for getting at these desiderata.’ Both Bax and Lafargue believed in a transitional period before communism, and Bax had treated the first initial stage of this transition rather than anything longer term. Both also believed that the ‘result of the social revolution will of course be the disappearance of the State,’ but Bax thought ‘this result will be brought about by the turning of it and its machinery against itself rather than by a policy of mere destruction.’⁶⁹

The State under Communism

Although keen to press upon his audience ideas about the shape of the future, Morris always included the caveat that nothing was set in stone. He wrote with Bax that they could offer ‘nothing but mere abstract deductions from historic evolution, the logical sequence of which may be interfered with at any point by elements whose force we have not duly appreciated; and these are abstractions also which are but the skeleton of the full life which will go on in those times to come.’⁷⁰

Morris was always reluctant to offer any form of concrete suggestions as to how the transition between state socialism and communism would take place:

‘No doubt some transition, the nature of which will be determined by circumstances, will take place between the present state of things, in which the political unit is a nation, and the future, in which a system of federalized communities will take the place of rival nationalities; but as this chapter has to do with the ultimate realization

⁶⁹ Bax, ‘Correspondence: Lafargue v. Bax’, *Commonweal*, 3.80 (23 July 1887), p. 237.

⁷⁰ Bax & Morris, ‘Socialism from the Root Up: Chapter XXIII Socialism Triumphant [Part 1]’, *Commonweal*, 4.121 (5 May 1888), p. 140.

of the new society rather than with the transitional period, we need not speculate on this point.’⁷¹

Or in his lecture ‘The Society of the Future’ where he told his audience that ‘you must remember, of course, in speaking of the Society of the future, I am taking the indulgence of passing over the transitional period – whatever that may be – that will divide the present from the ideal’.⁷²

For Meier, this reluctance to detail the transition and gradual dissolution of the national state could be an area to reproach Morris. But Meier, ever keen to compare them, asks if such a demand is ‘logical in his case, any more, moreover, than in that of Marx and Engels?’ Meier instead sees this partial absence as an example of Morris’s ‘impatient imagination [taking] wing towards the full achievement of communist society.’⁷³ There is no substantive reason to hold Morris the theorist of revolutionary transition to a different standard to Marx or Engels. However, it is not my purpose here to hold Morris to account for something he didn’t do, and moreover, something he explicitly stated he would not do and something he thought could not be done accurately.

What Morris did provide though was an outline of society under communism. It is worth quoting at length the outline he produced with Bax:

‘We ask our readers to imagine the new society in its political aspect as an organized body of communities, each carrying on its own affairs, but united by a delegated federal body, whose function would be the guardianship of the acknowledged principles of society; it being understood that these two bodies, the township or community and the Federal Power, would be the two extremities between which there would be other expressions of the Federal principle, - as in districts that were linked

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² Morris, ‘The Society of the Future’, *Commonweal*, 5.169 (6 April 1889), p. 108.

⁷³ Meier, *William Morris*, p. 308.

together by natural circumstances, such as language, climate, or the divisions of physical geography.

‘It is clear that in such a society what laws were needed for the protection of persons and the regulation of inter-communal disputes, since they could be but the expression of the very root principles of society, would have to be universal, and the central regulating body would be charged with their guardianship, and at a last resort to carrying them out by force. Obviously no community could be allowed to revert to the exploitation of labour of any kind under whatever pretext, or to such forms of reaction as vindictive criminal laws. Such measures if allowed, even as local and spasmodic incidents, would undermine the very foundations of communistic society. *This unity in Federation in short, appears to be the only method for reducing complexity in political and administrative matters to a minimum; and of ensuring to the individual, as a unit of society, the utmost possible freedom for the satisfaction and development of his capacities.*’⁷⁴

As shown earlier, Edward Bellamy had argued that the way to reduce complexity in government was to have it as highly centralised as possible. For Morris the complete opposite was true. A centralised government far from the people it governed would struggle to act efficiently in the interests of the people even with a decent flow of information and statistics reaching the administrative body. It would be simpler to allow and encourage smaller communities to manage their own affairs while a limited central body oversaw national matters to ensure the principles on which the local bodies organised society were not threatening equality of condition.

The long passage quoted was jointly written with Bax, yet the principles it explains are recurrent throughout Morris’s work. In ‘True and False Society’ Morris argued that those who could see beyond state socialism to communism believed that ‘decentralisation in it would have to be complete.’ The name Morris gives to the small units of community varies

⁷⁴ Morris and Bax, ‘Socialism Triumphant [Part 1], *Commonweal*, 4.121 (5 May 1888), p. 140. Emphasis added.

across his writings between ward, township, local guild, and other terms. In this lecture Morris states that the 'political unit with [communists] is not a Nation, but a Commune; the whole of reasonable society would be a great federation of such communes, federated for definite purposes of the organisation of livelihood and exchange.' The nation, as 'a body of people kept together for purposes of rivalry and war with other similar bodies', would cease to have a function when 'competition shall have given place to combination'.⁷⁵ In June 1888 Morris again affirmed the position of the Socialist League was that 'in the society of the future, nations as political entities will cease to exist, and give place to the federation of communities bound together by locality or convenience.'⁷⁶

Morris's reference to the political unit of the future in 'True and False Society' being that of the commune highlights the influence of the Paris Commune of 1871 on socialist thought in Britain. Commemoration of the Commune was an important annual event to socialists and one that united rival factions of socialists and anarchists. These commemorations were reported on in *Commonweal*, and the paper ran articles on the importance of the event, including in April 1885 by the communard Édouard Vaillant titled 'Vive La Commune!'⁷⁷ In 'Why We Celebrate the Commune of Paris' Morris ended by saying that they honoured the Commune 'as the foundation-stone of the new world that is to be.'⁷⁸

In 1886 the League issued a pamphlet written by Morris, Bax, and Victor Dave, called *A Short Account of the Paris Commune*. The pamphlet is largely a history of the Commune with less on its significance as this was what the commemorations were for. However, it did importantly state that what most commentators on the Commune, particularly 'middle-class

⁷⁵ Morris, 'True and False Society', p. 20.

⁷⁶ 'The Policy of the Socialist League', *Commonweal*, 4.126 (9 June 1888), p. 180.

⁷⁷ Édouard Vaillant, 'Vive La Commune', *Commonweal*, 1.3 (April 1885), p. 17.

⁷⁸ Morris, 'Why We Celebrate the Commune of Paris', *Commonweal*, 3.62 (19 March 1887), p. 90.

historians', failed to understand was that 'from the Political point of view, the Revolution of Paris established a new form of administration, - Federalist Administration'. Alongside the 'idea of the Federation of Communes...which was the special politics of the Commune' it also showed 'the great impulse towards the real Revolution: the freedom of labour from the trammels of wage-slavery.'⁷⁹ What distinguished the Commune as an event to Morris was its attempt to link political form with social goal.

In a letter from April 1888 Morris iterated his belief that in the future 'nations as political entities would cease to exist' and that 'civilization would mean the federalization of a variety of communities great and small'. Again, Morris stated there would need to be 'some central body whose function would be almost entirely the guardianship of the *principles* of society', but then added that 'even this shadow of centralization would disappear at last when men gained the habit of looking reasonably at these matters'.⁸⁰ There is an echo of Mill here. Mill argued that between the central governing body and the local one, the 'authority which is most conversant with principles should be supreme over principles [the central], while that which is most competent in details should have the details left to it [the local]'.⁸¹ Ultimately Morris thought 'we should tend to the abolition of all government, and even of all regulation that was not merely habitual,' and work towards a scenario in which 'voluntary association would become a necessary habit and the only bond of society.'⁸²

Morris admitted that this condition of society 'is a long way ahead' and that 'State Socialism will have to intervene between our present break-down and communism'. He did not think that state socialism 'will last long when it is fully developed; especially as I think there are signs that it will come in the municipal rather than the imperial form; which I think

⁷⁹ E. Belfort Bax, Victor Dave, and William Morris, *A Short Account of the Commune of Paris*, The Socialist Platform – No. 4. London: Socialist League Office, 1886, p. 59, 74.

⁸⁰ *CL II*, p. 769, 770.

⁸¹ Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government*, pp. 423-424.

⁸² *CL II*, p. 770.

a very good thing.’⁸³ Morris showed signs he shared the Fabian belief that municipalisation could aid the transition to state socialism. He had earlier written that ‘Provincial councils...if they were intended to be genuine and independent’ could ‘educate people towards the condition of the free federation of free communes, which is the only solution of politics.’⁸⁴ But he also voiced caution, stressing that pushes for decentralised government were not always to be welcomed. As editor of *Commonweal* he added a note to Tom Muse’s ‘Suggestions on Decentralisation’ pointing out that the ‘demand for decentralisation must spring from the same source as, and be put forward simultaneously with, the demand for the freeing of labour from the monopolist rule. A system of ‘local self-government’ might become a very dangerous instrument of oppression in the hands of our present rulers and the proprietary class which they represent.’⁸⁵ H. Davis argued similarly that the recent Local Government Bill could create a ‘State-communal system’ where ‘the representative body in each commune would wield authority quite as much as the central representative body of to-day.’⁸⁶ While elements of decentralisation within the existing system were encouraging signs, caution was always needed against the Fabian error of focusing too much on the machinery for delivering socialism rather than the need to abolish class society.

Fellowship and Authority

Like all late-nineteenth century British socialists Morris thought that the society of the future could not and should not be reliant on ‘the transmutation of uncoordinated, self-

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ Morris, ‘Notes on Passing Events’, *Commonweal*, 2.17 (8 May 1886), p. 41.

⁸⁵ Morris, *Commonweal*, 4.109 (11 February 1888), p. 43.

⁸⁶ H. Davis, ‘Free versus State Communism’, *Commonweal*, 5.163 (23 February 1889), p. 58.

interested economic behaviour into rising material well-being and social harmony as promised by the market's apologists.⁸⁷ For socialists such as the Fabians, Bellamy (considered a socialist even though he disavowed the term), Hyndman, and many others, the solution was the state. The state, centralised or decentralised, would direct economic life. With the removal of the anarchy of the market and economic life now consciously organised for the benefit of all, politics would be reduced to the election of officials to oversee economic administration.

Morris, as shown, believed that state direction of the economy would be necessary for a time before a transition to communism and the abolition of governmental and state structures. With the removal of both the market and the state as the organising forces of society Morris was faced with the question of what then would hold society together under communism. Noel Thompson correctly noted that for Morris 'the hallmark of communism was freedom' and moreover that '[s]implicity was a sine qua non of freedom'. In Morris's simplified life of communism, organisation 'could proceed on the basis of simple rational discussion between those suffused with the spirit of communism.'⁸⁸ In Morris's terms, this spirit of communism was fellowship.

As *News from Nowhere* makes clear, this fellowship did not mean that all would agree on all topics. In discussing 'How Matters are Managed' Old Hammond remarks that 'differences of opinion about real solid things need not, and with us do not, crystallise people into parties permanently hostile to one another, with different theories as to the build of the universe and the progress of time.'⁸⁹ The disagreements and differences are not concerned with deep principles but with the more mundane organisation of resources.

⁸⁷ Noel Thompson, *The Market and Its Critics*. London: Routledge, 1988, p. 187.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 205, 203.

⁸⁹ Morris, 'News from Nowhere', *Commonweal*, 6.224 (26 April 1890), p.130.

Nor does the spirit of communism imply that variety and individuality have been crushed. 'You see in matters which are merely personal which do not affect the welfare of the community – how a man shall dress, what he shall eat and drink, what he shall write and read, and so forth – there can be no difference of opinion, and everybody does as he pleases.' But, when it comes to matters of concern to the community, decisions have to be reached collectively. On such issues 'the majority must have their way; unless the minority were to take up arms and show by force that they were the effective or real majority; which, however, in a society of men who are free and equal is little likely to happen; because in such a community the apparent majority *is* the real majority'.⁹⁰

In each local unit, when a decision needs to be made that affects the whole community, the proposal is put before the 'Mote, as we call it, according to the ancient tongue of the times before bureaucracy'. If everyone agrees there is no further discussion except on details. If no one backs the proposer, 'the matter drops for the time being; a thing not likely to happen amongst reasonable men, however, as the proposer is sure to have talked it over with others before the Mote.' If some agree and some disagree, a vote is deferred and in the meantime the matter is discussed amongst citizens. At the next meeting:

'If the division is a close one, the question is again put off for further discussion: if the division is a wide one, the minority are asked if they will yield to the more general opinion, which they often, nay, most commonly do. If they refuse, the question is debated a third time, when, if the minority has not perceptibly grown, they always give way; though as a matter of fact, if there is any rule on the case, they might still carry it on further: but I say, what always happens is that they are convinced, not perhaps that their view is the wrong one, but that they cannot persuade or force the community to adopt it.'⁹¹

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

Despite Morris's antipathy towards modern democratic politics the communes pictured in *News from Nowhere* operate using a form of deliberative democracy, where space and time is given to debate and discussion, and the final decision being subject to the will of the majority. This was not the people electing representatives or delegates who would then debate and make decisions on behalf of the people, but the people actively managing their own affairs. Morris's choice of the term 'Mote' shows an influence of the idea of the ancient constitution on his thinking about the state. As Ruth Kinna demonstrates, Morris saw hope in a Germanic feudalism with a loose federal structure that allowed for local decision making as opposed to the centralised Roman bureaucratic state.⁹²

On alternative ways of managing affairs, Old Hammond can only think of two, both inimical to communism. The first is 'a class of superior persons capable of judging on all matters without consulting the neighbours; that, in short, we should get for ourselves what used to be called an aristocracy of intellect'. The second is the return of the market, of private property, and have a society of 'slaves and slaveholders once more.' Guest suggests a third: 'that every man should be quite independent of every other, and that thus the tyranny of society should be abolished.'⁹³ At this suggestion, both men burst out laughing.

It is hard to read this last suggestion as anything other than a comic rebuke to the anarchists within the Socialist League.⁹⁴ Throughout the League's brief history Morris had been trying to steer a course between the parliamentary faction and the anarchists, with his own anti-parliamentary stance meaning he tended to side with the anarchists even if he never fully agreed with them. By 1890 Morris had grown tired of what he saw as the anarchist's

⁹² Ruth Kinna, *William Morris: The Art of Socialism*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000, pp. 137-146.

⁹³ *Ibid*, p. 131.

⁹⁴ Michael Holzman, 'Anarchism and Utopia: William Morris's *News from Nowhere*', *ELH*, Vol. 51, No. 3 (Autumn, 1984), pp. 589-603, p. 596.

excessive individualism and their tactics of ‘partial, necessarily futile, inconsequent revolt, or riot rather, against the authorities, who are our absolute masters, and can easily put it down.’⁹⁵

Between April and August 1889 an exchange of views took place in the pages of *Commonweal* between Morris and several anarchist correspondents.⁹⁶ The debate was started by James Blackwell who wished to see more correspondence in *Commonweal*, holding that ‘the friendly discussion of our differences of opinion as Communists, Anarchists, and Social Democrats, is decidedly useful to the common cause of the emancipation of labour.’ He noted the ‘recent decided tendency of the Socialist League towards Communist-Anarchism’ and wished to see a discussion of clauses adopted by the Spanish socialists at the Congress of Valence. The first clause stated that by ‘Anarchism we understand a social state in which there is no necessity for government. We are of opinion that whilst the principle of authority exists, there will be no guarantee for the liberty of all members of society.’⁹⁷ Communists could agree with the first part of this, but there was, as Blackwell wished, friendly discussion on the second.

Morris replied in May, beginning by saying ‘I call myself a Communist, and have no wish to qualify that word by joining any other to it’, and again stated his belief that ‘Communism is the necessary development of Socialism’. Morris took issue however with ‘our Anarchist-Communist friends, who are somewhat authoritative on the matter of authority’:

‘For if freedom from authority means the assertion of the advisability or possibility of an individual man doing what he pleases always and under all circumstances, this is

⁹⁵ Morris, ‘Where Are We Now?’, *Commonweal*, 6. 253 (15 November, 1890), p. 361.

⁹⁶ For a broader discussion of Morris’s relationship to anarchist thought see Lyman Tower Sargent, ‘William Morris and the Anarchist Tradition’, in Florence S. Boos & Carole G. Silver eds., *Socialism and the Literary Artistry of William Morris*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1990, pp. 61-73.

⁹⁷ James Blackwell, ‘Correspondence’, *Commonweal*, 5.170 (13 April 1889), p. 117.

an absolute negation of society, and makes Communism as the highest expression of society impossible; and when you begin to qualify this assertion of the right to do as you please by adding “as long as you don’t interfere with other people’s rights to do the same,” the exercise of some kind of authority becomes necessary. If individuals are not to coerce others, there must somewhere be an authority which is prepared to coerce them not to coerce; and that authority must clearly be collective.’

Morris argued that if even ‘twelve men want to act together, there must be give and take between them,’ and they must agree on rules on conduct. ‘And what is this common bond but authority – that is, the conscience of the association voluntarily accepted in the first instance.’ Morris called for ‘*public conscience* as a rule of action’ and he suspected that ‘many of our Communist-Anarchist friends’ actually meant the same thing as he did in their calls against authority.⁹⁸

A reply came from J. Armsden who pointed to ‘logical discrepancies’ in Morris’s piece and then proceeded to make very little sense in his own.⁹⁹ More coherent responses came later in June from H. Davis and someone calling themselves ‘Anarchist’. Davis identified himself as an ‘Anarchist-Communist’, arguing that ‘the word anarchy has reference to the *political* status of the people, while the word commune has reference to their *grouping and geographical arrangement*’, thus using the word communist in a different way to Morris. Davis objected to Morris’s assertion that the authority stopping individuals coercing others had to be collective. ‘The only solution I can imagine to this “collective authority” is the rule of the majority, which is “the tyranny of the strongest,” of which there is no more bitter opponent than comrade Morris himself.’ He also demurs from Morris’s belief that the ‘mutual agreement’ needed to work together constituted ‘the exercise of authority’ whereas it

⁹⁸ Morris, ‘Correspondence’, *Commonweal*, 5.175 (18 May 1889), p. 157.

⁹⁹ J. Armsden, ‘Looking Forward. A Reply to William Morris’, *Commonweal*, 5.177 (1 June 1889), p. 173.

actually illustrated ‘the Anarchist ideal’ of ‘*voluntary organisation*’.¹⁰⁰ Davis earlier in 1889 had preferred the term ‘Free-Communist’ but still stressed the necessity of ‘voluntary co-operation’ rather than the imposition of authority.¹⁰¹ The response by ‘Anarchist’ did not show any disagreement with Morris beyond asking for a more restricted meaning of the word authority. ‘It should mean, in my opinion, the authority of compulsory representative institutions, such as parliaments, county and municipal council, school boards, etc.’ and not Morris’s public conscience. Like Davis, Anarchist also stressed the ideal of voluntary association.¹⁰²

In July Blackwell re-entered the fray expressing regret that Morris ‘has been the only Socialist who has criticised the Anarchist position.’ Nevertheless, he pressed Morris on ‘the old question of majorities and minorities’. Blackwell argued that ‘no logical reason has ever been brought forward to show why the minority should give way to the majority, or the majority to the minority, for as has been proved over and over again counting noses doesn’t prove the truth or falsehood of a thing.’ He then introduced the example of a committee trying to reach a decision, not unlike the description of the Mote Morris would give in *News from Nowhere*. ‘When a minority gives in to a majority on a committee, it is because the difference of opinion is not very great, and practically they are converted to the views of the majority. If the difference was sufficiently important neither party would give in.’ On most issues though, ‘if they were reasonable people living in good fellowship with each other, the weakest in argument naturally give way.’¹⁰³

On his return from the Paris Congress that inaugurated the Second International, Morris replied. Morris introduces the thought of a community discussing the building of a

¹⁰⁰ H. Davis, ‘Anarchy and Communism. An Answer to W. Morris’, *Commonweal*, 5.180 (22 June 1889), p. 197.

¹⁰¹ H. Davis, ‘Free versus State Communism’, *Commonweal*, 5.163 (23 February 1889), p. 58.

¹⁰² Anarchist, ‘Anarchy and Communism. An Answer to W. Morris’, *Commonweal*, 5.180 (22 June 1889), p. 197.

¹⁰³ James Blackwell, ‘Correspondence: Anarchy and Communism’, *Commonweal*, 5.182 (6 July 1889), p. 211.

bridge that he would use in *News from Nowhere*. ‘Our Anarchist friends say it must not be carried by a majority; in that case then, it must be carried by a minority. And Why? Is there any divine right in a minority? I fail to see it, although I admit that the opinion is held by the absolutists.’ He refers to Blackwell’s ‘curious’ suggestion ‘that the larger of the two differing parties in a matter of administration should throw the matter over’ and argues that ‘this would mean victory for the noes; or, in other words, that in any question which must be answered aye or nay, any one obstructive could always prevent any business being done, and could in such matters thereby establish the most complete minority rule conceivable.’¹⁰⁴ There must be some means of proceeding with business even in cases of disagreement, and in a society of equals and of fellowship a majority decision was not a great infringement on individual liberty.

Overall, Morris, as he often did, tried to strike a conciliatory tone. One main difficulty was that ‘in all probability, I differ very little in theory from what they *think*, but considerably from what they *write*’. Davis, for example, ‘misunderstands my use of the word Communist in supposing me to use it as the Owenites did, as implying life in separate communities... whereas I use it as a more accurate term for Socialism as implying equality of condition and consequently abolition of private property.’ Morris finished by stating that he found often that ‘Communist-Anarchists’ ‘cannot differentiate themselves from the Communists’ and that their ‘Anarchism consists in a somewhat exaggerated fear of a possible re-growth of some of the tyrannical methods of the destroyed Society, and a consequent distrust of the new Society having any definite form.’¹⁰⁵

Morris, like the anarchists, valued individual freedom and sought the best arrangement of society in which this could be expressed. Their differences were often

¹⁰⁴ Morris, ‘Correspondence: Communism and Anarchism’, *Commonweal*, 5.188 (17 August 1889), p. 261.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

semantic and betrayed no significant disagreement. Yet no amount of individual freedom could overcome for Morris the fact that communism was a co-operative society that realised the full embodiment of man as a social animal. He too stressed the anarchist notion emphasised by Davis that such co-operation must be voluntary. In 'True and False Society' he stated that 'the constitution of all society requires that each individual member of it should yield up a part of his liberty in return for the advantages of mutual help and defence; yet at bottom that surrender should be a part of the liberty itself; it should be voluntary in essence.'¹⁰⁶

One area of disagreement was over tactics. Morris thought the anarchist practice and advocacy of propaganda by the deed to be totally misguided. A significant reason for this was Morris's belief in the need to transition towards socialism and communism rather than trying to establish it immediately in the ashes of capitalism. This was important because the transition allowed for the development of the habit of fellowship and of the public conscience Morris spoke of in his *Commonweal* correspondence. Without this fellowship the new society could not operate and would fall back in to unequal power relationships and the desire of individual gain at the expense of others inimical to the equality of condition that Morris saw as the basis of communism.

Here it is useful to return to Bellamy and show how Morris's belief in the need for the growth of socialist habit highlights a crucial difference between the utopian novels presented by the two men. Both follow a similar narrative, with a 19th century inhabitant falling asleep followed by their explorations of a familiar yet transformed future landscape and society. However, Morris and Bellamy had different ideas as to historical change, and we find this on evidence in both novel's final chapters.

¹⁰⁶ Morris, 'True and False Society', p. 14.

In the final chapter of *Looking Backward*, the protagonist Julian West seemingly wakes up from his dream of the year 2000 back in Boston of the late-nineteenth century. After traversing the streets in horror, he finds himself at the house of his fiancée's family. Having seen a better world and now thrust back in the old one, he tries to tell the family about the misery surrounding them, asking them if they 'know that close to your doors a great multitude of men and women, flesh of your flesh, live lives that are one agony from birth to death?' West's words have no effect, and he thinks he just didn't state the matter correctly, believing the family was 'angry because they thought I was berating them, when God knew I was merely thinking of the horror of the fact without any attempt to assign the responsibility for it.' He tries to show how it was 'not the crime of man, nor of any class of men, that made the race so miserable, but a hideous, ghastly mistake, a colossal world-darkening blunder.'¹⁰⁷ As was shown earlier, Bellamy strongly disliked class-based politics. His rejection of class-struggle politics also entailed rejection of a class-based analysis of the problems of late-nineteenth century America, and instead it's seen as a 'ghastly mistake' where no-one is to blame, or everyone is.

After explaining to his fiancée's family how if only everyone could let 'but the famine-stricken nation assume the function it had neglected, and regulate for the common good the course of the life-giving stream, and the earth would bloom like one garden, and none of its children lack any good thing.' This plea is met with calls of "Madman!" "Pestilent fellow!" "Fanatic!" "Enemy of society!" After one last tearful effort to persuade his audience, West, panting and groaning finds himself back in the more congenial Boston of 2000, realising that 'my return to the nineteenth century had been the dream, and my presence in the twentieth was the reality.'¹⁰⁸ Although Bellamy's story arguably performs this

¹⁰⁷ Bellamy, *Looking Backward*, p. 190, 191.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 192, 193.

function, in the novel itself West does not need to actually return to the nineteenth century and use what he has seen to guide others towards the society of the future. History will run its course irrespectively.

This in part explains the oddly unsocial nature of Bellamy's Boston in the year 2000. Dr. Leete explains to West that to 'save ourselves useless burdens, we have as little gear about us at home as is consistent with comfort, but the social side of our life is ornate and luxurious beyond the world ever knew before.' But this social side of life is not all that social. To simplify the cooking of meals great dining halls have been created. Although the cooking may have been communalised, behind closed doors the consumption of meals is still a private affair. The room in which Leete takes West to eat 'is, in fact, a part of our house, slightly detached from the rest...Every family in the ward has a room set apart in this great building for its permanent and exclusive use for a small annual rental.' Musical services too are organised using the idea of 'labor-saving by coöperation' as everything else is. Yet rather than going to listen to a concert, each of the city's various music halls 'are connected by telephone with all the houses of the city whose people care to pay the small fee' so that the people can listen in the comfort and privacy of their own homes.¹⁰⁹ As no-one person or class was responsible for the misery and poverty of the nineteenth century, there is no need for a change in the habits of the people in order for future society to function. The only thing that needs to change is the organisational structure and administration of the state.

In contrast to *Looking Backward*, Morris's *News from Nowhere* is actually a dream narrative. In the closing section, the protagonist William Guest wakes up back in his bed in 'dingy Hammersmith...overwhelmed with despair'. All through his perceived time in the future with its inhabitants, Guest had had a feeling that 'I had no business amongst them' and that 'Ellen's last mournful look seemed to say, "No, it will not do; you cannot be of us; you

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 93, 90, 66.

belong so entirely to the unhappiness of the past that our happiness even would weary you'. Despite being a convinced socialist, Guest is still from late-nineteenth century capitalist society and has not adequately formed the habits of social life that would enable him to live in peace in communist society. Ellen's look implored Guest to "Go back, and be the happier for having seen us, for having added a little hope to your struggle. Go on living while you may, striving, with whatsoever pain and labour needs must be, to build up little by little the new day of fellowship, and rest, and happiness."'¹¹⁰

Although some form of socialism was inevitable, the shape it would take was not determined. Guest has to wake up and use what he has seen to help shape the struggle, to turn his dream into a vision. Crucially, he has to work towards building up the habit of fellowship and public conscience within the socialist movement itself. If workers are to manage their own affairs under communism, they have to learn how to do so in the struggle. If they are to live in fellowship and harmony in the future, they must learn to live so in the present. As the League's Manifesto stated: 'We are working *for* equality and brotherhood for all the world, and it is only *through* equality and brotherhood that we can make our work effective.'¹¹¹ While the ethical dimension of socialism would only be truly realised in a socialist society of equality, Morris thought it imperative that steps towards this were made in the present.

Conclusion

In his discussion of Morris's critique of the market and what would replace it, Noel Thompson argued that though Morris 'posed many of the crucial questions, this was the

¹¹⁰ Morris, 'News from Nowhere', *Commonweal*, 6.247 (4 October 1890), p. 315.

¹¹¹ 'The Manifesto of the Socialist League', *Commonweal*, 1.1 (February 1885), p. 2.

extent of his achievement, for he failed to grasp just how difficult, with the abandonment of the market, such questions became. It is here that Morris is culpable. Culpable not in the sense of failing to provide satisfactory answers to questions of pricing, distribution and allocation under socialism but in his failure to appreciate and tendency to evade their complexity.’ One can reasonably assert that the same is true for his thinking on the state. Thompson continues that having abandoned the market, ‘the road to a decentralised market socialism was closed’ leaving the only remaining roads ‘those of economic control by the state and an anarcho-communism of utopian, static simplicity with the former leading by stages to the latter.’¹¹²

But, for Thompson, Morris was not alone in failing to appreciate the complexity of the task at hand. Nearly all British socialists of the period, state socialists, communists and anarchists, were culpable. Thompson rightly states that ‘just as in certain circumstances, a deterministic theory of history could breed political quiescence, it could also engender an intellectual passivity as regards the constructive aspect of socialism.’ They all attempted to solve complex problems by posing them as simple questions, and it was ‘their simplifying assumptions which gave their solutions what superficial feasibility they possessed.’¹¹³ This is certainly true of Morris. However, Morris gave simple solutions because to a great extent he thought that though at present society was very complex, in the future it would be simpler and would have to be so in order to be free. Identifying the root problem of capitalism as the class struggle born of inequality and private property, once these had been abolished, Morris thought a just and workable organisational structure for society would be a relatively simple task to be achieved by free and equal citizens who actively wanted to take part in the management of their own affairs.

¹¹² Thompson, *The Market and Its Critics*, p. 209, 210.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 238.

Moreover, there is still the question of how valid it is to criticise Morris for something he never truly set out to do. He never claimed to be presenting a detailed working blueprint for the structure of socialist or communist society. Such an undertaking was seen as utopian in the negative sense. Across September and October 1889 *Commonweal* ran two articles from a utopian community in Nevada who had attempted to create ‘the Co-operative Commonwealth’. The articles provided a lot of detail on how the society, labelling themselves the ‘Central Phalanx’ of the coming commonwealth was organised. An editorial note after the second article stated that the piece had been included ‘to provoke discussion’ and that for the meantime stated only that ‘in our opinion any *a priori* plan of such complexity must necessarily result in a disastrous failure.’¹¹⁴ There is obviously a difference between the details of a utopian colony in the present and the details of the socialist future, but for Morris the misguidedness of trying to closely design society was the same for both.

Morris only ever claimed to be presenting the guiding principles on which the future should rest. Mostly these were stated without much detail, as in ‘True and False Society’, sometimes it was fleshed out, as in *News from Nowhere*. But there is another, more important reason that Morris never engaged in the difficult task of solving in depth the question of market and state under socialism. This was the actual political nature of the work that Morris was undertaking. Morris saw his role as that of preaching socialism and gaining converts. He was a propagandist. The nature of Morris’s task was not particularly suited to the sort of intellectual discussion more likely to be found in a political treatise. Even ‘Socialism from the Root Up’ had as its purpose the historical exposition of society up to its present with only the final section devoted to the future.

¹¹⁴ ‘The Integral Co-operators: An Attempt to Establish the Co-operative Commonwealth’, *Commonweal*, 5.194 (28 September 1889), pp. 305-306; *Commonweal*, 5.195 (5 October 1889), pp. 314-315.

Morris's thought on the socialist and communist state, despite its occasional simplicity and lack of critical depth, is an important aspect to his thought that is often overlooked. The notion of a transition between state socialism and a federalised communism is tied closely to Morris's thought on the questions of imperialism and the relationship between national groups, the relationship between labour and art, and the divide between town and country. It is to the first of these and the question of imperialism that is turned to now.

Chapter 3: Imperialism

In her 2010 book, *Empire and Imperial Ambition: Liberty, Englishness and Anti-Imperialism in Late-Victorian Britain*, Mira Matikkala argues that what linked critics of imperialism ‘was that they all declared to represent ‘true Englishness’ in contrast to what they regarded as a ‘distorted’ imperial identity.’ Matikkala places her focus on ‘the public debate’ and therefore ‘on active publicists.’ Because of this focus, her book ‘leaves out persons like William Morris, who was an anti-imperialist but’, apparently, ‘did not take any public part in the debate.’ While true that Morris was not engaged in the same written public debate as the figures who mainly populate Matikkala’s study, such as Herbert Spencer, Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, William Digby, Frederic Harrison and Edward Beesly, this is not the same as saying that Morris was not an active publicist. On the contrary, Morris’s writings in *Commonweal* and his activities with the Socialist League show that the issue of imperialism was never far from his mind. Just as Matikkala rightly argues that ‘there were various anti-imperialisms,’ so we have to also state there was more than one public debate and various avenues by which one could be an active publicist.¹

That Matikkala omits Morris from her study is not surprising. As Gregory Claeys noted in his *Imperial Sceptics: British Critics of Empire, 1850-1920*, published the same year as Matikkala’s study, ‘Morris’s views on foreign affairs have attracted scant mention.’ Even in Claeys’s exemplary book, Morris’s thought is not explored in great depth, receiving just four pages compared to the nineteen and ten afforded to Henry Mayers Hyndman and Ernest

¹ Mira Matikkala, *Empire and Imperial Ambition: Liberty, Englishness and Anti-Imperialism in Late-Victorian Britain*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2010, p.1, 18, 40.

Belfort Bax respectively. Claeys notes Morris's transition to socialism via liberal agitation in the Eastern Question Association (EQA) and cites the influence of Bax, Blunt, and the Positivists on his outlook.² Both Mark Bevir and Ruth Kinna also note Morris's involvement in the EQA and subsequent disillusionment with political liberalism but neither go on to accord his anti-imperialism as an important part of his socialist thought.³

It is worth briefly considering why this aspect of Morris's thought has been overlooked. Two points are worth mentioning. The first is that Morris's most direct statements on imperialism and the British Empire are to be found in his *Commonweal* journalism and this has often been overlooked even by scholars of Morris's politics in favour of examinations of his lectures and fictional works such as *News from Nowhere*. Morris's anti-imperial stance and his analysis of the competition for a larger share of the world-market is certainly present in his lectures and in *News from Nowhere*, but it is never the main point and can easily be overlooked. The second point is that the position taken by Morris was not the dominant one taken by socialists and would not prove to be influential in the labour movement as it developed into the Labour Party. Additionally, Morris died in 1896, before the patriotic fervour surrounding the Second Boer War that further side-lined critical voices such as Bax, who's anti-patriotism was unpopular even with his socialist contemporaries.⁴ As Claeys argues, the Boer War 'brought a substantial number of socialists either grudgingly to agree to shoulder the imperial burden, or downright positively to promote a brand of socialist imperialism'.⁵

² Gregory Claeys, *Imperial Sceptics: British Critics of Empire, 1850-1920*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, pp. 168-171.

³ Mark Bevir, *The Making of British Socialism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011, p. 91. Ruth Kinna, *William Morris: The Art of Socialism*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000, pp. 62-63.

⁴ Claeys, *Imperial Sceptics*, pp. 164-168. On socialists and the issue of patriotism during this period, see Paul Ward, 'Socialists and 'True' Patriotism in Britain in the Late 19th and Early 20th Centuries', *National Identities*, 1:2, pp. 179-194.

⁵ Claeys, *Imperial Sceptics*, pp. 125-126.

Of course, to say that Morris's anti-imperialism has been understudied is not to say that it has not been studied at all. E. P. Thompson long ago established Morris's agitation on the EQA as one of the tributaries Morris travelled, along with his considerations on the decline of art, on his way across the 'River of Fire' towards socialism. Thompson also noted that organising around opposition to imperialism was an important rallying point for the League in its early days and that imperialism 'was understood from the very first by Morris and the Leaguers to be the deadliest enemy to internationalism and to the cause of the people at home.'⁶

Peter Faulkner noted that Morris's 'hatred of aggressive nationalism' was one of his strongest political feelings and also that he drew a link between the decline of art and imperialism. Faulkner quotes from one of Morris's lectures: 'While we meet here in Birmingham to further the spread of education in art, Englishmen in India are, in their shortsightedness, actively destroying the very sources of that education'. Faulkner also highlights a passage from *News from Nowhere* where Old Hammond gives an account of the world-market and how it forcefully created new markets by destroying traditional societies, noting rightly that because 'there is so much else in *News from Nowhere*,' such passages are 'easily passed over'.⁷

Owen Holland has recently outlined how Morris 'mobilised a diverse array of media (journal, pamphlet and printed book) and genre (prose romance, poetic narrative, journalism, public lecture and stage-play) in an attempt to drive a wedge into the emergent discourse of the 'new imperialism'.' In particular he argues that 'Morris's decision to subtitle *News from Nowhere* a utopian *romance* consciously situated the text in proximity to the popular romance' stories by the likes of G.A. Henty and Henry Rider Haggard who had 'augmented

⁶ E. P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1955, p. 459.

⁷ Peter Faulkner, 'A Note on Morris and Imperialism', *JWMS* 9.2 (Spring 1999), pp. 22-27, p. 22, 25.

the academic work of historians such as J.R. Seely and J.A. Froude in making the case for ‘Greater Britain’.⁸ Holland further notes how *News from Nowhere* was relatively quickly translated into German, French, Spanish, Italian, Dutch, Swedish, Norwegian, Finnish, Bulgarian, Serbian and Japanese, each ‘published by houses affiliated to the socialist parties and labour movements in their respective countries. Such a politicised network of distribution’, Holland argues, ‘qualifies...critical assessments of Morris’s utopianism, which focus on its nationally circumscribed content.’⁸

Yet Holland also points rightly towards the ‘unconsciously Euro-centric’ logic of Morris’s socialism, and that we must acknowledge ‘that Morris’s politicised anti-imperialism did not dovetail neatly with a straightforward anti-colonialism, which, in consequence, requires us to revise our understanding of Morris’s socialist internationalism.’⁹ This issue will be considered towards the end of this chapter, as it also raises the issue of how much consideration Morris gave to the developmental paths towards socialism of non-industrial countries. Claeys warns that in ‘reassessing socialist views of empire, we need to be wary in particular of imposing any preconceived ideological schema on a bewilderingly diverse cast of characters.’¹⁰ With the much-loved Morris we must also be wary, as indeed Holland is, of not skipping past those parts of his thought that seem less palatable to us.

This chapter argues that opposition to imperialism was a core factor in Morris’s political thought. This opposition was present in Morris’s thought and action before his public embrace of socialism and was one of the forces that shaped his socialism in to the anti-parliamentary stance it would take. In the pages of *Commonweal*, drawing on Bax’s work also in the journal, Morris developed an analysis of imperialism and the violent creation of

⁸ Owen Holland, *William Morris’s Utopianism: Propaganda, Politics and Prefiguration*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, p. 182, 221, 181, 199.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 228, 230.

¹⁰ Claeys, *Imperial Sceptics*, p. 130.

new markets as a necessity on the part of capitalism. For Morris as a propagandist for socialism this was a worry as it had the potential to renew the vitality and stability of the competitive system at home and delay the advent of socialism. Thus, he saw it as important to try and propagate an anti-nationalist sentiment within the potential working class converts to socialism and to those already within the movement. The task of making international socialists in a period of increasing imperialism and national chauvinism was no easy task and on occasion led Morris to question its possibility.

Alongside his analysis of the world-market, Morris held a moral critique of the violence perpetrated in service of the extension of capitalism. This moral critique extended to those who justified British power, particularly in the form of a Christianity which provided a moral cover for capital in the guise of its civilising mission. Yet there are also what could be called, depending on one's own politics, limitations to Morris's thought. As Holland has shown, he left a door open to a potential future socialist colonialism (while remaining steadfast in his opposition to its practice in his own day). He routinely held to a rhetorical distinction between civilised and barbarous countries, said relatively little with the exception of Ireland to what should be done in places where British interest was already established, and was relatively vague on what the path of development towards socialism should be for those countries without a developed capitalist system.

A Lover of Justice

Morris's first public utterance on foreign affairs was a letter to the *Daily News* in October 1876.¹¹ Here Morris appealed to the Liberal Party and to 'the working men' to do all

¹¹ The fullest account of this period is still Thompson, *William Morris* (1955), pp. 230-312.

they could to oppose Britain going to war in aid of Turkey against Russia.¹² The month before Gladstone had published his pamphlet *The Bulgarian Horrors and the Question of the East* setting out his opposition to the Disraeli led Tory government. In his letter Morris asked ‘with humility to be allowed to inscribe myself, in the company of Mr Gladstone...as an hysterical sentimentalist’ and questioned whether history could show ‘greater fools than the English people will be if they do not make it clear to the Ministry and the Porte that they will wage no war on behalf of the Turks, no war on behalf of thieves and murderers?’¹³

The following month saw the creation of the Eastern Question Association (EQA) and Morris took up the position of Treasurer. The Chairman of the Executive Committee was the Liberal MP A.J. Mundella, who spent much of his career trying to foster links between the Liberal Party and the organised working class. One of these groups of organised labour, the Labour Representation League, had been bringing together London workers in opposition to government policy even before the establishment of the EQA.

It was to the working-men that Morris addressed his short Manifesto of May 1877. Titled ‘UNJUST WAR’, he signed it as ‘A Lover of Justice’. Morris writes that of all those who pay a price in times of war that ‘you, friends of the working classes, will pay the heaviest.’ Those pushing for involvement in the war were the ‘[g]reedy gamblers on the Stock exchange’, the ‘idle officers of the army and navy’ and ‘lastly, in the place of honour, the Tory Rump, that we fools, weary of peace, reason and justice, chose at the last election to “represent” us’.¹⁴ Given the rather limited franchise at this point, a few years before the Third

¹² On Morris’s relationship to the Liberal Party see Frank C. Sharp, ‘William Morris and British Politics: From the Liberal Party to the Socialist League’, in Florence S. Boos ed., *The Routledge Companion to William Morris*. Routledge, 2021, pp. 387-403.

¹³ Morris, ‘England and the Turks’, *AWS II*, p. 487.

¹⁴ The text of ‘UNJUST WAR’ has been reproduced in a few places, including as an appendix to Chapter 2 of R. Page Arnot, *William Morris: the man and the myth*. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1964. My citations are from here. ‘UNJUST WAR’, p. 25.

Reform Act, Morris's 'we fools' who had voted in the Tory administration will no doubt not have included many within his intended audience.

Morris also issued a warning to the working-men he addressed: 'I doubt if you know the bitterness of hatred against freedom and progress that lies at the hearts of a certain part of the richer classes in this country', and that these men, 'if they had the power (may England perish rather), would thwart your just aspirations, would silence you, would deliver you bound hand and foot for ever to irresponsible capital'.¹⁵ It was language like this that led Robin Page Arnot to say that Morris at this point, 'though still a member of the Liberal Party, is already putting on his armour for the class struggle'.¹⁶ Likewise Thompson argued that the piece shows 'the enormous educational effect upon him of his recent participation in the agitation, the great stride forward in understanding of class issues which he had taken' since his initial involvement.¹⁷

As Communist historians seeking to reclaim Morris, these comments by Arnot and Thompson are understandable, but they read Morris's statements of this period in light of his later socialism rather than trying to understand them on their own terms or in their context. Nicholas Salmon argued rightly that the Manifesto's 'significance has been exaggerated. Its tone is still to some extent patronising, and seen in the context of the wider agitation its appeal to the workers must be viewed with some suspicion.' Successful agitation depended on large numbers of people, and 'Morris was still sufficiently dedicated to the idea of parliamentary reform to realise that the power of the working classes was severely limited because they did not possess the vote.'¹⁸

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Arnot, *William Morris: the man and the myth*, p. 23.

¹⁷ Thompson, *William Morris* (1955), p. 252.

¹⁸ Nicholas Salmon, 'The Down-Trodden Radical': William Morris's Pre-Socialist Ideology', *JWMS* 13.3 (Autumn 1999), pp. 26-43, p.39, 40.

Thompson writes that throughout the Manifesto ‘it is to the working class that Morris appeals as the true force of internationalism and the backbone of the agitation’.¹⁹ While true that Morris addresses the working class, it needs to be noted that in asking them to ‘cast aside sloth and cry out against an UNJUST WAR’ he also pointedly asks them to ‘urge us of the Middle Classes to do no less, so that we may all protest solemnly and perseveringly’ against the drive for war.²⁰ The working-men were important allies to be sure, but in order to exert the most influence possible, Morris still believed the middle classes, those already with the vote, would be essential to bring on side.

There is also no inherent logical step from engaging with and appealing to the working class towards fully embracing the concept of class struggle. Many liberals such as Mundella were trying to forge links with the organised groups of working-men. There is also in Morris’s use of the phrase ‘irresponsible capital’ the sign of potential Positivist influence. As a socialist Morris would later scoff at what he characterised as the Positivist proposal of a moralised capitalism, though, as Claeys points out, he ‘evidently knew little of the details of these propositions, and is unlikely to have read Comte’.²¹ As Claeys also notes, some of Morris’s early lectures on art were organised by the Positivist Professor Henry Warr, and Morris in his letters and on occasion in *Commonweal* records his admiration (with reservations) for Frederic Harrison, particularly his ‘wholesome views against the exploitation of barbarous countries’.²² This admiration to some extent was reciprocated. In 1881 Harrison invited Morris to attend a lecture by a leading French Positivist, to which Morris replied, diplomatically, ‘I am, of course, much interested in sociology, but I can’t pretend to knowing

¹⁹ Thompson, *William Morris* (1955), p. 253.

²⁰ Morris, ‘UNJUST WAR’, p. 26.

²¹ Claeys, *Imperial Sceptics*, p. 169. There is further work needed on the links between the British Positivists and socialists. As GDH Cole long ago pointed out, the Positivists were one of few ‘Radical tendencies which helped to prepare the ground for the revival of Socialism.’ GDH Cole, *A History of Socialist Thought: Volume II Marxism and Anarchism 1850-1890*. London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd. 1953, p. 385.

²² *CL II*, p. 339.

French enough to follow an intricate address.’ Harrison, like Morris, had been influenced by Ruskin’s *Unto this Last*, and he and other Positivists held the line that in periods of war the burden fell hardest of the workers: ‘You are the bulk of the people, who suffer most and first in times of national distress.’²³

Even if we were to concede to Arnot’s position and say that in the late 1870s Morris was ‘putting on his armour for the class struggle’, he was slow in assembling the full suit. After the EQA died down Morris, along with other radicals similarly involved, formed the National Liberal League in late summer 1879. Like the EQA, this group sought to try and organise alongside working-men’s groups to keep pressure on the Liberals and to influence public opinion, and Morris again took up the position of Treasurer. In this position Morris wrote to the *Daily News* outlining the aims of the group – and anticipating one of the problems he would face in his socialist propaganda – stating that the chief difficulty to overcome was ‘not the body of crystallized Tory opinion that writes so many of our journals and votes so patiently in the House of Commons,’ and that instead it was ‘the mass of no opinion which, having in itself no principles, is naturally led to the poll by the first plausible cry that can manage to excite it into a temporary vitality.’²⁴ In his January 1880 manuscript ‘Our Country Right or Wrong’, intended for delivery to an audience of Liberal critics of Disraeli, he still believed that ‘the great crimes of nations’ had been caused by ‘stupidity chiefly, not by malice’ but also that ‘greed’ and ‘National Vain-Glory’ had been the cause of most ‘wars of civilization’.²⁵ Despite the frustrations he already felt with the Liberal party, Morris still thought it the most likely vehicle for political change if enough public pressure could be raised and sustained to hold it to its supposed principles.

²³ Quoted in Claeys, *Imperial Sceptics*, p. 101.

²⁴ *CL I*, p. 527.

²⁵ Morris, Florence S. Boos ed., *Our Country Right or Wrong: A Critical Edition*, London: William Morris Society, 2008, p. 66, 69.

Two events finally broke Morris's ties to the Liberal party. Following his Midlothian Campaign Gladstone and the Liberals were returned to office in 1880. In 1881 the Protection of Persons and Property Act, known as the Coercion Act, was passed giving the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland the power to intern without trial people suspected of taking part in the ongoing Land War. The following year Gladstone, in response to the nationalist movement of Arabi Pasha, ordered the bombardment of Alexandria and the invasion of Egypt. Gladstone, who had personal investments in Egypt, had a few years earlier criticised calls for intervention in Egypt, albeit as Priyamvada Gopal puts it, 'mainly on grounds of expediency.' It was the 'gap between the politician's rhetoric in opposition and his practice in power' that led many to abandon what hope they had in the Liberal party.²⁶

Frederic Harrison would later reflect that after the invasion of Egypt, for 'the next twenty years, no member of the Liberal party, whether politician or publicist, could be counted on to resist unjust war and Imperial expansion.'²⁷ Harrison and the Positivists highlighted the financial motivations behind the invasion, arguing that the 'real, and paramount aim of the English government' had been 'the forcing of Egyptian people...to submit to such a domestic régime as will continue to wring from them the usurious interest of loans almost forced on them by European gamblers.' Yet there were additional forces at play according to Harrison who shared Morris's hatred of national chauvinism. If the initial intervention came 'in the interest of the bond-holders' the British stayed in Egypt 'simply because our upper and middle classes are possessed by a blind passion for hoisting the British flag in every new territory than can be acquired.'²⁸

²⁶ Priyamvada Gopal, *Insurgent Empire: Anticolonial Resistance and British Dissent*. London: Verso, 2019, p. 146.

²⁷ Quoted in Claes, *Imperial Sceptics*, p. 80.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

The invasion of Egypt was also a crucial event for one of the most enigmatic of the critics of British imperial and colonial practice, Wilfred Scawen Blunt. Blunt profoundly admired Harrison and would go on to be close to Morris.²⁹ For Gopal, ‘Blunt’s criticism was frequently more radical and textured’ than the Positivists ‘in no small part due to his regular contact with anticolonial figures from the Arab world.’³⁰ Blunt went further than just opposition to the British policy and fully embraced the Egyptian nationalist movement and spent much time in contact with its leaders. While he admired the likes of Harrison, he wrote that their ‘sympathy is not as that of a man for his own kin, rather as a man for some ill-treated beast. They do not love the Musselman “Arabs” as I do.’³¹

In comparison to Harrison and Blunt, Morris’s public utterances at the time of the invasion of Egypt are more notable by their absence. The issue is also not particularly present in his letters of the period. One reason for this absence is that Morris at the time of the invasion was busy in his role as Treasurer of the Iceland Famine Relief Fund.³² It also speaks to his disillusionment with the Liberals. In the preceding years Morris’s lectures and thinking on art and its relation to labour and society had led him to believe a more wholesale change in the organisation of society was necessary, and now he was sure that such a change would not and could not come about via Liberals and Radicals.

In June and July of 1883, now openly declaring his socialism, Morris wrote to Charles Edmund Maurice, son of the Christian Socialist leader F.D. Maurice. Having previously thought that progress could be furthered on the lines of the Radicals, Morris was now of the opinion that ‘Radicalism is on the wrong line, so to say, and will never develop into anything more than Radicalism’. It was a product of and for the middle classes ‘and will

²⁹ On the relationship between Blunt and Morris see Peter Faulkner, *Wilfred Scawen Blunt and the Morris*. London, William Morris Society, 1981.

³⁰ Gopal, *Insurgent Empire*, p. 133.

³¹ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 144.

³² See *CL II*, pp. 117-119.

always be under the control of rich capitalists' who 'have no objection to its *political* development, if they think they can stop it there; but as to real social changes, they will not allow them if they can help it'.³³ This view 'received fresh confirmation in my mind by last year's events in Ireland and Egypt (especially the latter, where the Liberal 'leaders' 'led' the party into mere Jingoism).'³⁴

Morris had by now joined Hyndman's Democratic Federation, in which he met the Austrian socialist Andreas Scheu. Morris sent Scheu a biographical letter detailing his movement towards socialism. He claimed, with maybe a small amount of self-justificatory hindsight, that he 'was under small allusion as to the result of a victory of the Liberals, except so far as it would stem the torrent of Chauvinism, and check the feeling of national hatred and prejudice for which I shall always feel the most profound contempt.' If this is just a moral critique of national hatred and war, Morris then showed his awareness of the Positivist's argument about the financial motivations for the invasion of Egypt: 'The action and want of action of the new Liberal Parliament, especially the Coercion Bill and the Stockjobbers' Egyptian War quite destroyed any hope I might have had of any good being done by alliance with the radical party, however advanced they might call themselves.'³⁵

Morris's socialist opposition to parliamentarism and his reluctance to cooperate with the radicals is not understandable without reference to his own involvement with the Liberal party and his bitter disappointment at the betrayal of its principles when in office. The Coercion Bill and the Egyptian War did not in and of themselves make Morris a socialist. Harrison remained a Positivist who critiqued socialism, and Blunt was by inclination a conservative, albeit one who shared Morris's tendencies towards romanticism. There is truth in the idea that Morris was tending towards socialism, an idea he retrospectively put forward

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 199-200.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 202.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 230.

himself to Maurice to whom he told that you, ‘like myself, have really been a Socialist for a long time’.³⁶ But there was nothing inevitable about this move. His opposition to British foreign policy and towards national chauvinism were important in this transition to socialism and would continue to play an important part in both his outlook and that of the Socialist League.

Commonweal, Bax, and the early activities of the Socialist League

Justifying the breakaway from the Social Democratic Federation and the establishment of the Socialist League, Morris wrote in a letter that while he had hoped the problems would heal, ‘the truth is that Hyndman is determined to be master...and he cannot change his nature and be otherwise than a jingo and a politician if he tries.’³⁷ Given his experience with the Liberal party outlined above, Morris’s use of the word politician is pointed. He reiterated the same in another letter a few days later saying that ‘Hyndman’s leadership and our distrust of it is what has broken us in two: we think him ambitious, and though intellectually convinced of the economic truths of Socialism, yet at heart rather a jingo than anything else’.³⁸ The issue was certainly crucial to Eleanor Marx’s decision to lead the breakaway alongside Morris. Her political upbringing was firmly international in character with the Paris Commune and the Irish Republican movement being particularly important in making her, in the words of her most recent biographer, ‘the most committed and forceful internationalist’ in the League and wider socialist movement.³⁹

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 199.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 369.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 371-372.

³⁹ Rachel Holmes, *Eleanor Marx: A Life*. London: Bloomsbury, 2015, p. 235; for the split and Eleanor Marx’s role in it more generally see *ibid.*, pp. 230-235.

One of the ongoing quarrels within the SDF was control over *Justice*. The League itself would come to face issues over influence within *Commonweal*, but at the outset Morris as editor was important in shaping its direction and content. On the new journal's very first page the 'Manifesto of the Socialist League' declared that 'there is competition always, and sometimes open war, among the nations of the civilised world for their share of the world-market. For now, indeed, all the rivalries of nations have been reduced to this one – a degraded struggle for their share of the spoils of barbarous countries to be used at home for the purpose of increasing the riches of the rich and the poverty of the poor.'⁴⁰

On the same first page, Morris's 'Introductory' stated that *Commonweal* would 'only deal with political matters when they directly affect the progress of the Cause.' A government of the privileged 'cannot act usefully or rightly towards the community' due to their position; 'their struggles for the national share of the exploitation of barbarous peoples are nothing to us except so far as they may give us an opportunity of instilling Socialism into men's minds, or of organizing discontent into Socialism.'⁴¹ The references to 'barbarous' countries and peoples would be a regular feature of Morris's journalism and show that Blunt's line that, for people like Harrison, their 'sympathy is not as that of a man for his own kin, rather as a man for some ill-treated beast', could easily be applied to Morris, and this will be considered later in the chapter. What is also of note is that Morris sees the issue of imperial expansion 'as an opportunity of instilling Socialism into men's minds'. It was hoped that through exposing the violent exploitation of 'barbarous' peoples, British workers would come to realise the hideous power of capital, both abroad and at home, and work towards its abolition.

⁴⁰ 'The Manifesto of the Socialist League', *Commonweal*, 1.1 (February 1885), p. 1.

⁴¹ Morris, 'Introductory', *ibid*.

Key in shaping the anti-imperialist stance of the League in its early stages was Ernest Belfort Bax.⁴² Bax had been strongly influenced by the Positivists, acknowledging later in his life that the ‘idea of human progress as the proper object of religion led me...to attach myself somewhat, although I never formally joined it, to the Positivist body’. He was particularly struck that ‘they were the only organized body of persons at that time in the country who had the courage systematically to defend the movement of which the [Paris] Commune was the outcome, as well as the actions of the Commune and its adherents themselves.’⁴³

During its first year Bax wrote several pieces on imperialism in *Commonweal*, starting in the first issue. This piece, ‘Imperialism v. Socialism’, was the first full article to appear in *Commonweal*, and in conjunction with his other pieces can, as Claeys puts it, ‘be seen as marking a turning-point in popularising a socialist critique of imperialism’.⁴⁴ Bax began by noting that antagonism between countries was nothing new, but that the ‘jealousy between the courts of Europe, once the sole and until recently the main cause of national enmity and war, has in our day been superseded by the jealousy between the great capitalists of its various nationalities.’ It is worth quoting some of Bax’s article at length to bring out the character and tone of his critique.

‘War, jingoism – otherwise patriotism – are indeed past cure while the economic basis of society remains unchallenged, but only so far; and hence we call on all sincere friends of peace to leave their tinkering “peace societies” and work for Socialism, remembering that all commercial wars – and what modern wars are not directly or indirectly commercial? – are the necessary outcome of the dominant civilisation. We conjure them to reflect that such wars must necessarily increase in proportion to the

⁴² Bax did not receive the level of attention he merits from twentieth century historians of socialism, even if he escaped the opprobrium levelled towards Hyndman. The best recent discussion of his thought is in Seamus Flaherty, *Marx, Engels and Modern British Socialism: The Social and Political Thought of H.M. Hyndman, E.B. Bax and William Morris*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2020. On his anti-imperialism see Claeys, *Imperial Sceptics*, pp. 159-168.

⁴³ E.B. Bax, *Reminiscences and Reflexions of a Mid and Late Victorian*. New York: Thomas Seltzer, 1920, p. 30

⁴⁴ Claeys, *Imperial Sceptics*, p. 162.

concentration of capital in private hands – *i.e., in proportion as the commercial activity of the world is intensified, and the need for markets becomes more pressing.* Markets, markets, markets! Who shall deny that this is the drone-bass ever welling up from beneath the shrill howling of “pioneers of civilisation”, “avengers of national honour,” “purveyors of gospel light,” “restorers of order,” in short, beneath the hundred and one cuckoo cries with which the “market classes” seek to smother it or to vary its monotony? It seems well-nigh impossible there can be men so blind as not to see through these sickening hypocrisies of the governing classes, so thin as they are.’⁴⁵

The view of imperial expansion as the necessary result of capitalism’s need of new markets, the hypocrisy of its defenders, particularly Christian ones, and a belief that only socialism could combat this new development were to be hallmarks of Bax’s and Morris’s critique. The influence of Bax’s arguments on other contributors to *Commonweal* is clear, with William Davidson in 1889 writing that ‘we Socialists declare that this slaughter directly due to war, when traced to its primary cause, is but an effect of competitive commercialism.’⁴⁶

If, as Bax argued, the ‘end of all foreign policy, as of colonial extension, is to provide fields for the relief of native surplus capital and merchandise,’ in what position did this leave the worker. The numerous emigration schemes that were in place throughout the nineteenth century only gave workers ‘the privilege of being shipped across the seas, there to help to make the colonialist and land-grabber rich.’ For sure a few may make their own fortune, but ‘the immense majority remain wage-slaves as before.’ The emerging cities in the colonies such as Sydney and Melbourne ‘exhibit precisely the same conditions as the cities of the Old World’ and could not do otherwise as the same underlying economics were at play.

⁴⁵ Bax, ‘Imperialism v. Socialism’, *Commonweal*, 1.1 (February 1885). pp.2-3. Bax’s reference to the ‘jealousy’ between capitalists of different nationalities is perhaps an echo of Hume’s essay, which Bax was certainly aware of, though the argument is of course different. See David Hume, ‘Of the jealousy of trade’, in Knud Haakonssen ed., *Political Essays*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 150-153.

⁴⁶ William Davidson, ‘Competition and War’, *Commonweal*, 5. 179 (15 June 1889), p. 188.

‘This, then, is the empire which the blood and sinew of you, workers, are squandered to maintain and extend. With room enough and to spare in the British Islands for all their inhabitants to live a comfortable life, ever fresh lands are sought for exploitation, ever new populations for pillage. It matters not even that colonies already established could accommodate more than a hundred times their present inhabitants; still the vampire Imperialism sucks in fresh territory year by year. Populations to rob and enslave; markets to shoot bad wares into; lands to invest capital upon: to obtain these is the be-all and end-all of modern statesmanship.’

Workers did not benefit from imperial expansion and were expendable bodies to be used in the process. Only a change in the basis of society could combat ‘the vampire Imperialism’. Bax thought that the correct socialist attitude was that the ‘love of country’ was ‘no nobler sentiment than love of class’. ‘Race-pride and class-pride are, from the standpoint of Socialism, involved in the same condemnation. The establishment of Socialism, therefore, on any national or race basis is out of the question.’⁴⁷

In March 1885 Bax turned his pen towards the supposed national hero General Gordon. Gordon’s defence of Khartoum against the Mahdi’s forces had gained him popularity amongst the British public and significant organs of the press such as the *Pall Mall Gazette*. The government had not wished for Gordon to become entrenched in the city, and only reluctantly sent a force to help relieve him and his troops. In a blow to the popularity of Gladstone’s administration, the force arrived two days after Khartoum had fallen and Gordon had died. A few weeks after, Morris wrote to his daughter May, in a very matter of fact way: ‘Let me see, you have been away nearly three weeks; what has happened in that time? Khartoum fallen – into the hands of the people it belongs to – and what else?’⁴⁸

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁴⁸ *CL II*, p. 388.

As editor of *Commonweal*, Morris felt that ‘some space we have been obliged to give to the wretched Soudan business’, adding that ‘Bax’s article is very good’.⁴⁹ Bax felt no sympathy for Gordon. ‘Khartoum has fallen amid massacre (we are told). Gordon is killed. Who is to blame? We answer proximately Gordon himself, and ultimately the English capitalist class. Had it not been for the latter, Gordon would never have been sent out. Had it not been for Gordon’s inducements the inhabitants of Khartoum would never have fought against their own countrymen and thus excited the fury of the Mahdi’s victorious troops.’ Bax urged that the working class should ‘remember that this organised brigandage was deliberately planned from the beginning and that Gordon’s “pacific mission” was only too obviously a blind.’ Morris’s friend Blunt, Bax thought, ‘whose disinterested love for the Arab race is beyond question, was in a position to guarantee successful negotiations, had the opportunity been given him of making them.’ But, turning his attention to the cheerleaders of British prestige, such an arrangement ‘was not quite good enough for the “influential” public for which the *Pall Mall Gazette* and its congeners write.’⁵⁰

The League’s activities were not isolated to *Commonweal*. In February J.L. Mahon, Secretary of the League sent a circular to newspaper editors with a resolution passed by the Provisional Council. The League, it stated, was convinced that the invasion of the Soudan ‘was undertaken with the covert intention of exploiting that country for the purposes of Commercial greed, and that therefore the check inflicted on the British invaders should be hail’d by all supporters of the cause of the people as a triumph of right over wrong, of righteous self-defence over ruffianly Brigandage.’⁵¹ In April Morris chaired a public meeting held in protest against Imperial Policy and against the ongoing military action in Soudan. The first resolution proposed stated:

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 391.

⁵⁰ Bax, ‘Gordon and the Soudan’, *Commonweal*, 1.2 (March 1885), pp. 9-10.

⁵¹ *IISH SL*, No. 171.

‘That this meeting denounces the aggressions on the peoples of Egypt and the Soudan, which have occasioned such wrong, waste, and slaughter, and sympathises heartily with the brave men, women, and children who have offered such dauntless resistance to Tyranny. It considers all this robbery and violence to be only the necessary outcome of the system of commercial exploitation, which in one way or another curses all the countries of the world, and it calls on all workers to resist such policy to the utmost and to combine for the final removal of the causes which produce it.’⁵²

As the circular and this resolution make clear, the League were willing to publicly declare support for resistance to British military forces.

Priyamvada Gopal has recently argued that a significant driving force of anti-colonial and anti-imperial thought in Britain was recognition of indigenous resistance. She cites the example of Frederic Harrison, who ‘certainly did not arrive at his reflections on Egypt through a presupposition of cultural equality, but found himself conceding parity of aspiration by coming to an understanding of the aspirations and claims that drove the rebellion.’⁵³ A similar dynamic can be seen with the League. In March 1885 the League issued its ‘Manifesto on the Soudan War’. Drafted by Bax this Manifesto certainly did not assume equality, describing the people of the Soudan as ‘ill-armed and semi-barbarous’ and again as ‘weak and uncivilised peoples’. Yet, their ‘only crime is that they have risen against a foreign oppression’. Praise was given to ‘Mehemet Achmet (the Mahdi), the brave man who in Oriental fashion is undertaking the deliverance of his country’.⁵⁴ Bax had argued that ‘everything which makes for the disruption and disintegration of the empire to which he

⁵² *IISH SL*, No. 3454.

⁵³ Gopal, *Insurgent Empire*, p. 159.

⁵⁴ *IISH SL*, No. 3441.

belongs must be welcomed by the Socialist as an ally.’⁵⁵ Because the League saw the motive of the imperial project as economic, as part of capitalism’s need to create new markets, the resistance displayed by indigenous peoples made them part of the same struggle as socialists in Britain who saw themselves as engaged in a battle against tyranny and oppression. As Morris put it, a man like Stanley in Africa was a ‘friend of the capitalist who lives by robbing the workman of the results of his toil, and therefore by that very act is his enemy’, and he was also ‘the enemy of the barbarian who lives by the labour of his hands’ who were ‘therefore the brother of the English *workman*.’⁵⁶

Morris and the World-Market

Most of Bax’s articles on imperial expansion appeared in 1885 and 1886, yet he returned to the subject in July 1888 with an article that had a strong impact on Morris. The article, ‘Africa’, was relatively short and direct. After a brief summary of the advances made by European nations in their partition of Africa, Bax moved to consider the historical ramifications of this stage of capitalist development. Given ‘the rapidity with which capitalism advances’, the opening up of Africa meant ‘*untold* mineral, vegetable, and animal wealth placed at the disposal of the modern commercial system; a new world of markets; *limitless* cheap labour; practically *boundless* territories for emigrations; etc., etc.’ What impact this would have on the course of economic development was ‘undoubtedly one of the crucial questions in all speculations as to the immediate future of the human race.’⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Bax, ‘Imperialism v. Socialism’, p. 3.

⁵⁶ Morris, ‘Notes on News’, *Commonweal*, 5.170 (13 April 1889), p. 113.

⁵⁷ Bax, ‘Africa’, *Commonweal*, 4.113 (28 July 1888), p. 236.

It was a crucial question, particularly for socialists, Bax argued, because it had large implications for their own political project and should be taken seriously by those who thought the revolution was close to hand. 'It is all very well to talk about the modern system of production and distribution breaking down by its own weight. This would be true enough if it could not gather strength from anywhere, but unfortunately it can do so, and its votaries are actively preparing the conditions by which, as far as may be, it shall do so.' Bax's conclusion is worth quoting in full:

'I do not wish to be pessimistic or to dash the hopes of enthusiasts, still less to dogmatise in matters economic, when I confess the dread possibility does present itself to me occasionally of the capitalistic world taking a new lease of life out of the exploitation of Africa. How long or how short that lease may be, if it obtains at all, none can say. We know the Social Revolution is written in history in terms which are hidden in no cryptogram. But the time when the change shall come is not within the bounds of human science to foresee. This is that secret which the day shall reveal when it comes, and which no genius can make known beforehand. We must beware of confounding the Logical with the real sequence of things. Logically the principle of Individualism has reached its extreme limits in the nineteenth century – is played out, in fact. The next definite stage in human evolution must be the beginning of Socialism. But it is quite conceivable, to say the least; that the present stage should be prolonged in a slightly changed form even for another century by means as these indicated in the present article.'⁵⁸

Some form of socialism was still seen, ultimately, as inevitable, but its arrival was not to be taken as an automatic process. The political struggle against imperialism was part of the same struggle against capitalism.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

In the same edition of *Commonweal*, Morris closed his 'Notes on News' with a few remarks on Bax's article, 'which is worth very serious consideration.' Morris makes an important admission that too many socialists, even those 'most sincere in their professions of internationalism are too apt to limit our scope of vision to civilised countries,' adding, in a demonstration of his lack of belief in cultural equality, that it is easy to forget 'that barbarous ones are at any rate of the kind of importance that the lamb is to the wolf.' Bax's article raised several questions for Morris, which he poses but offers no answers:

'Whether the nourishment to be afforded to capitalism by the Dark Continent is as great as our comrade seems to think; whether the accelerated pace which the impulse of huge new markets would certainly give to competitive commerce would not go far to neutralise the advantages to capitalism 'opening up' Africa – whether at least it would not make the break-up more complete when it came. Or again, if Africa is falling into the grasp of capitalism grown conscious of its necessities for new markets, is there anything which can prevent it from becoming the new nourishment for capitalism?'

These are significant questions, and we should at least recognise that Morris asks them. Ultimately, Morris decides that irrespective of this 'new nourishment', 'it is not our business merely to wait on circumstance; but to do our best to push forward the movement towards Socialism, which is at least as much part of the essence of the epoch as the necessities of capitalism are.' The gain to be made in making convinced socialists 'will not be lost again, though it may be obscured for a time'.⁵⁹ Like Bax, Morris still sees the move to socialism as inevitable, if delayable, and their job as propagandists and socialists was to convince others of this and to join the struggle against those forces seeking to strengthen and renew capitalist society.

⁵⁹ Morris, 'Notes on News', *Commonweal*, 4.133 (28 July 1888), p. 233.

Morris had articulated similar thoughts in a fuller length article over a year before Bax's on Africa. There were signs that trade was picking up after a few years of depression, casting doubts in the minds of socialists who thought the change in the basis of society was at hand. Morris urged caution, while socialists had faith 'in the certainty of the great change coming about, it would be idle for any one of us to attempt to prophesy as to the date of the realization of our hopes; and it is well for us not to be too sanguine, since overweening hope is apt to give birth to despair if it meets with check or disappointment.' He reminded his readers of the two forces - Thompson's necessity and desire - pushing the coming change. The first was that the capitalist system 'is of its own weight pushing onwards towards its destruction.' The second, which it was important not to lose sight of, was 'the *conscious* hope of the oppressed classes, forced into union and antagonism by the very success of the commercial system which their hope now threatens with destruction.' But, what if the capitalist system was able to save and renew itself? Morris outlined three possibilities. The first a slow recovery 'something of the nature of the rebounds from depression which were the rule for the last forty years'. The second was a large European war, as this 'would give a great stimulus to trade while it lasted; just as if half London were burned down, the calamity would be of great service to those who were not burned out'. War was not desirable however, even from the capitalist standpoint, because behind it lay the possibility of revolution. The third, the most likely to be successful, also involved war:

'...because unless commerce can find new capacities for expansion it is all over, or will be in a very few years; the partial and brief recovery of trade before mentioned is too insignificant to be worth much notice; the one thing for which our thrice accursed civilisation craves, as the stifling man for fresh air, is new markets; fresh countries must be conquered by it which are not manufacturing and are producers of raw

material, so that ‘civilised’ manufactures can be forced on them. *All wars now waged, under whatever pretences, are really wars for the great prizes in the world-market.*’⁶⁰

Paul Lafargue had earlier made this same last point in *Commonweal* in his article on French involvement in China. ‘No capitalist nation can pretend to be safe from colonial wars,’ he argued, ‘for the great question of modern industry is...to increase and to open up new markets.’⁶¹ These new markets were needed so that ‘the present rulers of society’ could ‘work off the stock of wares which they go on producing by means of partly unpaid labour’ and are unable to sell sufficiently at home.⁶² If fresh countries already had manufactures of their own, these could be forcibly ruined by the importation of cheaper commodities, as in the case of India, the decline of whose art and culture, as mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, was a concern of Morris’s from the late 1870s. As *The Communist Manifesto* had put it, and quoted in the League’s own manifesto: ‘Cheap goods are the artillery for battering down Chinese walls and for overcoming the obstinate hatred entertained against foreigners by semi-civilised nations’.⁶³

Whereas during his liberal agitation Morris criticised ‘irresponsible capital’ and the injustice of British force, as a socialist he saw how it was all connected to, and was the result of, the competitive commercial system that had long been in operation in Britain itself. The League’s Manifesto outlined that the class conflict happened not just between classes but that the ‘profit grinding system is maintained by competition, or veiled war’ and was taking place ‘also within the classes themselves: there is always war among the workers for bare subsistence, and among their masters, the employers and middle-men...lastly there is competition always, and sometimes open war, among the nations of the civilised world for

⁶⁰ Morris, ‘Facing the Worst of It’, *Commonweal*, 3.58 (19 February 1887), p. 60.

⁶¹ Paul Lafargue, ‘The Tonkin War and Socialism’, *Commonweal*, 1.4 (May 1885), p. 34.

⁶² Morris, ‘Notes on News’, *Commonweal*, 4.135 (11 August 1888), p. 249.

⁶³ Quoted in ‘The Manifesto of the Socialist League’, p. 1.

their share of the world-market.’⁶⁴ The imperial quest for new markets was a logical extension of the competitive system based on the profit motive. If enough profits were not to be found in the old markets, new ones had to be found or created.

That Morris understood new markets were actively created and not simply found is evident in *News from Nowhere* in a passage described by Peter Faulkner as ‘one of the most convincing pieces of Victorian anti-Imperialism, and all the more striking and courageous as being written at the beginning of the decade of the Diamond Jubilee, the high point of the British Empire.’⁶⁵ It is worth quoting in full as it is a powerful example of how Morris used his utopian story as a political intervention in contemporary arguments, and it also supports Owen Holland’s argument that the story is also Morris providing a counter-narrative to the imperial romances popular at the time. The speaker is Old Hammond:

‘The appetite of the world-market grew with what it fed on: the countries within the ring of what was called ‘civilisation’ (that is, organised misery) were glutted with the abortions of the market, and force and fraud were used unsparingly to ‘open up’ countries *outside* that pale. This process of opening up is a strange one to those who have read the professions of the men of that period and do not understand their practice; and perhaps shows us at its worst the great vice of the nineteenth century, the use of hypocrisy and cant to evade the responsibility of vicarious ferocity. When the civilised world-market coveted a country not yet in its clutches, some transparent pretext was found – the suppression of a slavery different from and not so cruel as that of commerce; the pushing of a religion no longer believed in by its promoters; the ‘rescue’ of some desperado or homicidal madman whose misdeeds had got him into trouble amongst the natives of the ‘barbarous’ country – any stick, in short which would beat the dog at all. Then some bold, unprincipled, ignorant adventurer was found (no difficult task in the days of competition), and he was bribed to ‘create a market’ by breaking up whatever traditional society there might be in the doomed

⁶⁴ ‘The Manifesto of the Socialist League’, *ibid.*

⁶⁵ Faulkner, ‘A Note on Morris and Imperialism’, p. 25.

country, and by destroying whatever leisure or pleasure he found there. He forced wares on the natives which they did not want, and took their natural products in ‘exchange,’ as this form of robbery was called, and thereby he ‘created new wants,’ to supply which (that is, to be allowed to live by their new masters) the hapless, helpless people had to sell themselves into the slavery of hopeless toil so that they might have something wherewith to purchase the nullities of ‘civilisation.’⁶⁶

What is apparent in this passage is Morris’s attack on the justifications given for imperial venture. If imperialism had the potential to renew capitalism, as Bax suggested, for another hundred years, it was important to not just convince workers of the truths of socialism but also for those socialists to be opposed to British imperial policy and not to fall prey to nationalist sentiment and support policies that would entrench their own servitude at home. Imperialism, as Eric Hobsbawm wrote, ‘encouraged the masses, and especially the discontented, to identify themselves with the imperial state and nation, and thus unconsciously to endow the social and political system represented by that state with justification and legitimacy.’⁶⁷ For Morris the need to expose the ‘hypocrisy and cant’ used as cover for ‘vicarious ferocity’ was clear, and it is to his attempt to do this that we now turn.

The ‘Honour, Glory, and Usefulness of the British Empire’

According to Matikkala the late-Victorian anti-imperialists can be considered, using Stefan Collini’s term, as ‘public moralists’, and that ‘they thought that imperialists did not live up to the traditional English ideals, which amounted to significant ‘failings of

⁶⁶ Morris, ‘News from Nowhere’, *Commonweal*, 6.225 (3 May 1890), p. 141.

⁶⁷ Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Empire 1875-1914*. London: Abacus, 2010, p. 70.

character'.⁶⁸ This wasn't quite the case with Morris. What imperialism and its public advocates revealed to Morris was that 'English ideals' served only the morality of the market. Morris used *Commonweal*, particularly his Notes, to attack the violence at the heart of British imperialism, its supporters back home, and also its figureheads.

We have already seen how Bax treated the death of General Gordon. Around the four-year anniversary of this event, Morris was prompted to have his say on 'the general of the Christian commercialists'. 'It is to be supposed that as long as it is convenient to remember him and his virtues we shall have them dinned into our ears.' The Fall of Khartoum, regarded by many influential elements of the press as a tragedy, was rather 'a victory of the oppressed' and Gordon 'fell not as a martyr to a great cause, but as an instrument of oppression whom fate at last thrust aside.'⁶⁹ Morris was particularly scathing at the cover that religion gave to figures like Gordon. After Gordon had 'got religion' he 'became that most dangerous tool of capitalistic oppression, the 'God-fearing soldier'' who 'allowed himself to be used to drive the wedge of profit-mongering into barbarous Africa'.⁷⁰

It wasn't just Gordon though, all 'Christian heroes...whose mission it is to 'civilise' barbarism by the introduction of wage-slavery cannot be nice about their means.'⁷¹ Henry Morton Stanley was a frequent target in *Commonweal*. Bax had reviewed Stanley's *The Congo; or, The Founding of a Free State* in 1885, a book which on every page 'expresses the hope and faith of the market-hunter's pioneer, that the redemption of Africa by international capitalism draweth nigh.' 'Christianity, it is perfectly obvious, is to Mr. Stanley the indispensable handmaid of the great religion of the nineteenth century, commercial enterprise, and for this reason alone is to be respected.'⁷² Morris ventured whether Stanley, a

⁶⁸ Matikkala, *Empire and Imperial Ambition*, p. 11; see Stefan Collini, *Public Moralists: Political Thought and Intellectual Life in Britain 1850-1930*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991.

⁶⁹ Morris, 'Notes on News', *Commonweal*, 5.160 (2 February 1889), p. 33.

⁷⁰ Morris, 'Notes on News', *Commonweal*, 4.146 (27 October 1888), p. 337.

⁷¹ Morris, 'Notes on News', *Commonweal*, 5.157 (12 January 1889), p. 12.

⁷² Bax, 'The Congo', *Commonweal*, 1.7, p. 70

‘Rifle-and-bible newspaper correspondent’, should be put on trial when he returned to England, and if not, he asked whether ‘his hanging men because they refused to serve him at the risk of their lives differs from murder?’⁷³ Frank Kitz described Stanley as ‘the personification of that commercial Christianity which gives a lip-service to its crucified Christ, and daily crucifies humanity between the twin thieves of profit and interest.’⁷⁴

The British Empire was an ‘elaborate machinery of violence and fraud’ that unsurprisingly came under severe attack. When the Colonial and Indian Exhibition opened in South Kensington in May 1886, Morris used *Commonweal* to suggest ‘examples of the glory of the Empire which have been, I think, forgotten.’ These included beginning ‘at the entrance with two pyramids, *à la Timour*, of the skulls of Zulus, Arabs, Burmese, New Zealanders, etc., etc., slain in wicked resistance [sic] to the benevolence of British commerce.’ Another possibility was a ‘specimen of the wire whips used for softening the minds of rebellious Jamacia [sic] negroes under the paternal sway of Governor Eyre’. A final example took aim at the Poet Laureate: ‘A pair of crimson plush breeches with my Lord Tennyson’s ‘Ode’ on the opening of the Exhibition, embroidered in gold, on the seat thereof.’⁷⁵ This last example, while tongue in cheek was still serious. Morris had admired much of Tennyson’s work, and he hated to see a once great artist producing work in celebration of the cause of empire.

At times Morris’s disgust at the Empire extended to the mass of English people. In December 1888 British forces defeated an advancing Mahdist force near Suakin in Sudan. The British, a combined Anglo-Egyptian force, suffered 12 casualties to around 1,000 on the Mahdist side. Morris considered that ‘this Massacre of Suakim [sic], whatever the

⁷³ Morris, ‘Notes on News’, *Commonweal*, 6.225 (3 May 1890), p. 140; ‘Notes on News’, *Commonweal*, 5.170 (13 April 1889), p.113.

⁷⁴ F. Kitz, ‘The Christian Pioneer’, *Commonweal*, 6.220 (29 March 1890), p. 97.

⁷⁵ Morris, ‘Notes on Passing Events’, *Commonweal*, 2.18 (15 May 1886), p. 50.

Gladstonian party (equally guilty with the others) may say, will be heartily applauded by the average Englishman.’

‘Nay, it will be considered by the politicians who are now governing us as a stroke of good luck which will help to stay their failing fate, and will probably win them a seat or two of those that are agoing in the electoral scramble. This is the morality of the English nation, of which we have heard so much! Indeed, I admit that it is caused more by rank stupidity than by malicious scoundrelism; though there is an element of that in it also.’

There is an element of despair in Morris’s tone here, as if he is questioning the possibility of making socialists out of a public who could cheer on such events, revealing quite how difficult his project of educating international revolutionary socialists in the era of imperialism was. That politicians looked to take advantage of the situation confirmed his position against electoral politics. In cases such as this Morris found himself on the side of the ‘enemy’ – Yes; if they are the enemies of such a nation as ours there must be some good in them I think, since commercial patriotism has brought us to this pass.’⁷⁶ Anti-patriotism, however honestly felt, is a difficult political position to sell, especially when your political project aims at mass support.

If the public were one issue there was also the push from more established members of the society for Imperial Federation.⁷⁷ This ‘curious fad’, as Morris termed it, was likely to be suspicious to socialists who would ‘be likely to smell out the ‘Imperial’ qualification of that good thing Federation.’⁷⁸ One such socialist was William Clarke, a future Fabian essayist, who in 1885 had written that the Imperial Federation movement ‘in its essence is

⁷⁶ Morris, ‘Notes on News’, *Commonweal*, 4.155 (29 December 1888), p. 409.

⁷⁷ On the various proposals for a Greater Britain, see Duncan Bell, *The Idea of Greater Britain: Empire and the Future of the World Order, 1860-1900*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007.

⁷⁸ Morris, ‘Notes on Passing Events’, *Commonweal*, 2.19 (22 May 1886), p. 57.

intended to divert the broad stream of human progress into the narrow channel of English capitalism.⁷⁹ To Morris it meant ‘the bolstering up of the decaying supremacy of England in the world-market with the help of a worthless sentiment called patriotism; which, however, has done rather successful work as regards the leaders in this movement themselves, who can see nothing but through its mist.’⁸⁰ Clarke had argued similarly, against the claims that the scheme would be mutually beneficial to all involved, that ‘imperialists in England always, avowedly or tacitly, advocate federalism because it would be good for England, not at all because it would necessarily be good for the colonies.’⁸¹

As Duncan Bell has shown, proponents of Imperial Federation and of a Greater Britain often presented ‘a vision of moral order in which a superior Anglo-Saxon race offered stability and leadership, benevolently but firmly, to a chaotic world.’⁸² We have seen what Morris thought of the ‘moral order’ of British imperialism. He too had a tendency himself to think in terms of racial characteristics, but in the case of Imperial Federation he was keen to point out that ‘that humbugging phantom, ‘the marvellous energy of the Anglo-Saxon race,’ covers at least the average amount of incompetence and laziness common to commercial mankind.’⁸³ The malignant rule and hypocrisy of the English was also highlighted by John Sketchley who scoffed at the idea ‘that England is the most enlightened nation in the world’ and ‘that her dealing with other peoples is the most just, and her influence throughout the world the most beneficent’. Rather, when ‘we look at the Government of India, it is one of the purest despotisms; and when Englishmen condemn the government of Russia in Poland, they ought to remember that the government of England in India is not in the least better.’⁸⁴

⁷⁹ William Clarke, ‘An English Imperialist Bubble’, *The North American Review*, Vol. 141, No. 344 (July 1885), pp. 60-72, p. 72.

⁸⁰ Morris, ‘Notes on Passing Events’, *Commonweal*, 2.19 (22 May 1886), p. 57.

⁸¹ Clarke, ‘An English Imperialist Bubble’, p. 71.

⁸² Bell, *The Idea of Greater Britain*, p. 92.

⁸³ Morris, ‘Notes on Passing Events’, *Commonweal*, 2.19 (22 May 1886), p. 57.

⁸⁴ John Sketchley, ‘British Rule in India’, *Commonweal*, 4.119 (21 April 1888), p. 124.

Morris's critique of the violence and immorality at the core of empire and imperialism was powerful, even courageous, but it cannot be said to be that influential. *Commonweal*, as Elizabeth Carolyn Miller has written, often presented itself against the bourgeois press as 'an oppositional, alternative print sphere.'⁸⁵ Morris and others frequently attacked or mocked the 'reactionist press', often singling out 'the perfidious *Pall Mall Gazette*'.⁸⁶ Eleanor Marx noted that this often went both ways, that while it had 'more than once been our duty to fall foul of the *Pall Mall Gazette*', they in turn 'have attacked it and its editors unsparingly.'⁸⁷ Bax wrote of the importance of the *Gazette*, but also of *The Times* and *The Telegraph* in demanding a relief mission for General Gordon. The government had been forced into action, Bax argued, partly because a government 'whose sole policy is office cannot afford to disregard the plainly expressed wishes of the bulk of the upper and wealthy middle classes, its masters,' who were represented by the bourgeois press.⁸⁸

Morris warned readers to 'be cautious in accepting news from the tainted source of filibusters and filibusters' friends; for it will often be fabricated, or at least exaggerated, in order to stir public opinion into getting up fresh filibustering expeditions.'⁸⁹ Although his political views had changed a lot since his involvement in the Eastern Question Association, public opinion was still considered important, and so was the place of the press in forming that opinion. *Commonweal*, and other small radical papers never had the circulation or reach to significantly shift public opinion. Beyond individual responses it would also be difficult to say that Morris and *Commonweal*'s anti-nationalism and even anti-patriotism had significant influence within the socialist and labour movement. Bax's anti-patriotism would eventually

⁸⁵ Elizabeth Carolyn Miller, *Slow Print: Literary Radicalism and Late Victorian Print Culture*. Stanford University Press, 2014, p. 40.

⁸⁶ Morris, 'The Whig-Jingo Victory', *Commonweal*, 2.27 (17 July 1886), p. 121.

⁸⁷ Eleanor Marx Aveling, 'The "Pall Mall Gazette"', *Commonweal*, 1.7 (August 1885), p. 69.

⁸⁸ Bax, 'Gordon and the Soudan', *Commonweal*, 1.2 (March 1885), pp. 9-10, 10.

⁸⁹ Morris, 'Notes on News', *Commonweal*, 5.158 (19 January 1889), p. 18.

lead Hyndman to claim he ‘bitterly hates England and Englishmen’.⁹⁰ It has also not featured prominently in assessments of Morris’s politics, but as this chapter has been arguing, it was an integral part of his socialism.

Barbarous Peoples, Internationalism and Colonies

In this final section we turn to examine some of the tensions, gaps and limitations in Morris’s thought on imperialism and internationalism. To begin with we must note that, for all that has preceded in this chapter, ‘the internal logic of [Morris’s] socialist politics, in common with most sections of the socialist movement during this period, was unconsciously Euro-centric.’⁹¹ He respected and supported the resistance offered by indigenous peoples against British force without ever fully admitting cultural equality. Despite sincerely believing in the international solidarity of labour and, as we have seen, referring to African labourers as the brothers of English workers, he also near uniformly referred to countries (and by extension their citizens) in Africa, Asia and the Arab world as ‘barbarous’, or ‘semi-civilised’, or occasionally ‘savage’. There are also occasional instances in both his journalism and letters of what now are considered racist slurs.⁹² Morris never travelled outside Europe and, unlike Blunt, had no first-hand experience of interaction with the people he wrote about in his journalism. He was not able, as Blunt was, ‘to unlearn a habitual paternalism and understand that there were substantive cultural resources available to non-European subjects for thinking about emancipation and change which did not preclude engagement with other

⁹⁰ Quoted in Claey's, *Imperial Sceptics*, p. 167.

⁹¹ Holland, *William Morris's Utopianism*, p. 228.

⁹² See his article ‘The Ten Commandments’, *Commonweal* 2.46 (27 November 1886), p. 276.

cultures.’⁹³ It is also, however, possible to read Morris’s use of such terms, especially ‘semi-civilised’ as an example of Morris employing a sense of irony. In 1889 he wrote in *Commonweal* that ‘I must tell you that my special leading motive as a Socialist is hatred of civilisation: my ideal of the new Society would not be satisfied unless that Society destroyed civilisation.’⁹⁴ And in 1885 he had written to Georgina Burne-Jones that he had no ‘more faith than a grain of mustard seed in the future history of ‘civilization’, which I *know* now is doomed to destruction, and probably before very long: what a joy it is to think of! and how often it consoles me to think of barbarism once more flooding the world, and real feelings and passions, however rudimentary, taking the place of our wretched hypocrisies.’⁹⁵ It would be a stretch though to say that Morris is always being ironic when using these terms.

Another tension in Morris’s internationalism is highlighted by the figure of Blunt. Blunt considered himself to be an Egyptian nationalist and also an Irish nationalist. He clearly discussed the issue with Morris as he recorded in 1886: ‘Nationalism he cares nothing about,’ and that ‘he says socialism and nationalism have nothing in common.’⁹⁶ The tension in Morris’s thought is how to reconcile an internationalist socialism that sought, in the words of the League’s Manifesto, ‘a change in the basis of Society...which would destroy the distinctions of classes and nationalities’ with the acknowledgement that the political struggle for this goal took place within defined national boundaries and that native resistance movements to imperialism and colonialism were very often self-consciously nationalist.⁹⁷

The context for Blunt’s remarks is the Irish Home Rule movement, in which Blunt’s activism would see him briefly imprisoned in 1888. Blunt also noted that ‘Morris does not care for the Irish movement except so far as it goes against property.’⁹⁸ E. P. Thompson’s

⁹³ Gopal, *Insurgent Empire*, p. 135.

⁹⁴ Morris, ‘The Society of the Future’, *Commonweal* 5.168 (30 March 1889), p. 98.

⁹⁵ Morris, *CL II*, p. 436.

⁹⁶ Quoted in Faulkner, *Wilfred Scawen Blunt and the Morrisises*, p. 17.

⁹⁷ ‘The Manifesto of the Socialist League’, p. 1.

⁹⁸ Quoted in Faulkner, *Wilfred Scawen Blunt and the Morrisises*, p. 17.

assessment was similar, that while ‘the Leaguers stood like a rock against the clamour of the Jingoists and coercionists, and defended the right of the Irish people to independence, they implied, in the same breath, that the issue of independence was of little importance, and was irrelevant to the fundamental issues of the class struggle.’⁹⁹ Both assessments contain some truth without being entirely fair.

Morris followed the progress of Home Rule closely and wrote frequently on the topic in *Commonweal*. Others in the journal also contributed on the topic including John Sketchley who posed the question of ‘what is social order in Ireland? It is the protected claim of the landlord to plunder the Irish people in the name of rent, and by eviction to reduce them to starvation and death...The right of the land-thief to plunder the cultivator, protected in his work of rapine and murder by English bullets and English bayonets.’¹⁰⁰ Throughout, Morris was a vocal supporter of Home Rule even if this support was qualified. That the issue of independence was very important to Morris is evident not just in the amount of time he gave it in his journalism, but also in that he believed ‘Home Rule would be a serious blow to...the British Empire.’¹⁰¹ As Bax had written, ‘everything which makes for the disruption and disintegration of the empire to which he belongs must be welcomed by the Socialist as an ally.’¹⁰² Morris’s issue with Home Rule was not about whether it should be granted, as far as British politics was concerned he could see no way it could move forward if it was not. ‘As Socialists...we are bound to wish the utmost success to those who can at least see that it is necessary for Ireland to take her own affairs into her own hands, whatever the immediate results may be.’¹⁰³

⁹⁹ Thompson, *William Morris* (1955), p. 458.

¹⁰⁰ John Sketchley, ‘The Government and Ireland’, *Commonweal*, 2. 34 (4 September 1886), p. 178.

¹⁰¹ Morris, ‘Notes on News’, *Commonweal* 5.157 (12 January 1889), p. 12.

¹⁰² Bax, ‘Imperialism vs. Socialism’, p. 3.

¹⁰³ Morris, ‘Home Rule or Humbug’, *Commonweal* 2.24 (26 June 1886), p. 101.

The qualification to Morris's support for Home Rule was precisely the question of what it would result in, of what would happen next. This was the question Morris asked in one of his first articles on the subject, 'Ireland and Italy. A Warning': 'Yet we must ask ourselves what is to come next; will Ireland ruling herself be progressive, revolutionary that is, or reactionary?' As his title would suggest, Morris presented his view of what had happened to Italy since unification:

'Italy triumphed and became 'free' and united; those noble deeds accomplished that at least. What, then, has been the gain? I will not say nothing, but I will say something very small compared with all the energy, enthusiasm, and self-sacrifice that brought it about, very small compared with the high-wrought hopes that went before it. For whatever the gain was, it was confined to the bourgeoisie, and the proletariat did not share it, has not shared it.'

Italy was even pursuing an imperial policy of its own and 'is almost a 'great power', while the mass of her population is living, to speak bluntly, in abject slavery.'¹⁰⁴ The message was clear; independence, political freedom was not the same as socialism, real freedom. Morris and the League certainly wanted Home Rule, 'but not as an instrument for the exploitation of the Irish labourer by the Irish capitalist tenant: not as an instrument for the establishment of more factories, for the creation of a fresh Irish proletariat to be robbed for the benefit of national capitalists.'¹⁰⁵

Morris's assertion that Home Rule was not the Irish people truly gaining their freedom should not be taken as though he thought it was of itself worthless. Rather, 'it is just because we Socialists want to see the real struggle for freedom begin, that we will do all we

¹⁰⁴ Morris, 'Ireland and Italy. A Warning', *Commonweal*, 1.9 (October 1885), pp. 86-87.

¹⁰⁵ Morris, 'Notes on News', *Commonweal*, 4.121 (5 May 1888), p. 137.

can to push on this preliminary stage of Home Rule.’¹⁰⁶ Blunt was right that Morris had no interest in nationalism as an end and idea in and of itself, believing it largely incompatible with socialism, but Morris did think that it may be a useful way for countries to escape relations of colonial domination and that ‘it may well be that Ireland must become national before she can become international.’¹⁰⁷ His worries about Home Rule were tied to his overall distrust and dislike of electoral politics, it was ‘only by finding out what a parliament is like that they can know what a worthless instrument it is towards helping the community to a decent life’. It was a necessary step, not ‘of itself necessarily a revolutionary measure, but it will clear the ground for sowing the seed of Revolution’ once the Irish themselves realise that English rule was disastrous not due to difference of race but ‘because England represented landlord and capitalist oppression’.¹⁰⁸

What Morris failed to appreciate was the power of nationalism as a motive in movements against foreign and imperial powers. Morris was not always entirely clear on just what the international part of international socialism meant. *Commonweal* from its beginning to Morris’s departure in 1890 always ran reports on the developments of socialism and the workers’ movements abroad, usually confined to European countries but with frequent reports on America and Australia. But what internationalism would mean in the future after the destruction of the distinctions of nationality, if it meant anything at all, was less clear. In summer 1888 *Commonweal* ran a statement of ‘The Policy of the Socialist League’:

Again, the League believes, when it speaks of *International* Socialism, that the word internationalism applies only to the present state of slavery, as expressing that the workers do not recognize the national distinctions made by their masters, and that in the society of the future, nations as political entities will cease to exist, and give place

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ Morris, ‘Ireland and Italy. A Warning’, p. 86.

¹⁰⁸ Morris, ‘Independent Ireland’, *Commonweal*, 2.16 (1 May 1886), p. 36.

to the federation of communities bound together by locality or convenience. Here again the League differs from some Socialists who cannot see so far as the abolition of nationality, and this again implies a difference in ideal.¹⁰⁹

The language is not geared for precision and clarity; ‘national distinctions,’ ‘nations,’ and ‘nationality’ are all potentially interchangeable but also potentially not. That ‘nations as political entities will cease to exist’ is a consistent element in his thought, and is the same idea that we have seen in the previous chapter that the state will also disappear. Two years earlier Morris had argued that just as individualism was the opponent of individuality, ‘so nationalism suppresses all that is worth keeping in the special elements which go to make up a *real* and not an *artificial* nation.’ A real nation, or ‘true community’, ‘would avail itself of the varieties of temperament caused by differences of surrounding which differentiate the races and families of mankind.’¹¹⁰ The pairing of real and artificial was a common rhetorical device for Morris, but its use here complicates exactly what is meant by the end of the nation under socialism. Whether this real nation is a community or commune, or collection of communes under a federated system, is left by Morris for his readers to decide.

What is clear though, in common with his writing on the transition from a state-based socialism to stateless communism, indeed it is related, is that Morris didn’t give much consideration to the fact this would be an immensely difficult process. When Reginald Beckett reviewed Joseph Lane’s ‘An Anti-Statist Communist Manifesto’ in *Commonweal*, Morris appended a note remarking that ‘I cannot see how ‘Internationalism’ can fail to bring about the extinction of nations, and so give us the free communes of Lane’s manifesto: the federal idea as opposed to the national is clearly growing even now.’¹¹¹ Socialism as the movement opposed to capitalism must be international, but once triumphant, when nations as political

¹⁰⁹ ‘The Policy of the Socialist League’, *Commonweal*, 4.126 (9 June 1888), p. 180.

¹¹⁰ Morris, ‘[Untitled Paragraph]’, *Commonweal*, 2.22 (12 June 1886), p. 83. Emphasis added.

¹¹¹ Morris, [Untitled Paragraph]’, *Commonweal*, 3.103 (31 December 1887), p. 421.

entities had become extinct, would it still make sense to refer to international socialism then? The policy of the League, as stated in in summer 1888, would suggest that internationalism would come to have no meaning. Yet a year earlier, commenting on a debate between Bax and Charles Bradlaugh, Morris commented on Bradlaugh that ‘it is really strange to find a man of ability who has not been struck by the international character of modern capitalism, and who cannot grasp the argument that if capitalism is international, the foe that threatens it, *the system which is put forward to take its place, must be international also.*’¹¹² This would suggest that the idea of internationalism would still have meaning in the future. It is interesting to note also that the few paragraphs at the start of Chapter XIV in *News from Nowhere* dealing with international relations are an addition to the 1891 version and don’t appear in the original *Commonweal* serialisation.¹¹³ An oversight perhaps, and one corrected, but it could also be seen as instructive to the level of detail and consideration Morris gave the topic or to how much it was a priority to the League and readers of *Commonweal*.

There is no clear way of resolving these ambiguities in Morris’s thought. Some of the confusion is down to inconsistent use of terminology over time, but is also due to the fact that Morris’s more immediate concern was the present. It was necessary to offer an idea of what the future relations of peoples and groups would be, but the exactness of these relations could not be prescribed in detail. What is more definite is that Morris’s future communes, although self-sustaining in all the requirements of a fulfilling life, are not completely cut-off from each other and other regions of the world. In *News from Nowhere* there is evidence of foreign travel and the exchange of goods. Rhenish wine is still enjoyed, and the tobacco Guest receives from the children in a little store is Latakia, a variety from Cyprus and Syria. How this travel and exchange of foreign goods takes place, or if there is an institutional framework

¹¹² Morris, ‘Bourgeois versus Socialist’, *Commonweal*, 3.82 (6 August 1887), p. 252. Emphasis added.

¹¹³ CW XVI, pp. 85-86.

managing or regulating such trade, is left unexplored by Morris who is more interested in picturing the possibilities of a future life without too much worrying about the operational details.

The movement of people brings us to what Holland describes as ‘one of the most serious shortcomings in Morris’s internationalism, namely, his failure to develop a systematic or ideologically coherent account of colonialism. Most significantly, he did not rule out the possibility of colonial engagements in a future society.’¹¹⁴ There are two principle sources for the claim. The first is remarks made by Old Hammond in *News from Nowhere* that while the population level is ‘pretty much the same as it was at the end of the nineteenth century’ they had also ‘helped to populate other countries – where we were wanted and were called for.’¹¹⁵ Hammond a little later on states that ‘lands which were once the colonies of Great Britain, for instance, and especially America...are now and will be for a long while a great resource to us.’¹¹⁶ As Holland puts it, ‘Hammond’s problematic valorisation of a colonial structure of feeling presupposes the persistence of a defined ‘centre’ or metropole – ‘us’ as separate from ‘them’ – occluding the possibility that actualisation of an international socialist community might involve a more fundamentally decentring kind of multi-polarity.’¹¹⁷

The second source is Morris’s notes on ‘Emigration and Colonisation’ from December 1887. The context is the state-assisted emigration schemes, frequent in the nineteenth century and often supported by trades-unions, that sought to reduce poverty levels in Britain whilst also bolstering numbers in the colonies, or as J. L. Mahon put it, the ‘aim of the upper class is to send the miserable people abroad, and send their misery with them.’¹¹⁸ These schemes were frequently attacked by Morris and the League, usually on the grounds

¹¹⁴ Holland, *William Morris’s Utopianism*, pp. 228-229.

¹¹⁵ Morris, ‘News from Nowhere’, *Commonweal*, 6.221 (5 April 1890), p. 106.

¹¹⁶ Morris, ‘News from Nowhere’, *Commonweal*, 6.226 (10 May 1890), p. 146.

¹¹⁷ Holland, *William Morris’s Utopianism*, p. 229.

¹¹⁸ J. L. Mahon, ‘The Unemployed and Emigration’, *Commonweal*, 2. 41 (23 October 1886), p. 236.

that, as the League's leaflet 'Why be "transported?"' had it, 'England is big enough and fertile enough to keep you [the workers] in comfort if you organise yourselves to resist these robbers [the capitalists].'¹¹⁹ It is worth quoting some of Morris's piece in full:

'But our younger Socialist readers must not suppose that Socialists object to persons or groups changing their country, or fertilising the waste places of the earth. Granted that society really were the sacred thing that it should be, instead of the mass of anomalies and wrongs that it is, the Roman idea of leading a colony is right and good, and it will surely be one of the solemn duties of the society of the future for a community to send out some band of its best and hardiest people to socialise some hitherto neglected spot of earth for the service of man. At present that cannot be done; all we can now do when pushed by our necessities is to waste and spoil some land which should be kept unwasted for the better days. As things go, we are as great a curse to the lands we overrun as were the Mogul hordes of the early Middle Ages – or worse, may be.'¹²⁰

Morris was clear that no emigration or colonial schemes could be beneficial under the existing system. Workers should not fall prey to promises of a new and better life in the colonies but should stay at home and work for socialism. As the 'Why be "Transported?"' leaflet had it: 'This is the only way in which you can help not only yourselves but all other nations; then you can emigrate without fear and without shame – then, when you can leave freedom behind you and carry freedom with you. If you emigrate now, you will leave slavery behind you and carry it with you.'¹²¹ Morris was not arguing as many Fabians later would that the British Empire if managed correctly in a socialist direction could become a force for good in the world. It was only until after the break-up of the Empire and Britain's successful

¹¹⁹ *IISH SL*, No. 3443.

¹²⁰ Morris, 'Emigration and Colonisation', *Commonweal*, 3.103 (31 December 1887), p.417.

¹²¹ 'Why be "Transported?"'

transformation to socialism that it would good for Britons to emigrate and assist in the development of other countries.

Lastly, we need to briefly examine how Morris viewed the transition to socialism for those countries yet to develop into an advanced stage of capitalism. At times Morris seems to suggest that imperialism, in bringing countries into the capitalist system may also bring them onto the historical developmental path to socialism. The forced introduction of capitalist relations into ‘barbarous’ countries ‘can only supplant one form of slavery by another’, but that through this ‘there is one element of good, that their necessities are leading gradually but swiftly to the extinction of the system which has produced all the misery and incapacity.’¹²² It was a question of if having brought more countries into its fold, ‘whether at least it would not make the break-up more complete when it came.’¹²³ Little evidence in *Commonweal* would support these claims. D. Gostling wrote from India that he knew ‘not a single Socialist here. The very name is unknown. The people are steeped in the depths of ignorance.’¹²⁴ Even a few years later when a short article welcoming the Indian National Congress appeared it was at pains to point out that ‘there is nothing very alarming in their modest programme’ and that it would take time before ‘we may expect to see a development of thought which in course of time must find expression in the endorsement of Socialistic principles.’¹²⁵ There is in Morris’s view a surface similarity to Marx’s thought that, although an opponent of violent exploitation, imperialism was not just a necessity for capitalists but also for the global march towards socialism.¹²⁶

Yet we also find a different view in ‘Socialism from the Root Up’:

¹²² Morris, ‘Notes on News’, *Commonweal*, 4.135 (11 August 1888), p. 249.

¹²³ Morris, ‘Notes on News’, *Commonweal*, 4.133 (28 July 1888), p. 233.

¹²⁴ D. Gostling, ‘A Letter from India’, *Commonweal*, 2. 26 (10 July 1886), p. 119.

¹²⁵ A. B., ‘The Indian National Congress’, *Commonweal*, 5.170 (13 April 1889), p. 116.

¹²⁶ See Claeys, *Imperial Sceptics*, pp. 131-140. See also Gareth Stedman Jones, ‘Radicalism and the Extra-European World: The Case of Karl Marx’, in Duncan Bell, ed., *Victorian Visions of Global Order*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, pp. 186-214.

‘A question may occur to some as to the probable future of the races at present outside civilisation. To us it seems that the best fate that can befall them is that they should develop [sic] themselves from their present condition, uninterfered [sic] with by the incongruities of civilisation. Those of them will be the happiest who can hold civilisation aloof until civilisation itself melts into Socialism, when their own natural development will gradually lead them into absorption in the great ocean of universal social life.’¹²⁷

The use of organic language, ‘melts’, ‘absorption’ ‘natural’, ‘great ocean’, gives the impression that such a process will be simple and involve little by way of a political struggle. This underplaying of the difficulties of future political transition is, as has been observed, common in Morris’s writing and in socialist literature of the period more broadly.

One final example of Morris’s thought is worth presenting. In March 1885 James Mavor, then secretary of the Glasgow Branch, wrote to the League’s Council to complain that the Soudan War manifesto had included his name as a signatory without his permission and to take issue with some of the manifesto’s content. Morris replied to Mavor expressing ‘the collective opinion of the Council’, also stating that ‘I fully concur in it personally.’ Mavor had clearly written about the Mahdi’s fanaticism, for Morris in reply wrote: ‘As to his fanaticism you should remember that any popular movement in the East is bound to take a religious form, the condition of development of the Eastern peoples forces this on them.’¹²⁸ As an expression of the Council’s opinion the formulation or idea may well not be initially Morris’s, and there is little else in his writings that clearly develops the point.¹²⁹ In reference to Egypt, Blunt had a few years earlier described fanaticism as simply ‘the patriotism of the

¹²⁷ Bax & Morris, ‘Socialism from the Root Up: Chapter XXIII. – Socialism Triumphant [Part 1]’, *Commonweal*, 4.121 (5 May 1888), p. 141.

¹²⁸ *CL II*, p. 409, 410.

¹²⁹ A likely candidate would be Bax.

people, to protest against the presence of the French and British fleets'.¹³⁰ Morris and the League were supportive of uprisings such as those led by the Mahdi, but as Morris's letter to Mavor shows, they still believed that Arab, 'Oriental' and African peoples were historically quite a distance from the development into socialism.

As this chapter has shown, anti-imperialism was a crucial component of Morris's political thought, both as a socialist and in shaping his transition to socialism. By shifting the focus to *Commonweal* Morris is shown to be a thinker and writer closely following imperialist development and public opinion which in turn he attempted to shape. While he was supportive of resistance to imperialism, his primary concern is to show the impact on capitalism at home and how the socialist movement should respond. At times his predictions as to possible futures lacks consistency and downplays the difficulties that will face any federated system working across communities around the world. His writing and activities with the League on foreign affairs were seen by Morris as integral to his commitment to socialism and should be seen as such in scholarly accounts of his politics.

¹³⁰ Quoted in Gopal, *Insurgent Empire*, p. 145.

Chapter 4: Labour

In Chapter Two it was shown how Morris reacted negatively to Edward Bellamy's vision of a highly centralised state and his depiction of labour being organised along the lines of universal military service. Morris thought all Bellamy could conjure was 'a machine-life' and that 'his only idea of making labour tolerable is to decrease the amount of it by means of fresh and ever fresh developments of machinery.' Opposed to this Morris held that 'the ideal of the future does not point to lessening of men's energy by the reduction of *labour* to a minimum, but rather to the reduction of *pain in labour* to a minimum, so small that it will cease to be a pain'. He asserted, as he was to many times in his work, that 'the true incentive to useful and happy labour is and must be pleasure in the work itself.'¹

This chapter is concerned with Morris's thought on labour, and the relationship between labour and art. Morris's statement that 'the true incentive to useful and happy labour is and must be pleasure in the work itself' was another way of formulating his definition, drawn from Ruskin, that art was 'the expression of man's pleasure in labour.'² This chapter argues that Morris thought labour could only be pleasurable if it was free, and that there are two key dimensions to this freedom, freedom *in* work, and freedom *of* work. This focus on freedom and labour brings Morris into dialogue with the 'labor republicanism' of the American Knights of Labour. Through a reading of relevant articles in *Commonweal* it will be seen how this is more than a coincidence. Morris and the League actively followed the activities of the Knights of Labour and read their publications, frequently quoting them in

¹ William Morris, 'Looking Backward', *Commonweal*, 5.180 (22 June 1889), p. 194.

² Morris, 'Preface' to John Ruskin, *The Nature of Gothic: A Chapter of The Stones of Venice*. London: Kelmscott Press, 1892, p. i.

Commonweal, pointing to trans-Atlantic networks that have been significantly underexplored in studies of British socialism.

Mark Bevir has argued that Morris's 'dominant concern' as a socialist 'remained the place of art in everyday life.' Bevir correctly notes that Morris's 'broad view of art included all labor', and that 'people did not have to create particular products' to be artists. However, he goes on to say that Morris believed workers 'just had to feel a particular way about the products that they created. Specific conditions of labor promoted the required feeling, but the feeling, not the conditions of labor, was what mattered.' Bevir drastically underestimates the extent to which the conditions of labour matter in promoting the feeling of the work being done. As a result he can state that Morris thought the 'slavery of the workers would end less because exploitation vanished than because art flourished.'³ Against this it will be argued that ending the slavery of the workers would provide the conditions in which art is allowed to flourish. Certainly, for Morris the desire for free and pleasurable labour (art), is a key motivation for ending exploitation, and the two are interrelated. But more important is the ending of exploitation because that is the key condition for everyone to enjoy happy and pleasurable labour. Kristin Ross hits the mark in arguing that Morris 'was less interested in art than in creating and expanding the conditions of art.'⁴

The best recent discussion of Morris's thought on the relationship between art and labour has come from Ruth Kinna. Kinna's discussion centres around a tension in Morris's thought between the relationship of work and leisure. She argues that Morris conceptualises this relationship in two ways: 'In the first he contrasted work with leisure and suggested that attractive labor required the reduction of necessary labor time; in the second he identified work with leisure and defined labor as the exercise and expression of human creativity.'

³ Mark Bevir, *The Making of British Socialism*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2011, p. 96, 97, 98.

⁴ Kristin Ross, *Communal Luxury: The Political Imaginary of the Paris Commune*. London: Verso, 2015, pp. 61-62.

These two conceptions pull against each other. The first ‘led Morris to argue that the realization of attractive labor was dependent upon the division of labor and the increase in productivity which it fostered’ while the second ‘convinced him that attractive labor required a change in working practices and that its realization was blocked by the conditions which this very division imposed.’⁵

A couple of points can be raised here at the outset, both which will themselves be developed later on at greater length. Firstly, Kinna underemphasises Morris’s belief that socialism will tend towards a greater simplification of life. As will be shown this itself was problematic but what it does is considerably lessen the impact that the eradication of the division of labour will have on the time needed for socially necessary work when coupled with the fact that under socialism there will be no idle workers. The second concerns Kinna’s overemphasis on the idea that for Morris and for Marx the productivity engendered by the division of labour and machinery provides the material basis for socialism. Following William Clare Roberts’ recent work on Marx’s *Capital*, it will here be argued that the more important material condition for socialism is not productive capacity but the degradation caused by capitalism, giving ‘the laboring class a powerful motive to cooperate in the construction of a new society.’⁶ This is not to discount the fact that productive capacity is important for overcoming the fear of starvation in the early stages of the transition to socialism but rather to affirm that there is no level of production at which socialism suddenly becomes possible whereas before that level was reached it wasn’t.

As stated, the perspective of this chapter is to look at Morris’s thought on labour and art through the idea of freedom. There are three main ways of thinking about the relationship

⁵ Ruth Kinna, ‘William Morris: Art, Work, and Leisure’, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 61, No. 3 (July 2000), pp. 493-512, pp. 494, 494-495.

⁶ William Clare Roberts, *Marx’s Inferno: The Political Theory of Capital*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018, p. 171.

between labour and freedom in regards to Morris, two of which are central to the chapter, and a third which while important is not the focus here. The first is the idea of freedom *in* work. The worker should have control over the nature of their own work, being free to use both the brain and the hand in the work, and not being subject to the division of labour. The second is structural and is the freedom *of* work. Here the idea is that no work should be done under coercion (other than nature's coercion to work for subsistence) but should be freely entered into. The third, less important here but a significant strand of socialist thought, is freedom *from* work. This idea is that advances in productivity and machinery can reduce the amount of socially necessary work to a minimum allowing for the maximisation of free time (this free time, or leisure, could be used for labour activity, or art, but this would be each individual's choice). While this last does have a place in Morris's thought, it is not considered here at the same length as the first two due to the fact, as mentioned by Kinna, that Morris wished all labour, including socially necessary work, to be in some sense pleasurable.

The central claim made here is that in order for labour to be pleasurable, to be artful, the first two conceptions of freedom need to be in place. The work must be freely done and there must be some degree of freedom in the work itself. Morris acknowledges that there will be some socially necessary work that cannot be done with the first conception of freedom, that it is not pleasurable in itself. But he insists that there can still be hope and pleasure in it, providing it is freely entered into, and this would be the pleasure of contributing to the social good.

That Morris places so much emphasis on labour in his writings can partly be put down to his own life and career as an artist and craftsman. There is also a wider theoretical point to his emphasis. As he put it in his lecture 'Useful Work versus. Useless Toil', 'the race of man must labour or perish. Nature does not give us our livelihood gratis; we must win it by toil of some sort or degree.' He insisted that simply achieving that livelihood without exploitation is

not enough. For many ‘it is enough that the worker should get the full produce of his work, and that his rest should be abundant.’ Morris disagreed, arguing that ‘though the compulsion of man’s tyranny is thus abolished, I yet demand compensation for the compulsion of Nature’s necessity. 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, even though the hours of labour were short.’ ‘Nature’, he thought, ‘will not be finally conquered till our work becomes a part of the pleasure of our lives.’⁷

The chapter starts by looking at two great influences on Morris, John Ruskin and Karl Marx. These two provide a familiar starting place but it is still fruitful to examine how their thought on the historical changes in labour impacted Morris and also, particularly so with Ruskin, to highlight areas of disagreement and divergence. It then briefly explores the Arts & Crafts movement and *News from Nowhere* as two avenues through which the legacy of Morris as an anti-modern socialist figure have been transmitted. It shows that in the case of the former Morris’s actual involvement and beliefs in the movement were less than his status as its figurehead would suggest, and in the latter that while a surface reading of the text can indeed show Morris as rejecting the modern world the text actually allows for more nuance.

Marx is then returned to in greater depth with a closer look at the sections of *Capital* on the division of labour and machinery. These sections were particularly important for Morris and confirmed his thoughts on the historical degradation of labour. From here the concept of wage-slavery is taken up. Paying attention to the entirety of *Commonweal* beyond the major articles allows us to see the similarities and connections to the American ‘labor republicanism’ of the Knights of Labor, particularly as it has been presented by the scholarship of Alex Gourevitch. Both socialists in the UK and labour activists in the US saw

⁷ Morris, ‘Useful Work versus Useless Toil’, *CW XXIII*, p. 98, 107.

the modern wage worker as being dependent upon the capitalist class and thus in a state of unfreedom and presented an alternative based on co-operative interdependence.

The final section of the chapter goes deeper into Morris's thoughts on the future of labour under socialism and communism. It questions how much Morris thought the future of labour was handicraft based and the extent to which machinery would still be used, arguing that Morris is not always completely clear on the matter despite his own personal preference being for a highly unmechanised society. Ultimately though the issue of how labour would be conducted in the future was a question only those in the future would be able to properly answer. His own preference came from a belief in the importance of simplicity in life for a free society. A free and simple society would not need the vast productive capacities of industrial society; everyone working co-operatively towards human needs would suffice to provide for all comfortably while still allowing each to develop their own capacities which in turn serve society. As labour and art were issues Morris lectured on extensively, this chapter more so than the others makes use of his lectures alongside *Commonweal*.

Ruskin

The influence of Ruskin on Morris is well known. As Morris put it, Ruskin 'was my master'.⁸ Yet it is easy to overestimate the extent of the influence. As Peter Faulkner notes, on 'such topics as democracy and religion they were poles apart.' Faulkner also affirms that 'whenever the central idea is human labour, and the crucial distinction between useful work

⁸ William Morris, 'How I Became A Socialist', *CW XXIII*, p. 279.

and useless toil, we can not doubt...the encouragement and inspiration that the younger man found in the work and example of the older.’⁹

On this central idea of labour, the key work of Ruskin’s was ‘The Nature of Gothic’ from the second volume of *The Stones of Venice*. When Morris reprinted this with his Kelmscott Press, he wrote in his Preface that ‘it is one of the most important things written by the author, & in future days will be considered as one of the very few necessary and inevitable utterances of the century.’ The reason for this is the primary lesson Ruskin teaches, what Morris takes to be ‘that art is the expression of man’s pleasure in labour’.¹⁰ This is a definition that reappears throughout Morris’s work and contains within it the idea that the condition of art in any given society reflects the overall conditions of labour and also the idea that machines cannot make art. It should also be made clear that when Morris speaks in general about art it is this definition he has in mind and thus is referring to what he terms the lesser, decorative, or popular arts, what we could call the arts of everyday life, and not the high or fine arts. While he says comparatively less about the high arts it is clear from what he does say that in his view they have to rest upon a foundation of a strong popular art.

Morris’s comments on the Renaissance are instructive in this regard, and allow us to move to the historical analysis of the decline of art with the focus on Ruskin and the decline of freedom both *in* and *of* labour as pivotal aspects of the decline of art. In *A Summary of the Principles of Socialism*, co-written with Hyndman but in passages strongly bearing the imprint of Morris, he argued that in the craft-guilds of the late middle ages each craftsman could become a master of his craft and was encouraged to feel like an artist. With craftsmen having control over their work and having a personal relationship with the buyer of their goods, Morris considered this period to be a high point for popular art. Hyndman elsewhere

⁹ Peter Faulkner, ‘Ruskin and Morris’, *JWMS*, 14.1 (Autumn 2000), pp. 6-17, p. 16.

¹⁰ Morris, ‘Preface’ to *The Nature of Gothic*, p. i.

termed this period ‘The Golden Age of the People.’¹¹ Together they argued that the ‘result of this popular art is obvious in the outburst of splendid genius which lit up the days of the Italian Renaissance: the strange rapidity with which that splendour faded as commercialism advanced is proof enough that this great period of art was born not of dawning commercialism but of the freedom of the intelligence of labour from the crushing weight of the competition market, a freedom which it enjoyed throughout the middle-ages.’¹² What is clear is that art was in a position to flourish because the labour that created it was not beholden to the impersonal forces of the market. There is an obvious objection to Morris that under no circumstances could the workers of the middle ages be considered truly free for ‘they were serfs, or gild-craftsmen surrounded by brazen walls of trade restrictions; they had no political rights, and were exploited by their masters’. Morris answered by arguing that the ‘oppression and violence of the Middle Ages’ had left its mark on the art of the period, that ‘its shortcomings are traceable to them’ and that ‘they repressed art in certain directions’. It was for this reason Morris believed that ‘when we shake off the present oppression as we shook off the old, we may expect the art of the days of real freedom to rise above that of those old violent days.’¹³

Morris first read ‘The Nature of Gothic’ when it appeared in 1853 and returned to it in 1870s when he began lecturing on art, but by 1892 he was well aware ‘that Ruskin is not the first man who has put forward the possibility and the urgent necessity that men should take pleasure in labour’.¹⁴ He then acknowledged that both Robert Owen and more-so Charles Fourier had stressed the importance of pleasurable labour in their schemes for a new and improved society.

¹¹ Henry Mayers Hyndman, *The Historical Basis of Socialism in England*. London: Kegan Paul, 1883, Ch 1

¹² Hyndman & Morris, *A Summary of the Principles of Socialism*. London: The Modern Press, 1884, p. 17.

¹³ Morris, ‘The Aims of Art’, CW XXIII, p. 89.

¹⁴ Morris, ‘Preface’ to *The Nature of Gothic*, p. iii.

However, the tone of Ruskin's denunciation of industrial society and its impact on the workman struck Morris fervently. In the Gothic architecture of mediaeval Christianity, Ruskin argues that workers had freedom in their work. This was due to the religious ethic underpinning the social system, with 'Christianity having recognized...the individual value of every soul. But it not only recognizes its value; it confesses its imperfection, in only bestowing dignity upon the acknowledgement of unworthiness.' Only God is perfect, and humans seek perfection in vain. For Ruskin 'the first cause of the fall of the arts of Europe' around the time of the start of the Renaissance 'was a relentless requirement of perfection'.¹⁵

If men are imperfect they are not supposed 'to work with the accuracy of tools, to be precise and perfect in all their actions.' If that precision is sought and you wish to 'make their fingers measure degrees like cog-wheels, and their arms strike curves like compasses, you must unhumanize them.' This analysis of the 'degradation of the operative into a machine' would stick with Morris for the rest of his life; likewise Ruskin's assertion that 'the great cry that rises from all our manufacturing cities, louder than their furnace blast' is 'that we manufacture everything there except men'.¹⁶

Everything 'except men' were being made due to the explicit separation between brain work and hand work. Thanks to the increasing division of labour and use of machinery, workers no longer had to think in their work, and people who thought for a living no longer worked with their hands. Ruskin thought 'it is only by labour that thought can be made healthy, and only by thought that labour can be made happy, and the two cannot be separated with impunity'.¹⁷ It is only through the employment of both the physical and mental capacities that labour can be truly enjoyed.

¹⁵ Ruskin, *The Nature of Gothic*, p. 14, 33.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 17, 20, 23.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

Despite Ruskin's influence on him, there are vital points in which Morris differs. Ruskin's religiosity pushed him to positions that Morris could never consent to. 'Men may be beaten,' Ruskin writes, 'chained, tormented, yoked like cattle, slaughtered like summerflies, and yet remain in one sense, and the best sense free.'¹⁸ Bevir's assertion that for Morris what mattered most was the feeling of the labour being undertaken could be taken as an accurate depiction of Ruskin's views. Morris placed freedom within labour as an ideal to be attained but his understanding of freedom extended beyond this, whereas Ruskin's didn't. 'I know not if a day is ever to come when the nature of right freedom will be understood,' Ruskin argued, 'and when men will see that to obey another man, to labour for him, yield reverence to him or to his place, is not slavery. It is often the best kind of liberty, liberty from care.'¹⁹ It is worth noting that Ruskin's understanding of freedom is a considerable distance from the republican tradition; for Ruskin, one can still labour for another man, under his orders, and yet all that matters is that freedom within that work itself is maintained, so long as the execution of the work itself is not directly subjected to the will or intellect of a higher workman.

Equality, for Ruskin, could only be found in the equality of the soul before God. For Morris the socialist absolute equality of condition was the goal to be reached, so it is odd that in Morris describes Ruskin's book on political economy *Unto this Last* as 'that great book'.²⁰ It is likely that Morris's admiration for Ruskin obscured his judgement of a work that contained much that would have been anathema to Morris. We can also speculate that Morris had not remembered the specifics of the work beyond Ruskin's condemnation of the injustice of mercantile practice, the critique of political economy as the science of getting rich, and his declaration that 'There is no Wealth but Life.'²¹

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

²⁰ Morris, 'Preface' to *ibid.*, p. iv.

²¹ Ruskin, *Unto this Last* (1862). London: George Allen & Unwin, 1960.

In the third of the four essays that constitute *Unto this Last*, Ruskin wrote ‘that if there be any one point insisted on throughout my works more frequently than another, that one point is the impossibility of Equality.’ He continued, and here it’s worth quoting at length to really see how divergent his and Morris’s thought could be: ‘My continual aim has been to show the eternal superiority of some men to others, sometimes even of one man to all others; and to show also the advisability of appointing such persons or person to guide, to lead, or on occasion even to compel and subdue, their inferiors according to their own better knowledge and wiser will.’²²

Despite his suspicion of hero worship, Morris’s personal affection towards Ruskin could lead him to overstate the impact he had had on him. It also led him to perhaps deliberately ignore those points at which the two men violently differed. If Morris ignored it, Ruskin’s opposition to equality as stated in *Unto this Last* was however picked up on by Thomas Shore in an article as part of his mostly praiseworthy *Commonweal* series on ‘Ruskin as a Revolutionary Preacher’.²³

Karl Marx

If before his turn to socialism Morris held Ruskin as his master, Ruskin was now joined in this position by Karl Marx. What particularly drew Morris’s attention was the description given by Marx in Part Four of *Capital* of the different epochs of production, the differences between and the change from the division of labour in the period of manufacture and the machine production of the factory and large-scale industry.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 102.

²³ Thomas Shore, jun., ‘Ruskin as a Revolutionary Preacher: IV’, *Commonweal*, 2.34 (4 September 1886), pp. 178-179.

In a paper for the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings in 1884, he noted how his work as a craftsman and designer had led him ‘to dig pretty deeply into the strata of the eighteenth-century workshop system’ and that he ‘could clearly see how very different it is from the factory system of today’. Therefore, he continued, ‘it was with a ready sympathy that I read the full explanation of the change and its tendencies in the writings of a man, I will say a great man, whom, I suppose, I ought not to name in this company, but cleared my mind on several points (also unmentionable here) relating to this subject of labour and its products.’²⁴ By 1888 he was happy to name Marx directly in the *Fortnightly Review*: ‘I must assume that many of perhaps most of my readers are not acquainted with Socialist literature, and that few of them have read the admirable account of the different epochs of production given in Karl Marx’s great work entitled “Capital.”’²⁵

In 1890 he used this part of Marx’s work to criticise the recently published *Fabian Essays*. Sydney Webb’s treatment of the ‘historic’ basis of socialism, for Morris, is insufficiently historical; ‘Webb has ignored the transition period of industry which began in the sixteenth century with the break up of the Middle-Ages, and the shoving out of the people from the land. This transition is treated of by Karl Marx with great care and precision under the name of the ‘Manufacturing Period’ ...and some mention of it ought to have been included’.²⁶ Morris’s statement that he ‘thoroughly enjoyed the historical part of *Capital*’, deserves to be taken seriously.²⁷

However, it is often issues relating to these epochs of production and preferences thereof, that have been used to distance Morris from Marx and the later socialist tradition. Morris in this way of thinking was a craftsman and medievalist who wished to return to the

²⁴ William Morris, ‘Architecture and History’, *Collected Works XXII*, p. 311.

²⁵ Morris, ‘The Revival of Handicraft’, *ibid.*, p. 334.

²⁶ Morris ‘Fabian Essays in Socialism’, *Commonweal*, 6.211 (25 January 1890), p. 28.

²⁷ Morris, ‘How I Became A Socialist’, *CW XXIII*, p. 278.

handicraft of the Middle Ages while Marx was the modernist who saw in the continuing development of machinery the key to the productive power of capital to create the material conditions necessary for communism. It is worth looking at both of these conceptions in turn.

Arts and Crafts

There are two chief reasons for the conception of Morris's political vision as a return to the pre-capitalist world. The first is Morris's activity as a designer and craftsman as head of Morris & Co. and figurehead of the Arts and Crafts Movement. The second is Morris's 'craftsman's paradise', *News from Nowhere*.²⁸

Nikolaus Pevsner can be taken as characteristic of the first. To Pevsner, Morris's socialism 'is far from correct according to the standards established in the later nineteenth century: there is more in it of More than of Marx.' Pevsner sees a clear divide between Morris's work as a craftsman and as a political thinker: 'His work, the revival of handicraft, is constructive; the essence of his teaching is destructive. His pleading for handicraft alone means pleading for conditions of medieval primitiveness'. He continues that the machine 'was Morris's arch-enemy' and that Morris 'certainly hoped for machine-breaking'.²⁹

The crux of this argument lies in the idea that a 'revival of handicraft' would require a return to the social conditions in which the handicrafts had flourished. There is sense in this if we take Morris to mean by a revival of handicraft a direct return to the practices of the medieval craftsman. As already seen, Morris took from Ruskin a belief that the condition of the arts in society reflects that society as a whole and particularly the condition of the worker.

²⁸ Perry Anderson, *Arguments Within English Marxism*. London: Verso, 1980, p. 169.

²⁹ Nikolaus Pevsner, *Pioneers of Modern Design: from William Morris to Walter Gropius*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960, p. 24, 25.

However, we have to be careful about what is meant by revival. Walter Crane, socialist comrade of Morris and leading member of the Arts and Crafts Movement, wrote in his reflections that the movement ‘represented in the main a revival of the mediaeval spirit (not the letter) in design; a return to simplicity, to sincerity; to good materials and sound workmanship’.³⁰ This difference between spirit and letter is key, and was hinted at in Ruskin’s analysis of the Gothic. The ‘characteristic or moral elements of Gothic’, chief of which is ‘Savageness’, can be represented as ‘belonging to the building’ or ‘as belonging to the builder’.³¹ The question raised is whether the spirit that animated the work of Gothic can be revived or found in other social conditions. For Ruskin this was not as much a concern as for Morris. Freedom within the labour activity itself was the only real issue for Ruskin, whereas Morris believed people needed to be free in all facets of their life.

Consideration must also be made of the actual relationship between the Arts and Crafts movement, Morris the craftsman and his thought on transforming the labour process. Involved with the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society from its inception, he was less sanguine than others about its potential. As Crane put it, Morris soon ‘abandoned hope that there could be any real or lasting improvement in the arts under the existing economic and social conditions’ and ‘did not seem to share in the belief which...animated some of his friends and followers, that the Arts and Crafts movement itself would prove a means of revolutionizing methods of production and carrying on an effective propaganda for Socialism.’³²

In Peter Stansky’s assessment Morris ‘regarded Arts and Crafts organizations with a somewhat jaundiced eye’ as they ‘were concerned with the state of art before that of politics had changed’ and that ‘the first obligation was to change the world politically.’³³ Yet, Morris

³⁰ Walter Crane, *William Morris to Whistler: Papers and Addresses on Art & Craft and the Commonweal*. London: G. Bell & Sons, 1911, p. 17.

³¹ Ruskin, *The Nature of Gothic*, p. 6.

³² Crane, *Morris to Whistler*, pp. 94-95.

³³ Peter Stansky, *Redesigning the World: William Morris, the 1880s, and the Arts and Crafts*. California: The Society for the Promotion of Science and Scholarship, 1996, p. 49, 68.

did not regard them as useless. They were a sign of the growing discontent. As Morris put it, 'it may be said that though the movement towards the revival of handicraft is contemptible on the surface of the gigantic fabric of commercialism; yet, taken in conjunction with the general movement towards freedom of life for all...and a token of the change which is transforming civilization into socialism, it is both noteworthy and encouraging.'³⁴

We should be cautious of seeing too much of a direct connection between Morris's practice as a craftsman and his thought. Certainly, they were connected, and his views on art and the condition of the handicrafts played a role in his political outlook, but as his views on the Arts and Crafts movement show, Morris saw his craft activities as secondary to the more important political fight. In 1882, a year before joining the Democratic Federation, Morris voiced his dissatisfaction with the possibilities of his craft work and in hindsight signalling the coming move to political activism. Writing to Georgina Burne-Jones he ventured the thought that 'it does sometimes seem to me a strange thing indeed that a man should be driven to work with energy and even with pleasure and enthusiasm at work which he knows will serve no end but amusing himself; am I doing nothing but make-believe then, something like Louis XVI's lock-making?'³⁵ Morris's wealth and social position meant he was able to pursue these activities even if they were only 'amusing himself'; he knew that his was an all too rare case and wished to see a society in which his own fortunate position was universalised.

News from Nowhere

³⁴ Morris, 'The Revival of Handicraft', *CW XXII*, p. 341.

³⁵ *CL II*, p. 95.

‘Morris’s rejection of the previous four hundred years of European civilization was,’ according to Perry Anderson, ‘virtually absolute’ and his utopian vision entailed ‘a consistent repression of the history of capitalism.’ This distaste for the artistic and scientific productions of the Renaissance onwards ‘sets him apart even within the Romantic tradition he shared, whose real revulsion was from the Industrial Revolution.’ For Anderson this placed ‘systematic limits’ to his communist vision.³⁶

The society pictured in *News from Nowhere* is not completely devoid of technological advances made in the last few hundred years however. ‘Technology and energy exist,’ notes Anderson, but they have been ‘confined off-stage to repetitive or disagreeable tasks.’³⁷ For Paul Meier, while ‘a reading of *News from Nowhere* in isolation (and this is most often the case) can leave an impression of a world from which machines are completely banished...in reality they are just hidden and have ceased to dominate daily life.’³⁸ If Morris in 1884 had been content to think about ‘A Factory as it Might Be’ in *Nowhere* the word factory no longer holds meaning having been re-named ‘Banded-workshops’ with smokeless furnaces.³⁹ On the trip up the Thames by row boat, William Guest notes that ‘every now and then we came on barges... going on their way without any means of propulsion visible to me’. Guest is informed that these are ‘force-barges’ and which he understands ‘had taken the place of our old steam-power carrying’.⁴⁰

Overall though, the impression given by the description is of a society that has returned to a pastoral idyll. Transport around London is no longer in a ‘vapour-bath of hurried and discontented humanity, a carriage of the underground railway’ but by horse and carriage.⁴¹ Along the Thames the ‘soap-works with their smoke-vomiting chimneys were

³⁶ Anderson, *Arguments Within English Marxism*, p. 168.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 166.

³⁸ Paul Meier, *William Morris: The Marxist Dreamer*. Sussex: The Harvester Press, 1978, p. 333.

³⁹ Morris, ‘News from Nowhere’, *Commonweal*, 6.215 (22 February 1890), pp. 58-59.

⁴⁰ Morris, ‘News from Nowhere’, *Commonweal*, 6.238 (2 August 1890), p. 242.

⁴¹ Morris, ‘News from Nowhere’, *Commonweal*, 6.209 (11 January 1890), p. 9.

gone; the engineer's works gone; the lead-works gone; and no sound of riveting and hammering' could be heard. Over the Thames is a stone arched bridge of such beauty that 'not even the Ponte Vecchio at Florence came anywhere near it.'⁴² The bridge, Guest learns, had been completed in 1971.⁴³

Philip Henderson writes of *News from Nowhere* that 'it is an Arts and Crafts Utopia with very little relation to anything that we know as communism'. It is 'obvious', apparently, that 'Morris was merely abolishing everything he disliked in the nineteenth century and replacing it by everything he nostalgically longed for.'⁴⁴ This argument relies on an association of the communism 'that we know' as the communism of the Soviet Union, and on that association it's correct. It is also tempting to see Henderson's argument as a rebuke to this passage from E. P. Thompson: 'Twenty years ago even among Socialists and Communists, many must have regarded Morris's picture of "A Factory as It Might Be" as an unpractical poet's dream: to-day visitors return from the Soviet Union with stories of the poet's dream already fulfilled.'⁴⁵ Henderson's view is similar to Pevsner's, that Morris's socialism 'is far from correct according to the standards established in the later nineteenth century'. Morris's attitude to machinery and the crafts in relation to the socialist transformation will be returned to later, but now it is time to turn to Marx.

Marx, *Capital* and Machinery

⁴² Morris, 'News from Nowhere', *Commonweal*, 6.210 (18 January 1890), p. 18.

⁴³ 1971 is the date given in *Commonweal*, when it was published as a book the date is 2003.

⁴⁴ Philip Henderson, *William Morris: His life, Work and Friends*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973, p. 386-7.

⁴⁵ E. P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1955, p. 760. Unsurprisingly this passage was removed in the revised edition twenty years later.

In his *Comments on James Mill* Marx writes that in a society based on actual human relations ‘labour would be a *free manifestation of life*, hence *enjoyment of life*; whereas under private property it is *alienation of life*, for labour is *in order to live*, in order to provide a *means* of life. My labour *is not* life.’⁴⁶ It is easy to find similar ideas expressed by Morris. Old Hammond responds to a question on why people work without the incentive of wages by stating the ‘reward of labour is *life*. Is that not enough?’⁴⁷ A passage in *The German Ideology* also shows ideas similar to those Morris would develop. In relation to workers in cities before the development of the division of labour Marx writes that ‘the medieval craftsmen retained an interest in their particular work and pursued a skill which could grow to a certain artistic sense while remaining restricted.’ Because of this, ‘every medieval craftsman was completely dedicated to his work, had a relation of comfortable servitude with it, and was much more absorbed in it than the modern worker, who is indifferent to his labour.’⁴⁸

Although interesting, finding similar ideas and phrases between thinkers tells us relatively little beyond the fact that ideas form and circulate in various ways from various sources. Although they are now part of what could be considered as the canonical texts of Marxism, Morris could not have read these texts. The *Paris Notebooks* and *The German Ideology* only surfaced, made available and translated in the twentieth century.

In this case the text of importance to Morris is *Capital*. More specifically the focus is what Marx says on the division of labour and on machinery. ‘If there is one point at which Marx has the reputation of a modernist,’ writes William Clare Roberts ‘not merely ambivalent about capitalism’s progressive bona fides, but enthusiastic about them, it is here.’ As he continues though, ‘this enthusiasm does not seem to be much in evidence in *Capital*.’⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Karl Marx, ‘From the Paris Notebooks (1844)’, in Joseph O’Malley ed., *Early Political Writings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994, pp. 71-96, p. 96.

⁴⁷ Morris, ‘News from Nowhere’, *Commonweal*, 6.225 (3 May 1890), p. 141.

⁴⁸ Marx, ‘The German Ideology’ in *Early Political Writings*, pp. 119-181, pp. 157-158.

⁴⁹ Roberts, *Marx’s Inferno*, p. 168.

Rather, in *Capital* Morris found further evidence for what he believed the division of labour and machinery were doing to all faculties of the labourer.

With the division of labour in the Manufacturing Period, Marx writes that the ‘commodity, from being the individual product of an independent artificer, becomes the social product of a union of artificers, each of whom performs one, and only one, of the constituent partial operations.’ The individual labourer performs only one kind of labour repeatedly, the habit of which ‘converts him into a never failing instrument, while his connexion with the whole mechanism compels him to work with the regularity of the parts of a machine.’ As a result, manufacture in its capitalist form ‘converts the labourer into a crippled monstrosity, by forcing his detail dexterity at the expense of a world of productive capabilities and instincts’.⁵⁰

In this process ‘the individual himself is made the automatic motor of a fractional operation’.⁵¹ The phrase is reminiscent of Ruskin’s who wrote that it ‘is not, truly speaking, the labour that is divided; but the men: Divided into mere segments of men, broken into small fragments and crumbs of life; so that all the little piece of intelligence that is left in a man is not enough to make a pin, or a nail, but exhausts itself in making the point of a pin or the head of a nail.’⁵² As John Burrow pointed out, ‘there is much in Ruskin’s denunciations of the mechanical nature of modern production...that is similar to Marx’s concept of the alienation of the worker from his labour and its product.’⁵³

Marx doesn’t specifically touch upon the effects of the division of labour on artistic production beyond noting that ‘the constant labour of one uniform kind disturbs the intensity and flow of a man’s animal spirits, which find recreation and delight in mere change of

⁵⁰ Marx, *Capital* (1867). London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1970, pp. 337-338, 349, 360.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 360.

⁵² Ruskin, *The Nature of Gothic*, pp. 22-23.

⁵³ John Burrow, *The Crisis of Reason: European Thought, 1848-1914*. Yale University Press, 2000., p. 43.

activity', or that the 'knowledge, the judgement, and the will, which, though in ever so small a degree, are practised by the independent peasant or handicraftsman' are faculties now 'required only for the workshop as a whole.'⁵⁴ The labourer, performing only a limited function, works not with any freedom or to their own design but under the command of a capitalist and in combination with others also performing limited but different functions. 'In short,' write Morris and Bax, 'each man is not so much a machine as a part of a machine.'⁵⁵

If workers are only parts of a machine, the next stage of development was the growth in use of machines themselves. From being 'a part of a machine' the labourer became 'the auxiliary of a machine.'⁵⁶ With growing use of machinery comes the factory system and a qualitatively different form of production. 'In handicrafts and manufacture, the workman makes use of a tool, in the factory, the machine makes use of him. There the movements of the instrument of labour proceed from him, here it is the movements of the machine that he must follow.'⁵⁷

As Roberts put it, in the factory it is 'the machine that directs production, that paces the work, that imposes mind-numbing tasks on the laborer, that denudes labor of all intellectual content, and that confronts it with an apparatus embodying intellectual powers unfathomable to its operator.' Importantly, Roberts also notes that this aspect of machinery and the factory is not specific only to their use in capitalist society: 'Workers' control of the factory alone would not be sufficient to make any of these aspects of the machine go away.'⁵⁸ It is this last insight that Morris, in his own way, picks up and that distinguishes his own socialist vision.

⁵⁴ Marx, *Capital*, p. 341, 361.

⁵⁵ Bax & Morris, 'Socialism from the Root Up: Ch. IX. – The Industrial Revolution in England', *Commonweal*, 2.31 (14 August 1886), p. 157.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Marx, *Capital*, p. 422.

⁵⁸ Roberts, *Marx's Inferno*, p. 169.

Wage-Slavery & Freedom

In his lecture ‘The Aims of Art’ Morris states that in the factory system man ‘is the slave to machinery;’ he does not use the machine, but is ‘used by it, whether he likes it or not.’ He is the slave to machinery because ‘he is the slave to the system for whose existence the invention of machinery was necessary.’ ‘To their employers they are, so far as they are workmen, a part of the machinery of the workshop or the factory; to themselves they are proletarians, human beings working to live that they may live to work: their part of craftsmen, of makers of things by their own free will, is played out.’⁵⁹ Workers lack free will within the labour process as they are slaves to machinery but also outside of the immediate labour process as they are slaves to the system, capitalism.

Marx also uses the language of freedom and slavery in *Capital*.⁶⁰ ‘At the same time that factory work exhausts the nervous system to the uttermost, it does away with the many-sided play of the muscles, and confiscates every atom of freedom, both in bodily and intellectual activity.’ Furthermore, in the factory code the capitalist ‘formulates, like a private legislator, and at his own good will, his autocracy over his workpeople’ with the result that the ‘place of the slave-driver’s lash is taken by the overlooker’s book of penalties.’⁶¹

Furthermore, Marx claims that it is not only himself and other socialists who recognise this. Almost all representatives of political economy, he writes, ‘bemoan the slavery of the factory operative. And what is the great trump-card that they play? That

⁵⁹ Morris, ‘The Aims of Art’, *CWXXXIII*, pp. 88-89.

⁶⁰ See Bruno Leipold, ‘Chains and Invisible Threads: Liberty and Domination in Marx’s Account of Wage-Slavery’, in Annelien de Dijn and Hannah Dawson eds., *Rethinking Liberty before Liberalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, Forthcoming.

⁶¹ Marx, *Capital*, pp. 422-423, 424.

machinery, after the horrors of the period of introduction and development have subsided, instead of diminishing, in the long run increases the number of the slaves of labour!’⁶²

This raises the concept of wage slavery. Morris used this term throughout his socialist writing, arguing in 1885 that unattractive labour ‘is but one of the consequences of wage-slavery’ and in 1890 he was still insisting that socialists must ‘admit that the workers of to-day are wage-slaves.’⁶³ The idea of wage slavery seems to stand in contradiction to the idea of the free labourer necessary for the process of capital accumulation. In Part Eight of *Capital* Marx outlines the features of this status: ‘Free labourers, in the double sense that neither they themselves form part and parcel of the means of production, as in the case of slaves, bondsmen, &c., nor do the means of production belong to them, as in the case of peasant proprietors; they are, therefore, free from, unencumbered by, any means of production of their own.’⁶⁴ The free labourer does not own the means of production, therefore they must enter into a negotiation with those who do and labour for them in return for a wage with which they can buy the goods needed to keep them and their families alive.

Morris highlighted this contradiction of the free labourer in his historical romance *A Dream of John Ball*. As shown in Chapter 1, Morris would have had Marx on his mind when writing *John Ball*, with the English translation of *Capital* appearing at the end of 1886 and the ‘Socialism from the Root Up’ series turning to Marx after he had finished *John Ball*. Michelle Weinroth argues that in ‘portraying the dreamer’s struggle to enlighten a fourteenth-century rebel priest from the stand-point of modernity,’ Morris’s story ‘suggests that the mission of making socialists is an arduous persuasive endeavour’ and one complicated by

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 447.

⁶³ Morris, ‘Unattractive Labour’, *Commonweal*, 1.4 (May 1885), p. 37; ‘The Development of Modern Society’, *Commonweal*, 6.240 (16 August 1890), p. 261.

⁶⁴ Marx, *Capital*, p. 714.

division in the League and journalistic shortcomings.⁶⁵ Morris's romance is both a comment on the difficulties of socialist education and a literary attempt at reinforcing that education.

As shown in Chapter One Morris places his explanation of the modern free labourer within a discussion between his narrator and John Ball about the coming centuries. Ball states that 'I know a free man, and he is his own always; but how shall he be his own if he have nought whereby to make his livelihood?' Morris explains that only owning himself, with 'himself then shall he buy it... with his body and the power of labour that lieth therein; with the price of his labour shall he buy leave to labour.' Here Morris makes the important distinction that the labourer doesn't actually sell themselves to the capitalist but their labour power, with the fact peculiar to labour as a commodity that it is inseparable from the body of its seller. Ball's position as an outsider allows him to point out to the readers of the story that 'man may well do what thou sayest and live, but he may not do it and live a free man.'⁶⁶

The result of this system is that the free labourer is dependent upon the wage-relation in order to live and socially reproduce; they are dependent on the wage and thus on the capitalist who provides the wage, resulting in the condition of wage slavery. The free labourer does not have to go to a *specific* capitalist, they can choose to negotiate a wage with whoever they want, but crucially they have to go *a* capitalist.

H. Davis in a series of articles in *Commonweal* titled 'Freedom of Contract' argued that while a labourer can try to find a better wage by going into negotiations with a different employer 'it is not true that the labourers, as a body, can change their employers at will.' As such, 'when we speak of slavery as applied to the labourers of a nation, we necessarily mean, not the slavery of one individual to another, but the slavery of one class in society to another

⁶⁵ Michelle Weinroth, 'Redesigning the Language of Social Change: Rhetoric, Agency, and the Oneiric in William Morris's *A Dream of John Ball*', *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 53, No. 1 (Autumn 2010), pp. 37-63, p. 41.

⁶⁶ Morris, 'A Dream of John Ball', *Commonweal*, 3.51 (1 January 1887), p. 3.

class.’⁶⁷ James Leigh Joynes argued similarly when he wrote that the typical British worker ‘had failed to comprehend the important point...that if he is under compulsion to expend his labour for the benefit of others, it is indifferent whether that constraint is enforced by an individual or a class, and his condition as a slave is not affected thereby.’⁶⁸

Marx and British socialists in the 1880s were not the only ones to adopt the language of slavery when talking about wage labour. The idea of wage slavery, or even white slavery, was used by pro-slavery advocates in the American South who pointed at the conditions of white factory workers in the northern states and in Britain to argue that these workers faced worse conditions than chattel slaves. It was a comparison also used by reformers and radicals campaigning to improve the conditions of factory workers.⁶⁹ This last usage continued to the late nineteenth century with William Clarke in the *Fabian Essays* arguing that in English factories before the start of labour legislation there ‘can be no doubt that far greater misery prevailed than in the Southern States during the era of slavery.’ This was because the ‘slave was property – often valuable property and it did not pay his owner to ill-treat him to such a degree as to render him useless as a wealth-producer. But if the ‘free’ Englishman was injured or killed, thousands could be had to fill his place for nothing.’⁷⁰

Recent historical and theoretical work by Alex Gourevitch, has examined the thought of late-nineteenth century “labor republicans” associated with the labour organisation The Knights of Labor and their critique of wage labour within a republican framework concerned with liberty and freedom.⁷¹ These writers and activists attempted to expand the idea of

⁶⁷ H. Davis, ‘Freedom of Contract’, *Commonweal*, 3.91 (8 October 1887), p. 322.

⁶⁸ J. L. Joynes, ‘Hopeless Toil’, *Commonweal*, 1.5 (June 1885), p. 43.

⁶⁹ On this see Marcus Cunliffe, *Chattel Slavery and Wage Slavery: The Anglo-American Context 1830-1860*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1979.

⁷⁰ William Clarke, ‘Industrial’ in *Fabian Essays* (1889). London: George Allen & Unwin, 1962, p. 107.

⁷¹ See Alex Gourevitch, ‘Labor and Republican Liberty’, *Constellations*, Vol. 18, No. 3, 2011, pp. 431-454; ‘Labor Republicanism and the Transformation of Work’, *Political Theory*, 41.4, 2013, pp. 591-617; *From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth: Labor and Republican Liberty in the Nineteenth Century*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015. See also Eric MacGilvray, *The Invention of Market Freedom*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011. Gourevitch’s work has sought to build on, extend, and in part critique the work done on

republican liberty ‘from an ideal of political liberty to a broader aspiration to human emancipation, and the old formula that “it is only possible to be free in a free state” was reworked to mean that one could only be free in a free society.’⁷²

A central problem to come to terms with for the “labor republicans” was an increasingly industrialised economy. Sharing much of the critique of wage labour and the impact of the machine on workers as Morris, the “labor republicans” tried to find a way of realising liberty and freedom through the potentials of the modern economy rather than echoing earlier republicans who had idealised the land-holding small producer. As Gourevitch notes, the factory had ‘made clear the social character of work.’⁷³ A return to pre-industrial production processes was impossible, and as such the idea of independence important to republican liberty had to be redefined. ‘Individual freedom’, in this new way of conceiving it, ‘depends upon spontaneous recognition of equal interdependence.’⁷⁴

Under capitalism the ‘propertyless worker was structurally dominated prior to the contract [they have no choice but to sell their labour power], and personally dominated in the making of the contract [it is the employer of labour who sets the terms of the labour contract] and once at work [where ‘overseer’s book of penalties replaces the slave-driver’s lash’].’⁷⁵ The last of these three aspects of the domination of the workers is the clearest. The first two aspects can be illustrated in a passage from Morris where he argued that ‘the capitalists, by means of their monopoly of the means of production, compel the worker to work for less than his due share of the wealth which he produces – that is, for less than he produces. He must work, he will die else; and as they are in possession of the raw materials, he must agree to the terms they enforce upon him.’ For Morris this was the meaning of ‘the “free contract” of

the neo-Roman conception of liberty by scholars such as Quentin Skinner in his book *Liberty Before Liberalism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

⁷² Gourevitch, ‘Labor and Republican Liberty’, p. 432.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 442.

⁷⁴ Gourevitch, ‘Labor Republicanism and the Transformation of Work’, p. 610.

⁷⁵ Gourevitch, *From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth*, p. 116.

which we hear so much, and which, to speak plainly, is a capitalist lie.’⁷⁶ What this demands then is the collective and cooperative control of the industrial system by the workers as the only way ‘to retain control over one’s laboring activity.’⁷⁷

As the *Journal of United Labor*, the main organ of the Knights of Labor, put it, ‘integral co-operation is the whole or complete organization of production and distribution for the benefit of the whole body of those concerned in the production...the members of which employing their own labor and consuming their own products would be self-sustaining, therefore independent of the money-market and of the wage-market.’⁷⁸ What this vision aimed at was not simply the eradication of despotism within the workplace but a transformation of the production process as a whole by an extension of the principle of self-government into the economic sphere.

However, as Eric MacGilvray points out, republicanism focuses not just on liberty but rather ‘centers around the problem of securing the practice of virtue through the control of arbitrary power’. Liberty is important as it allows for individual self-cultivation. Wage labour leads to a loss of liberty and freedom not only because of the ‘degrading effect on the bodies and minds of those who are engaged in it’ but also ‘because it imposes a relationship of dependence, with all the servility and corruption that such a relationship entails.’⁷⁹

The ‘integral co-operation’ envisioned by the “labor republicans” was a transformation that ‘required forms of social and political cooperation. Such collective action was only possible if workers developed and exercised certain qualities in themselves. They needed not just a conception of liberty but a sense of virtue.’⁸⁰ Crucially this was a sense of

⁷⁶ Morris, ‘True and False Society’, p. 10.

⁷⁷ Gourevitch, ‘Labor and Republican Liberty’, p. 443.

⁷⁸ Quoted in Gourevitch, ‘Labor Republicanism and the Transformation of Work’, p. 597.

⁷⁹ MacGilvray, *The Invention of Market Freedom*, p. 22, 159.

⁸⁰ Gourevitch, *From Slavery to the Cooperative Commonwealth*, p. 137.

virtue that would need to be inculcated during the existing social conditions in order for a successful transformation and not purely a feature of the future co-operative society.

Morris and British socialists were certainly aware of what was happening in America. *Commonweal* ran regular reports on the activities of the Knights of Labor and quotes from American labour journals. Henry F. Charles, an anti-parliamentarian member and one-time financial secretary of the League, who had emigrated to America contributed over fifty 'Letters from America' to *Commonweal* between summer 1887 to spring 1890 from a variety of different American cities.⁸¹ Regular feature 'The Labour Struggle' ran reports of strikes and union organisation in the States.⁸² There were also short lived attempts at establishing Knights of Labour assemblies in Britain and Ireland, though these never achieved mass membership or much influence.⁸³ Henry Halliday Sparling's article 'Labour Troubles in America' described the programme of the Knights as 'in part Socialistic', that they 'aim at a universal and complete organisation of labour, productive and distributive, without distinction of race, creed, or colour, and are composed, therefore, of men following the most varied vocations, with very dissimilar habits of life, and strongly marked differences of opinion.' Sparling thought the strength of the Knights 'comprehensive reach over all ranks and kinds of labour' was also its main weakness in that a strong and consistent socialist approach was diluted to appease as broad a church as possible.⁸⁴ Likewise Morris and Bax referred to the Knights as a 'gigantic trades' union' with 'more definite tendencies towards Socialism than those in this country' but questioned the leadership of Terence Powderly.⁸⁵

⁸¹ For example, see Henry Charles, 'Letter from America', *Commonweal*, 4.105 (14 January 1888), p. 11.

⁸² See *ibid.*, p. 15.

⁸³ Steven Parfitt, *Knights Across the Atlantic: The Knights of Labor in Britain and Ireland*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016.

⁸⁴ H. Halliday Sparling, 'Labour Trouble in America', *Commonweal*, 2.18 (15 May 1886), p. 52.

⁸⁵ Bax & Morris, 'Socialism from the Root Up: Ch. XXII. – Socialism Militant', *Commonweal*, 4. 14 (17 March 1888), p. 82.

The 7th December 1889 issue of *Commonweal* ran a quote from the *Journal of United Labour* that said a people ‘may be politically free, but if they must obtain permission and pay a price ere they can apply their labour to the natural sources of wealth they are not industrially free, and what avails political freedom to industrial slaves?’⁸⁶ The same issue quoted an editorial from the Detroit *Evening News* which stated that the ‘logic of Democracy is Anarchism, and the logic of Republicanism is State Socialism or Communism.’⁸⁷ An earlier issue, from 1886 ran a quote from the *Labor Leaf*, a Detroit paper of the Knights of Labor: ‘When you own the tools of production, you will be independent of the capitalist.’⁸⁸

Commonweal didn’t only quote ‘labor republican’ papers and journals but also from individuals within the republican tradition. The February issue of 1886 quoted Abraham Lincoln: ‘I affirm it as my conviction that class laws placing capital above labour are more dangerous to the Republic at this hour than chattel slavery in the days of its haughtiest supremacy.’⁸⁹ Also from the American side was a quote from Alexander Hamilton: ‘A power over a man’s subsistence amounts to a power over his will.’⁹⁰ From the European republican tradition they quoted Mazzini: ‘Our political liberty is a lie, capital is now the tyrant of labour, and the labourer has to accept any terms from his employer or die of starvation.’⁹¹ Notably, Algernon Sidney’s *Discourses Concerning Government* was also quoted: ‘The weight of chains, number of stripes, hardness of labour, and other effects of a master’s cruelty, may make one servitude more miserable than another; but he is a slave who serves the best and gentlest man in the world, as well as he who serves the worst – and he does serve him if he must obey his commands and depend on his will.’⁹²

⁸⁶ *Commonweal*, 5.204 (7 December 1889), p. 387.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 389.

⁸⁸ *Commonweal*, 2.27 (17 July 1886), p. 125.

⁸⁹ *Commonweal*, 2.13 (February 1886), p. 15.

⁹⁰ *Commonweal*, 2.22 (12 June 1886), p. 85.

⁹¹ *Commonweal*, 3.69 (7 May, 1887), p. 146.

⁹² *Commonweal*, 5.156 (5 January 1889), p. 8.

The frequency of such quotes and attention paid to American labour activists demonstrates the importance of this tradition to Morris, but it is necessary to be wary of according it a huge influence. Morris and the other editors of *Commonweal* did not consider themselves to be republicans, they were socialists and communists. However, the use of such quotes does show us that the socialists of the 1880s were willing to take material from a wide array of sources if they thought it would help them. They saw themselves as a continuation of other historical struggles against oppression. The quotes also help to remind us that although it may not be the case, as the Detroit *Evening News* had put it, that ‘the logic of Republicanism is State Socialism or Communism’, a statement at odds with the League’s own manifesto, it is certainly true that one of the intellectual roots of socialism is republicanism and this should not be forgotten.⁹³ Furthermore, this close following of the Knights of Labor also points towards trans-Atlantic networks of radicals and socialists, and to the importance of journals and publications in the global spread of ideas

Machinery under Socialism

‘The mighty change which the success of competitive commerce has wrought in the world,’ Morris declared in 1881, ‘whatever it may have destroyed, has at least unwittingly made one thing – from out of it has been born the increasing power of the working-class.’⁹⁴ A few years later he reformulated the same idea: ‘the capitalist or modern slave-owner has been forced by his very success, as we have seen, to organize his slaves, the wage-earners, into a co-operation for production so well arranged that it requires little but his own elimination to

⁹³ On this, see Mark Bevir, ‘Republicanism, Socialism, and Democracy in Britain: The Origins of the Radical Left’, *Journal of Social History*, Vol. 34, No 2 (Winter, 2000), pp. 351-368.

⁹⁴ Morris, ‘The Prospects of Architecture in Civilization’, *CW XXII*, p.138.

make it a foundation for communal life'. The capitalist's 'own advance in wealth and power has bred for him the very enemy who is doomed to make an end for him.'⁹⁵

What the second passage here makes clear is that the foundation for the new society to be created in socialism is based on the co-operative nature of production that capitalism has developed. This basis has been created not despite the horrors and degradation of industrial labour but because of it. William Clare Roberts argues that Marx in *Capital* is making a similar argument. 'Nowhere in *Capital* does he argue or imply that capitalism has developed human productive powers to the point where we can meet everyone's needs, or that such a development would constitute a threshold before which the attainment of communism would be impossible.' Rather, capitalism destroys the workers' capability of going it alone and forces them into combination. The 'power developed by capitalism is the power to destroy workers' lives, to expose large swaths of humanity to immiseration and sudden desolation, and to undermine the earth's capacity to sustain us all.' This power, and not the technological advances of production, is 'the development of the material conditions of communism, for the simple reason that capitalism gives to the laboring class a powerful motive to cooperate in the construction of a new society.'⁹⁶

For Roberts, who takes *Capital* as a work of political theory as much as if not more so a treatise on economics, this argument was directed against ideas of 'worker separatism and the yeoman republican ideal of independent peasants and artisans' which 'were powerful ideological currents within the workers' movement' of the nineteenth century. The development of machinery under capitalism 'motivates, and even compels, the laborers to embrace Marx's own vision of political organization by precluding a return to independent artisanal production.'⁹⁷ Morris's vision of communism, as expressed in *News from Nowhere*,

⁹⁵ Morris, 'The Hopes of Civilization', *CW XXIII*, p. 76.

⁹⁶ Roberts, *Marx's Inferno*, p. 171.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 171, 169.

does seem to suggest a return to artisanal production. But it is not a return to ‘independent’ artisanal production, crucially it maintains the co-operative nature of labour developed by capitalism.

In answering the question ‘Is the change from handicraft to machinery good or bad?’ Morris gave the answer that ‘statically, it is bad, dynamically it is good. As a condition of life, production by machinery is altogether an evil; as an instrument for forcing on us better conditions of life it has been, and for some time yet will be, indispensable.’⁹⁸ Not only will it be indispensable for some time, ‘it must be remembered that machinery’, Morris wrote with Bax, ‘would be improved and perfected without hesitation when the restrictions laid on production by the exigencies of profit-making were removed.’⁹⁹

In the future machinery could be used for its supposedly designed purpose, saving labour. ‘Our epoch has invented machines which would have appeared wild dreams to the men of past ages, and of those machines we have as yet *made no use*.’ When used properly ‘these miracles of ingenuity would be for the first time used for minimizing the amount of time spent in unattractive labour, which by their means might be so reduced as to be but a very light burden on each individual.’¹⁰⁰

Morris was not so naïve as to think that all work in a socialist society would be pleasurable in itself. But this ‘unattractive labour’ must itself be both necessary and reasonable. That certain forms of labour are necessary for society to exist is obvious, and by reasonable Morris means ‘it must be such work as a good citizen can see the necessity for; as a member of the community, I must have agreed to do it.’ If the ‘necessary reasonable work

⁹⁸ Morris, ‘The Revival of Handicraft’, *CW XXII*, pp. 335-6.

⁹⁹ Bax & Morris, ‘Socialism from the Root Up: Ch. XXIII. – Socialism Triumphant’, *Commonweal*, 4.121 (5 May 1888), p. 140.

¹⁰⁰ Morris, ‘Useful Work versus Useless Toil’, *CWXXIII*, p. 117.

be of a mechanical kind, I must be helped to do it by a machine, not to cheapen my labour, but so that as little time as possible may be spent upon it'.¹⁰¹

That Morris saw the necessity for the continued use of machines is not surprising. It is a well-worn defence of Morris that it was not machines themselves he abhorred but their use under capitalism. For Stansky, Morris 'was less opposed to machines than to the meretricious ugliness of a machine civilization.'¹⁰² Morris himself wrote that it 'is not this or that tangible steel and brass machine which we want to get rid of, but the great intangible machine of commercial tyranny, which oppresses the lives of all of us.'¹⁰³

Undoubtedly there is truth in this, but it doesn't get to the bottom of the matter. It doesn't explain the near absence of machinery in *Nowhere* or his frequent assertions that the use of machinery in a socialist society would decline. Looking at one more formulation of the defence can help to find a way out of this question. 'What Morris is against is not the machines, but the alienation that, under capitalism, they produce.'¹⁰⁴ Certainly the use of machines under capitalism is worse than their use under socialism, but any use of machines places a disconnect between the labourer and the end product. 'I believe machines can do everything – except make works of art.'¹⁰⁵

As seen, co-operative control of factories does not do away with the effects of machine production itself. It is important for Morris that when socialism has been achieved the workers will have a choice about how they want to live. Machinery will likely develop further 'because people will still be anxious about getting through the work necessary to holding society together;' after this 'they will find that there is not so much work to do as

¹⁰¹ Morris, 'How We Live and How We Might Live', *CW XXIII*, p.20.

¹⁰² Stansky, *Redesigning the World*, p. 261.

¹⁰³ Morris, 'Art and Its Producers', *CW XXII*, p. 352.

¹⁰⁴ Ray Watkinson, 'The Obstinate Refusers: Work in News from Nowhere', in Stephen Coleman & Paddy O'Sullivan eds., *William Morris & News from Nowhere: A Vision for Our Time*. Totnes: Green Books, 2004, p. 97.

¹⁰⁵ Morris, 'Art and the Beauty of the Earth', *CW XXII*, p. 166.

they expected, and that then they will have leisure to reconsider the whole subject;’ then ‘if it seems to them that a certain industry would be carried on more pleasantly as regards the worker, and more effectually as regards the goods, by using hand-work rather than machinery, they will certainly get rid of their machinery, because it will be possible for them to do so.’¹⁰⁶

In his lecture ‘Monopoly: or, How Labour is Robbed’ Morris had argued that the ‘very increase in the productivity of labour, which will ruin capitalism, will make Socialism possible, and it cannot be doubted that the progress of the cheapening of production will be quickened prodigiously in the very first days of the new social order, and we shall all find it easy enough to live a very few years after the time when we found it so difficult to make profits.’¹⁰⁷ It was part of Morris’s argument that competition, the cheapening of production and exhaustion of markets, in combination with the workers’ struggle to improve their condition was making ‘employment for profit more difficult both to get and to give’.¹⁰⁸ This line of argument gives weight to Kinna’s assertion that ‘Morris’s hopes that the collapse of capitalism would inaugurate a new epoch of rest were grounded on the assumptions he made about its productive capacity.’¹⁰⁹ However, this assumption about productive capacity and the belief that it will increase in the early days of socialism only holds true for those early days. Once that holding together of the new society has been achieved people will then be faced with the choice of whether they need to maintain that level of productive capacity or whether they can forego some of it in order to improve the quality of daily life and labour.

Paul Meier’s argument ran along similar lines to Kinna’s. ‘Industrial progress and the social contradictions deriving from it have made popular revolution and the seizure of power

¹⁰⁶ Morris, ‘How We Live and How We Might Live’, *CW XXIII*, p. 24.

¹⁰⁷ Morris, ‘Monopoly’, *Commonweal*, 5.206 (21 December 1889), p. 401. ‘Monopoly: or, How Labour is Robbed’ was first given in 1887, given many times over the next couple of years, and was printed in *Commonweal* under the title ‘Monopoly’ in issues 5.204, 5.205, and 5.206.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ Kinna, ‘William Morris: Art, Work, and Leisure’, p. 501.

both achievable and necessary. This will in turn free technical progress from its ancient fetters and give it a fresh impulse allowing it to bring about the communist stage of abundance for all; and we must not forget that Morris's dreams of handicraft rest upon a first premise of a vigorous mechanised infrastructure which is at once unobtrusive and marvellously efficient.'¹¹⁰ While similar to Kinna's argument to begin with, Meier doesn't find the same contradiction that Kinna does. Kinna takes the dreams of handicraft as a turn away from mechanised infrastructure and thus also away from easy abundance with the result that labour on providing the basic needs of life will have to take up a large portion of daily life. Meier believes that the mechanised infrastructure doesn't disappear but rather goes unmentioned or under-emphasised by Morris due to his desire to focus on the human aspects of communist society. Given that in *News from Nowhere* road-mending and harvesting, both labour intensive activities, are performed by groups of labourers seemingly without machinery it is hard to believe with Meier that a 'vigorous mechanised infrastructure' is underpinning this society. Instead it can be argued that Morris thought a strong revival of handicraft would be possible even without a mechanised infrastructure. This was due to production being put towards only human needs rather than to the needs of the profit motive, resulting in the need to quantitatively make less stuff and the removal of wasted labour and resources. Added to this was the fact that there would no longer be idle classes living off the labour the others; all would contribute their fair share of labour under the belief that in working for society they were also working for themselves.

Morris simplified his thoughts on machinery by saying that 'the elaboration of machinery...will lead to the simplification of life, and so once more to the limitation of machinery.'¹¹¹ This brings us back to the point raised by Gourevitch and MacGilvray that the

¹¹⁰ Meier, *The Marxist Dreamer*, p. 379.

¹¹¹ 'How We Live and How We Might Live', *CW XXIII*, p. 25.

cultivation of virtue is a vital part of political and social change. In 1879 Morris had outlined two virtues necessary if art was to ever become a core part of society again, honesty and simplicity. 'To make my meaning clearer', Morris added, 'I will name the opposing vice of the second of these – luxury'. As well as luxury being the greatest foe of art, Morris argued that 'luxury cannot exist without slavery of some kind or other, and its abolition will be blessed, like the abolition of other slaveries, by the freeing both of the slaves and of their masters.'¹¹² It is interesting to compare this view with that of Oscar Wilde. There are many similarities between the two men, particularly the importance they attach to art, yet Wilde's approach is different. He too thought that up to the present man had been 'to a certain extent, the slave of machinery', but he did not think that slavery was itself was the foe of luxury and art. 'The fact is,' he argued, 'that civilization requires slaves. The Greeks were quite right there.' Human slavery was clearly 'wrong, insecure, and demoralising', and could not be a basis for Wildean socialism. Instead, on 'mechanical slavery, on the slavery of the machine, the future of the world depends.'¹¹³

Morris implored his audience in a lecture from 1884 to 'have as few things as you can, for you may be sure that simplicity is the foundation of all worthy art'.¹¹⁴ Although he thought the Arts and Crafts Movement to be very limited in its potential to change society, one thing it could do through its exhibitions, lectures and literature was promote these virtues by bringing the public into direct contact with the manufacturers themselves unmediated by

¹¹² Morris, 'The Art of the People', *CW XXII*, pp. 47, 48. Morris's hatred of luxury and his belief that the rise of commerce during the period of the Renaissance had disastrous consequences shares similarities, whether he knew it or not, with Rousseau's First Discourse: 'Granting that luxury is a certain sign of riches; that, if you like, it even serves to increase them: What conclusion is to be drawn from this paradox so worthy of being born in our time; and what will become of virtue, when one has to get rich at all cost? The ancient politicians forever spoke of morals and of virtue; ours speak only of commerce and of money.' Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 'Discourse on the Sciences and Arts', in Victor Gourevitch ed., *Rousseau: The Discourses and other early political writings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008, pp. 1-28, p. 18.

¹¹³ Oscar Wilde, 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism', *Fortnightly Review*, 49: 340 (Feb. 1891), pp. 292-319, p. 303.

¹¹⁴ Morris, 'Textile Fabrics', *CW XXII*, p. 294.

middleman and through its emphasis on simple yet sound workmanship on good quality material.

In 'The Aims of Art', a lecture important enough to be reprinted in *Signs of Change*, Morris presents an example of the extent to which a reasonable and free man would use a machine. There is no point in grinding corn by hand, a simple machine can do the job as well if not better. This is an 'unmixed gain' for 'no art is lost, leisure or time for more pleasurable work is gained.' This is a simple example, so he moves on to an example of someone who has to weave plain cloth but finds doing so boring and thinks a machine does the job well, 'so, in order to gain more leisure of time for more pleasurable work, he uses a power-loom, and foregoes the small advantage of the little extra art in the cloth.' This is not a pure gain, for the worker 'has made a bargain between art and labour'. Morris thinks this is not in itself wrong, but that 'this is as far as a man who values art and is reasonable would go in the matter of machinery *as long as he was free*'. 'Carry the machine used for art a step farther, and he becomes an un-reasonable man, if he values art and is free.' If the worker desires some art in their goods and knows that a machine cannot produce it they would only use a machine if forced to. If free and desirous of decoration, the worker will 'sacrifice some of his leisure to have it genuine', knowing that if he desires the ornamentation the labour 'will interest and please him by satisfying the needs of his mood and energy' and thus not be much of a sacrifice at all.¹¹⁵

The example of how a reasonable person may use machinery given in 'The Aims of Art' is at the extreme end of Morris's thinking on the subject and suggests he wanted a society that in many ways reverted to pre-industrial production techniques. Yet the lecture is also a considered one from Morris's socialist period. The level of machine use given is consistent with the society depicted in *News from Nowhere*, suggesting that if Morris did

¹¹⁵ Morris, 'The Aims of Art', *CW XIII*, pp. 86-88.

truly envisage this as a reasonable situation, it was in a society long settled into communism and not in its socialist stage of transition. Elsewhere Morris argued that ‘we should soon drop machinery in agriculture I believe when we were free’, further suggesting that there really is little room for machinery in his ideal future.¹¹⁶

Morris was usually content to give less detail or to be less prescriptive in what might count as reasonable use of machinery. In *Socialism: Its Growth & Outcome* Morris paid his due to the earlier ‘Utopist socialists’ and to Fourier particularly for ‘asserting that all labour could be made pleasurable under certain conditions.’ These conditions were: ‘freedom from anxiety to livelihood; shortness of hours in proportion to the stress of the work; variety of occupation if the work is of its nature monotonous; *due* use of machinery, *i.e.* the use of it in labour which is essentially oppressive if done by the hand; opportunity for every one to choose the occupation suitable to his capacity and idiosyncrasy; and lastly, the solacing of labour by the introduction of ornament, the making of which is enjoyable to the labourer.’ Developing on the use of machinery they say it ‘will be used in a way almost the reverse of the present one’ in that it will be used for ‘the roughest and most repulsive work’ to relieve each ‘citizen from drudgery.’¹¹⁷

Morris and Bax continue that ‘it must be admitted that the tendency of modern industrialism is towards the entire extinction of handiwork by machinery’ but that ‘there is no doubt that in the long run this will work out its own contradiction.’ The working out of this contradiction would be that after machinery has been ‘perfected, mankind will turn its attention to something else. We shall then begin to free ourselves from the terrible tyranny of machinery, and the results of the great commercial epoch which it has perfected; we fully admit that these results seem destined to overlap from the capitalistic into the socialistic

¹¹⁶ Morris, ‘The Society of the Future’, *Commonweal*, 5.169 (6 April 1889), p. 109.

¹¹⁷ Morris & Bax, *Socialism: Its Growth & Outcome* (2nd edition). London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1896, pp. 305-306.

period.’¹¹⁸ This last part suggests again that in the early stages of a socialist society machine use will continue apace allowing society the security to consider how they wish to continue.

Simplicity & Freedom

For E. P. Thompson, Morris’s belief that machinery would decline was one he ‘never posed...as one of practical theoretical importance.’ Rather he always saw it as a choice to be made ‘after the transitional stage of Socialism’ where he hoped that people would choose to simplify life, sacrificing some of the power over nature developed by industry.¹¹⁹ Despite Morris’s own strong predilection for the removal of machine production, he did think it was a choice for the future. In ‘The Development of Modern Society’ he argued that as there is nothing in machines themselves that forbids their use in actually ‘lightening the burden of human labour’ socialists must leave ‘the consideration of what is to be done to the machines and factories to future ages, who will be free to consider it, as we are not.’¹²⁰

However, against Thompson’s argument that it was not a question Morris thought of as being of theoretical importance I believe it was an issue of great significance, not for the achievement of socialism itself but for the quality of life under socialism and then communism, and for the rebirth of popular art. The move towards simplicity of life is how Morris manages to foresee the freedom in labour that comes from the reduction in machine use and the gradual eradication of the division of labour, and the wider social freedom of a society organised co-operatively for the benefit of each and all.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 306-307.

¹¹⁹ Thompson, *William Morris* (1955), p. 759.

¹²⁰ Morris, ‘The Development of Modern Society’, *Commonweal*, 6.240 (16 August, 1890), p. 260.

‘Free men,’ Morris argued, ‘must lead simple lives and have simple pleasures: and if we shudder away from that necessity now, it is because we are not free men, and have in consequence wrapped up our lives in such a complexity of dependence that we have grown feeble and helpless.’ Morris hoped for a ‘society conscious of a wish to keep life simple, to forego some of the power over nature won by past ages in order to be more human and less mechanical’. The simple life however is not an ascetic life, with Morris demanding ‘a free and unfettered animal life for man’ where if ‘we feel the least degradation in being amorous, or merry, or hungry, or sleepy, we are so far bad animals, and therefore miserable men.’¹²¹ Morris’s simplicity was not the same as Edward Carpenter’s. As Sheila Rowbotham put it: ‘Renunciation did not figure in Morris’ socialism unless it was forced on him by the exigencies of struggle.’¹²² Luxury needed to become extinct because it was born out of ‘a sickly discontent with the simple joys of the lovely earth’. It should be clarified again that Morris’s fear of dependency did not mean he proposed a return to complete independency. His future would have co-operation and fellowship at its heart but what was needed was ‘the shaking off the slavish dependence, not on other men, but on artificial systems made to save men manly trouble and responsibility’.¹²³

Meier warned against ‘a general tendency to exaggerate Morris’s desire for the reduction of needs and the simplification of life.’ The tendency towards ‘errors of interpretation’ on this issue came from ‘the habit of quoting from the texts of Morris’s pre-socialist period, to the exclusion of all others, or at least, from those where the influence of Ruskin was still preponderant.’¹²⁴ This is of a piece with Meier’s view that there is a radical break in Morris’s thought with his entry into socialism and upon reading Marx. However, the

¹²¹ Morris, ‘The Society of the Future’, *Commonweal*, 5.169 (6 April 1889), p. 108; 5.168 (30 March 1889), p. 99.

¹²² Sheila Rowbotham, *Edward Carpenter: A Life of Liberty and Love*. London: Verso, 2009, p. 84.

¹²³ Morris, ‘The Society of the Future’, *Commonweal*, 5.169 (6 April 1889), p. 108; 5.168 (30 March 1889), p. 99.

¹²⁴ Meier, *The Marxist Dreamer*, p. 382, 383.

quotes on the need for simplicity to lead a free life from ‘The Society of the Future’ are part of what, to use Meier’s phraseology, constitute Morris’s mature utopian thought. There is greater continuity from the pre-socialist to socialist Morris than Meier can admit to.

The belief that socialism would tend towards the simplification of life is seen by some as one of the least convincing aspects of Morris’s political thought. It is certainly one of the least easily applicable to the present day with our society, economy and governance even more complex than they were in the late 19th century. It is also a belief that has had potentially negative political consequences and has seen Morris fall foul of thinkers such as Raymond Williams who thought that the left had been ‘seriously limited – at times politically disabled – by the inheritance of models of socialism which either simplify or merely rationalise a social order.’ Williams recognised where the impulse came from, arguing that the ‘misery and poverty and disorder of the capitalist world within which the idea of socialism was originally generated made the prescription of an alternative almost too simple’ but thought instead that socialists should see that ‘complexity is an energizing challenge – and its means are becoming increasingly available, if we can find the political forms in which to use them.’¹²⁵

Conclusion

Ruth Kinna has argued that when Morris distinguished between socialism and communism ‘he insisted that communism was the only system that was compatible with art’ and that ‘he called himself a communist because he wanted to prioritize art as the principal

¹²⁵ Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters: Interviews with New Left Review*. London: Verso, 2015 (1979), p. 429, 432, 434. Williams doesn’t explicitly name Morris but his description of the socialist utopias he criticises make it clear Morris is one of the figures he has in mind.

aim of the revolution.’ However, she also states that he ‘did not always make the relationship between art and communism clear’ in that he ‘usually argued that the aim of communism was to realize freedom and co-operation.’¹²⁶ The reason that Morris argued the most important things to be achieved through communism were freedom and co-operation was because he saw these as the conditions in which art is possible.

Reporting on an Art Congress Morris writes that artists who ‘demand beauty and interest in life for themselves...will soon find out that they cannot have this except by means of co-operation of the labour that produces the ordinary wares of life; and that co-operation again they cannot have as long as the workmen are dependent on the will of a master.’ He continues that they ‘must co-operate consciously and willingly for livelihood, and out of that free co-operation will spring the expression of individual character and gifts which we call art.’¹²⁷ Workers do co-operate under capitalism but they do not do so freely; first they are forced to enter into a contract with an employer who puts them to work in combination with other workers, and then the work itself is directed and overseen; even if the work is not done by a machine the worker has not combined design and execution and the final product in no sense belongs to them either. Freely entered into co-operation fosters the sense of interdependence that Gourevitch identifies in the American “labor republicans”. As social creatures it is only through this freely developed interdependence that ‘the expression of individual character’ will emerge.

Ultimately, Morris was less interested in art than in the conditions in which it could be enjoyed by all. He had little time for the production of art for art’s sake. The beauty of products matters less than that people have been able to freely express themselves in their labour. ‘I am not pleading for the production of a little more beauty in the world,’ as he put it

¹²⁶ Ruth Kinna, *William Morris: The Art of Socialism*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000, p. 114, 115.

¹²⁷ Morris, ‘Talk and Art’, *Commonweal*, 4.154 (22 December 1888), p. 404.

in 1888, ‘much as I love it, and much as I would sacrifice for its sake; it is the lives of human beings that I am pleading for; or if you will, with the Roman poet, the reasons for living.’¹²⁸

‘Freedom first at any price,’ he argued in a similar sentiment, ‘and then if possible happiness, which to my mind would be the certain result of freedom.’¹²⁹

¹²⁸ Morris, ‘Art and Its Producers’, *CW XXII*, p. 352.

¹²⁹ Morris, ‘The Development of Modern Society’, *Commonweal*, 6.240 (16 August, 1890), p. 260.

Chapter 5: Town & Country

Early in 1887 occasional contributor to *Commonweal* Tom Muse wrote in regarding a Bill that proposed extending the Kendal railway line in the Lake District from Windermere through to Ambleside. Muse was in favour of the project, believing the proposed route would be mostly hidden from view and with the extra cost of a coach removed for tourists wishing to see Ambleside, ‘the artisans of the North will benefit if the hindrances to a proper enjoyment of the neighbourhood are removed.’ Muse was keen to stress that he and other ‘Cumberland and Westmoreland people yield to no one in love and respect for the beauties of the district’ but wished to see the Bill passed quickly as he objected to the view of ‘our friend W. Morris’ who had enjoined ‘we workers...to wait for the Socialist millennium [sic] before we enjoy the Promised Land even for a day.’¹

Muse’s letter was in part a response to a paragraph of Morris’s ‘Notes on News’ a few weeks prior. Here Morris had written in ‘appeal to all Socialists to do their best to preserve the beauty and interest of the country.’ He acknowledged that ‘under our present system’ most were not allowed to enjoy that beauty, but that ‘when we have abolished the artificial famine caused by capital, we shall not be so pinched and poor that we cannot afford ourselves the pleasure of a beautiful landscape’. As it was, Morris thought that ‘the Lake railway is not a question of the convenience of the Amblesiders, or the pleasure of the world in general, but the profit of a knot of persons leagued together against the public in general under the name of a railway company.’² Morris was unpersuaded by Muse’s letter, appending a response as editor saying that ‘our friend in his enthusiasm for railways is unconsciously playing into the

¹ Tom Muse, ‘Correspondence: The Ambleside Railway Bill’, *Commonweal*, 3.61 (12 March 1887), p. 85.

² William Morris, ‘Notes on News’, *Commonweal*, 3.59 (26 February 1887), p.65.

hands of the capitalist robbers'. Taking a longer view, Morris argued that the 'railway is meant to be the first step in the invasion of the Lake country, and will certainly not stop at Ambleside if the projectors can help it.' Ultimately, he thought it came it down to one question: 'Is the beauty of the Lake country, and the natural wish that people have to see it and enjoy it, to be handed over to be exploited without limitation by a company who looks upon the public as so much material for exploitation?' If yes, that beauty would not last long and people would be better off visiting 'some country side less renowned for beauty, and therefore not so tempting to the runners of those horrible pests, the tourist railway and the tourist hotel.'³

This short exchange reveals several important points. Firstly, it is worth noting that this is an instance of a League member and reader of *Commonweal* disagreeing strongly enough with Morris that he felt compelled to write in. Morris's word was never sacrosanct, in part because, as Muse notes, of Morris's 'favoured circumstances', a reference to his quite considerable wealth.⁴ Morris didn't shy away from these circumstances either, was aware it shaped his views and created a hard-to-bridge gulf between himself and those he was trying to reach. Morris's reply doesn't completely take account of Muse's arguments, especially regarding the 'Promised Land' of the 'Socialist millenium'; indeed, it trends towards quick dismissal of them, and is in places quite prescriptive about what socialists should think on the issue. In his favour, Morris's immediate detachment leads him to try to think of the issue in a longer-term perspective, believing that if given an inch, the railway companies will take many a mile. A significant difference between Muse and Morris, partly explained by their living proximity to the railway, is the focus in Muse's letter on the benefits of the railway for people in Cumbria and how it could improve their lives in the short term, whereas these are

³ Morris, 'Correspondence: The Ambleside Railway Bill', *Commonweal*, 3.61 (12 March 1887), p.85.

⁴ Muse, 'Correspondence', in *ibid*.

side-lined by the London-living Morris who emphasises instead the impact on the beauty of the landscape.

Morris's willingness to see the preservation of the countryside and of the natural world as an important political issue is one significant reason his thought has remained influential, and with the rapid development of climate change has come to be seen as increasingly important. The first Green Party MP elected to the UK Parliament Caroline Lucas in her Kelmscott Lecture put it clearly when she stated that for 'anyone interested in Green politics Morris is part of the furniture. We claim him, rightly as one of our own.'⁵ That for Morris this was something socialists particularly should be paying attention to is why, as Patrick O'Sullivan put it in his summation of scholarship on the issue, he should be seen as 'one of the most important founders of the modern red-green movement (such as it is)' and that through the 'synthesis between his earlier aesthetic ideas and his later Marxism' he 'is one of the few 'green' critics of capitalism who provides us with a concrete example of how to build an ecological society without resorting to authoritarianism.'⁶ Much of the scholarship on the environmental aspects of Morris's political thought has stressed how his socialism embodied the continuation of a romantic concern for nature and its place as a source of inspiration for art, and how these combined with his utopianism in creating a vision of an ecologically sustainable and aesthetically beautiful future encapsulated best in *News from Nowhere* but also in pieces such as 'A Factory as it might be'⁷. The best work in this area has

⁵ Caroline Lucas, *William Morris in the Twenty-First Century*. London: William Morris Society, 2013, p. 7. Whether Morris would be happy with being claimed by many modern Greens is a different question. Lucas continued by saying that 'we risk taking him for granted. We forget just how radical he was, how ambitious, and how much he achieved' (p.7). Despite this warning, Lucas herself significantly downplays much of Morris's radicalism, or at least his acceptance of the writings of Marx and belief in the necessity of communism, both of which go unmentioned.

⁶ Patrick O'Sullivan, 'Morris the red, Morris the green' – a partial review', *JWMS* 19.3 (Winter 2011), pp. 22-38, pp. 33-34. For other scholarship on Morris 'the green', see Raymond Williams, 'Socialism and Ecology (1982)', *Capitalism Nature Socialism*, 6.1 (1995), pp. 41-57; Patrick O'Sullivan, 'Desire and Necessity: William Morris and Nature', in Florence S. Boos ed., *The Routledge Companion to William Morris*. Routledge, 2021, pp.442-464; Bradley Macdonald, 'William Morris and the vision of ecosocialism', *Contemporary Justice Review*, 7.3 (2004), pp. 287-304.

⁷ Morris, 'A Factory as it might be', *WM: AWS II*, pp. 130-140.

taken careful note of the importance Morris gave to the question of production for use rather than for profit and shows how it is ‘in his combination of concerns, in the linked ideas of nature and human labour’ that his thought is most useful today.⁸ As Raymond Williams pointed out, Morris’s dictum to ‘Have nothing in your home which you do not either believe to be beautiful or know to be useful’ may sound like ‘a trite recommendation’ but in fact ‘goes to the center of the problem, and to take it seriously, still today, would lead to a pretty extraordinary clear-out.’⁹

Given how important what we now call green or environmental issues are to modern accounts of Morris’s politics, it is striking how these are not issues that dominate the pages of *Commonweal*. While not totally absent, they figure briefly in re-prints of Morris lectures and in his fictional works along with occasional condemnation of industrial pollution in articles and reports on factory life, the relative omission of direct engagement with them requires us to re-think how central they are to Morris at the level of political strategy. For Elizabeth Carolyn Miller this is one reason why Morris’s fiction should be privileged above his journalism. Morris’s ‘wide political ambitions’, including ecological concerns, ‘could not be achieved through journalism but required the speculative and epic forms that Morris brought into the pages of the *Commonweal* through his literary contributions.’¹⁰ Quite why these ambitions could not be achieved or even adequately confronted through journalism is not explained. Yet the absence of them from the journalism and from *Commonweal* at large should lead us to question exactly how central they are to the fiction. Questions of the environment and of nature are important to Morris but they only assume the importance often

⁸ Sara Wills, ‘Nature, Socialism, Livelihood: The Greening of William Morris?’, *Melbourne Historical Journal*, 31 (2003), pp. 74-92, p. 92.

⁹ Williams, ‘Socialism and ecology’, p. 47.

¹⁰ Elizabeth Carolyn Miller, ‘William Morris and the Literature and Socialism of the *Commonweal*’, in Florence S. Boos ed., *The Routledge Companion to William Morris*. Routledge, 2021, pp. 422-441, p. 435.

attached to them once the revolution has been achieved and the ‘Socialist millenium’ is being built.

In his analysis of the pastoral structure of feeling in Morris’s utopianism, Owen Holland has argued persuasively that we should ‘view Morris’s engagement with pastoral as a type of propaganda for the organisational and strategic orientation of the Socialist League, in opposition to the prefigurative practices associated with the small-scale utopian communities’ popular among many nineteenth century radicals. Although the society depicted in *News from Nowhere* may share some similarities with these utopian communities, Morris’s thought actually shows an ‘explicit repudiation of any political strategy involving back-to-the-land pastoral retreat’.¹¹ Despite being an important influence on such communities and schemes, they were incapable in Morris’s view of effecting socialist revolution.¹² In comparison to other writers who used the pastoral mode, such as Thomas Hardy, ‘Morris was less concerned to experiment with different narrative strategies for the representation (or preservation) of a vanishing rural life, and its human complications, because it was not the ‘green-world’ that was of primary interest to Morris, but the political means of achieving it’.¹³

This chapter takes one aspect of the pastoral tradition, the relationship between the town and the country, and uses this as a way of reading Morris’s major *Commonweal* fiction, *The Pilgrims of Hope*, *A Dream of John Ball*, and *News from Nowhere*. The educative function of fiction is subtler than openly instructive texts and articles, but situated as they were within *Commonweal* these works should be treated as part of Morris’s project of making and shaping socialists. The regularity with which the town/country divide appears in

¹¹ Owen Holland, *William Morris’s Utopianism: Politics, Propaganda and Prefiguration*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, p. 107.

¹² On this influence and the movement more generally see Jan Marsh, *Back to the Land: The Pastoral Impulse in England, from 1880 to 1914*. London: Quartet Books, 1982.

¹³ Holland, *William Morris’s Utopianism*, p. 157.

his socialist fiction indicates its importance to Morris's political thought and strategy. This chapter, therefore, hones its focus in on a close reading of these texts. His audiences and readers were being repeatedly told through this work where their political energies should be directed and the communist possibilities to be attained if the right path was taken.

The town/country divide is not a new theme in Morris's socialist work. It is there in a famous passage from *The Earthly Paradise*.

‘Forget six counties overhung with smoke,
Forget the snorting steam and piston stroke,
Forget the spreading of the hideous town;
Think rather of the pack-horse on the down,
And dream of London, small and white and clean,
The clear Thames bordered by its gardens green.’¹⁴

While the longer-term development of Morris's fiction is not here considered it is worth pointing out that there are some clear continuities. The opposition to industrial pollution and the emphasis on the ‘hideous’ nature of the town, as opposed to the direct ecological consequences of industrialisation, in contrast to the image of a clean and orderly city that is more garden than metropolis are all things that reappear throughout his works. Yet these continuities should not be overemphasised. Morris in the 1880s does not implore his readers to forget the industrial town but rather to see it as it is, as a product of capitalism and as a site of contestation in the fight to build a socialist society.

The contrast between town and country would continue to be an issue Morris thought about beyond the 1880s and his time in the Socialist League. It was on ‘Town and Country’ that he chose to speak to the Ancoats Brotherhood at Manchester in October 1892. The full

¹⁴ Morris, *CW III*, p. 3. For the longer history of this divide in English literature, see Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (1973). Nottingham: Spokesman, 2011.

text of the address has as yet not been recovered, but portions can be found in J. W. Mackail's *The Life of William Morris*. What we know of Morris's address, and Mackail suggests he delivered much without notes, indicates Morris treated his subject historically, up to the present and then offered his thoughts on 'whether it may not be possible in the long run to make the town a part of the country and the country a part of the towns.'¹⁵

The town and country distinction in this chapter is examined in three separate but related ways. First it will look at this distinction at the mental level, showing similarities between Morris's view and that of *The Communist Manifesto* towards the intellectual horizons of country life. In all of Morris's fiction it is in the town, and particularly in the capital city, that the knowledge and experience necessary to partake in political transformation are acquired, and it is in the city that political confrontation takes place. Secondly it takes the distinction at the level of the individual body. While city life can motivate the mind towards revolution, here it saps the body of strength leaving it weak for the fight. The body of country dwellers however is shown as strong, and, importantly for Morris, beautiful. The third level of the town and country distinction here looked at is the landscape. Morris's presentation of a future beautified city in contrast to its hideous present was part of his motivational project of making socialists but there is truth in Tom Muse's charge that it would have to wait for the 'Socialist millenium' before all could enjoy it. The town/country division is shown to play an important part in Morris's thinking around the transition from socialism to communism. It is the movement and equitable distribution of people during this transition that allows for the division to disappear and for the best characteristics of both town and country to melt in to the other.

¹⁵ Morris, quoted in J. W. Mackail, *The Life of William Morris, Vol. II*. London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1899, p. 301.

Morris's depiction of the country landscape is similar in some respects to his famous patterns: it is nature but it is not nature taking its own course. Instead it is a carefully controlled and managed nature, clean and ordered by the hand of society. In conclusion some of Morris's thoughts on the nature/society divide will be looked at to complicate scholarly accounts of Morris as a forerunner of ecosocialism. Morris, as one would expect of a late-nineteenth century socialist, does not fit easily into modern political categories and attempts to do so obscure his thought. His relevance for contemporary ecological thought and politics lies in his emphasis on production for need and in simplicity as the basis for a free and equal society.

Country Stupor

In the opening panoramic of history given in *The Communist Manifesto* Marx and Engels wrote: 'The bourgeoisie has subjected the country to the rule of the towns. It has created enormous cities, has greatly increased the urban population as compared with the rural, and has thus rescued a considerable part of the population from the idiocy of rural life.'¹⁶ Implicit in the final part of this, for Raymond Williams, is a value judgement in favour of the city against the country, and that it 'was then on this kind of confidence in the singular values of modernisation and civilisation that a major distortion in the history of communism was erected.'¹⁷ The longer history of communism is beyond the scope of focus here, but it is worth thinking about this part of the *Manifesto* in relation to Morris, someone who identified

¹⁶ Karl Marx & Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (1848), in Hal Draper, *The Adventures of the Communist Manifesto*. Alameda, CA: Center for Socialist History, 2004, p. 117.

¹⁷ Williams, *The Town and the Country*, p. 303.

himself as part of the communist tradition yet who is commonly associated with rural life and anti-urban sensibilities.

First it has to be noted that the phrase ‘idiocy of rural life’ as found in the main translation of the *Manifesto* by Samuel Moore and overseen by Engels, has been contested. Hal Draper noted how the German word *Idiotismus*, as used in the original could carry the ‘original Greek meaning of forms based on the word *idiotes*: a private person, withdrawn from public (communal) concerns, *apolitical* in the original sense of isolation from the larger community.’¹⁸ Similarly Eric Hobsbawm noted that ‘while there is no doubt that Marx...shared the usual townsman’s contempt for, as well as ignorance of, the peasant milieu,’ the original German referred not to stupidity ‘but to ‘the narrow horizons’, or ‘the isolation from the wider society’ in which people in countryside lived.’¹⁹ Morris would certainly have been familiar with this Moore translation, yet it would not have been his first encounter with the *Manifesto*. The Moore translation was published in March 1888, yet Morris was already familiar with the arguments it contained given that the Socialist League’s own Manifesto of 1885 had quoted from Marx & Engels’s more famous predecessor. The quotation used in the League’s Manifesto is similar to but not exactly the same as Helen Macfarlane’s 1850 translation that appeared in George Julian Harney’s *Red Republican*. Macfarlane’s translation stayed closer to the original German, speaking of ‘the idiotism of country life.’²⁰

The original phrasing in Marx’s text, according to Hobsbawm and also Draper, suggests that what ‘the rural had to be saved from, then, was the privatized apartness of a life-style isolated from the larger society: the classic *stasis* of peasant life.’²¹ It is unclear if

¹⁸ Draper, *The Adventures of the Communist Manifesto*, p. 211.

¹⁹ Eric Hobsbawm, *How to Change the World: Tales of Marx and Marxism*. London: Abacus, 2011, p. 108.

²⁰ Draper, *The Adventures of the Communist Manifesto*., p. 116.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 211.

Morris was aware of this meaning of *Idiotismus* or of Macfarlane's 'idiotism', though the classical aspects of his education mean it is certainly possible. What is clearer is that in his depictions of the narrow intellectual and social horizons of rural life, Morris's tone doesn't carry the dismissive possibilities of 'idiocy'. It is also clear that for Morris the ideas that were pushing society towards revolution were to be found, fostered and crystallised in the city.

We can see these ideas expressed in his first piece of *Commonweal* fiction, *The Pilgrims of Hope*. Appearing between March 1885 and July 1886, *The Pilgrims of Hope* is a thirteen-part poem following two lovers, Richard and his unfortunately unnamed wife, who travel from their village life to London and become embroiled in radical politics and a love triangle before leaving across the channel to take part in the Paris Commune.²² Unlike *A Dream of John Ball* or *News from Nowhere*, Morris never got round to revising his *Commonweal* text for separate publication, though the opening section 'The Message of the March Wind' was popular and often recited at socialist meetings.

'The Message of the March Wind' is set in a village not far from London where Richard and his lover live in 'Mid the birds and the blossoms and the beasts of the field'. It is 'here in the spring-tide the message shall find us':

'It biddeth us learn all the wisdom it knoweth;
It hath found us and held us, and biddeth us hear;
For it beareth the message: "Rise up on the morrow
And go on your ways toward the doubt and the strife;

²² On *The Pilgrims of Hope*, see Anne Janowitz, 'The Pilgrims of Hope: William Morris and the dialectic of romanticism', in Sally Ledger & Scott McCracken ed., *Cultural Politics at the fin de siècle*. Cambridge: CUP, 1995, pp. 160-183; Michael Holzman, 'Propaganda, Passion, and Literary Art in William Morris's *The Pilgrims of Hope*', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (Winter 1982), pp. 372-393; Florence Boos, 'Narrative Design in *The Pilgrims of Hope*', in Florence S. Boos & Carole G. Silver ed., *Socialism and the Literary Artistry of William Morris*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1990, pp. 147-166. The Paris Commune also served as inspiration for Charles Edwin Markham, who wrote that the martyrs of the Commune 'lit up all the Future, all the golden years to be, / When the burden shall be lifted and the worker shall be free.' Charles Edwin Markham, 'The Song of the Workers (Remembering the Martyrs of the Commune)', *Commonweal*, 2.35 (11 September 1886), p. 187.

Join hope to our hope and blend sorrow with sorrow,
And seek for men's love in the short days of life.”

Morris is quite specific about where this wind is coming from: ‘From London it bloweth’, and it is toward London that Richard and his lover must go.²³ The importance of London to Morris was emphasised in his 1892 address in Manchester where he spoke of its ‘special quality’, and how its ‘external beastliness and sordidness’ was at least ‘in some degree compensated by its intellectual life’.²⁴

Richard had heard of the struggles of the world before this, even if he had not experienced them first hand. In the fifth section, ‘A New Birth’, Richard recounts his childhood and schooling where he ‘learned the lore of the ancients, and how the knave and the fool / Have been mostly the masters of earth’. Despite this, he was happy in his country world, ignorant of the realities of city life. Richard befriends a Frenchman who opens his mind to ‘the tale that never ends; / The battle of grief and hope with riches and folly and wrong.’ Emphasising the importance of ideas taking root in preparation for the future ‘He told of dreams grown deeds, deeds done ere time was ripe’. Whereas before his life was contained within his pleasant surroundings, ‘Wide now the world was grown, and I saw things clear and grim’. After meeting his love, the couple ‘left our pleasure behind to seek for hope and for life’, suggesting that however pleasurable country life holds nothing in store more than this pleasure, to live an active and engaged life one had to move to the city.²⁵

The static nature of country life is reiterated in the ‘The Half of Life Gone’ where the story is thrown forward to Richard back living in the country after the conflict in Paris that

²³ Morris, ‘The Message of the March Wind’, *Commonweal*, 1.2 (March 1885), p. 12. There are similarities between Morris’s March Wind and Ferdinand Freiligrath’s ‘The Whispering Wind’, a translation of which appeared in *Commonweal*, 2.26 (10 July 1886), p. 115.

²⁴ Morris, quoted in Mackail, *Life of William Morris*, Vol. II, p. 304.

²⁵ Morris, ‘A New Birth’, *Commonweal*, 1.7 (August 1885), p. 68.

saw the death of his wife and new friend. Life and work in the country was going on ‘as of old’:

‘There are the men and the maids, and the wives and the gaffers grey
Of the fields I know so well, and but little changed are they
Since I was a lad amongst them; and yet how great is the change!
Strange are they grown unto me; yea, I to myself am strange.’²⁶

What has changed for Richard is his experience in the city, in London and in Paris. It is in London that he hears ‘one of those Communist chaps’ speak ‘Of man without a master, and earth without a strife, / And every soul rejoicing in the sweet and bitter of life’. The ideas took root:

‘I see the deeds to be done and the day to come on the earth,
And riches vanished away and sorrow turned to mirth;
I see the city squalor and the country stupor gone.’²⁷

If it is in London where Richard’s hopes are kindled, it is in Paris where he sees those hopes become concrete. On arriving with his wife and friend the ‘city’s hope enwrapped us with joy and great amaze’. ‘There was now no foe and no fool in the city, and Paris was free; / And e’en as she is this morning, to-morrow all France will be.’ The capital, as the central location of political and state power, was to Morris the key site in the transformation of the country at large. At this point where the ideas Richard has learned and promulgated in the city were ‘real, solid and at hand’, his mind takes him back to where he first heard the whispering of the March wind.

²⁶ Morris, ‘The Half of Life Gone’, *Commonweal*, 2.12 (January 1886), p. 4.

²⁷ ‘A New Birth’, *Commonweal*, 1.7 (August 1885), p. 69.

‘And strange how my heart went back to our little nook of the land,
And how plain and clear I saw it, as though I longed indeed
To give it a share of the joy and the satisfaction of need
That here in the folk I beheld.’²⁸

There is not the denunciatory tone of ‘the idiocy of rural life’ in Morris’s characterisation of the lack of social vitality in country life. Morris was fond of the simple life of the small rural community, no doubt heavily idealised, that he depicts. But there exists the sense that it needs to be brought in to the fold of the social transformation taking place in the city, that it would be irresponsible to enjoy what that life had to offer while many more were suffering in the city.

There are similar distinctions between the intellectual worlds of the country and the city in *A Dream of John Ball*. In this case however, the village life depicted is not completely free from political strife. But, as in *The Pilgrims of Hope*, it is to London as the location of political authority that the villagers must go to fully air their grievances. Before the trip John Ball warns the villagers to be prepared for the difference of worldly horizons presented by the capital. ‘London is a great and grievous city; and may happen when ye come thither it shall seem to you over great to deal with when ye remember the little townships and the cots ye came from.’ While the Kentish villagers may sometimes think of their counterparts in Essex or Suffolk, Ball is wary to point out that ‘from London ye may have an inkling of all the world, and over burdensome maybe shall that seem to you, a few and a feeble people.’²⁹

Morris does not depict the confrontation in London, but from the conversation between John Ball and his narrator it is clear he sees this simple nature of the villagers as part

²⁸ Morris, ‘A Glimpse of the Coming Day’, *Commonweal*, 2.17 (8 May 1886), p. 45.

²⁹ Morris, ‘A Dream of John Ball’, *Commonweal*, 2.49 (18 December 1886), p. 298.

of their ultimate failure. The villagers ‘are strong and valiant...and good fellows also and kindly; but they are simple and see no great way before their own noses.’ Lacking the experience of political struggle and a programme, the ‘victory shall they have and shall not know what do with it; they shall fight and overcome, because of their lack of knowledge; and because of their lack of knowledge shall they be cozened and betrayed when their captains are slain, and all shall come to nought be seeming’.³⁰ The importance of knowledge and ideas, and thus of clear and solid education, to a successful movement was clear to Morris, and this necessary knowledge was not to be found in people who ‘see no great way before their own noses.’

The idea that country people knew or cared little for knowledge beyond their immediate circumstances is similarly evident in other contributions to *Commonweal*, including in a three-part article on ‘The Agricultural Labourer’. For the agricultural worker, according to C. Walkden writing as someone who had lived in the country for some time, his ‘whole world is his little parish, sometimes his master’s farm’ and he ‘would be unhappy if away from the farm more than a day’.³¹ In a poem written the day after the execution of the Haymarket anarchists in Chicago, C. W. Beckett lamented ‘the dull apathy of men’ after he had taken to the country to consider what had happened. On his journey he doesn’t meet a single ‘son of toil who had descried / It was for him our comrades died.’³² Likewise Reginald Beckett referred to ‘slow-witted peasants’ he met in an alehouse on the borders of Oxfordshire.³³

In *News from Nowhere* William Guest and his companions come across a group of girls, who, realising he is a traveller, quiz him on where he came from. Guest notes how ‘they

³⁰ *Ibid.*, *Commonweal*, 3.51 (1 January 1887), p. 3.

³¹ C. Walkden, ‘The Agricultural Labourer’, *Commonweal*, 6.245 (20 September 1890), p. 300.

³² C. W. Beckett, ‘The Day After’, *Commonweal*, 3.97 (19 November 1887), p. 371.

³³ Reginald A. Beckett, ‘A Day in the Country’, *Commonweal*, 3. 65 (9 April 1887), p. 117.

were eager to discuss all the little details of life' and that 'they talked of these things not in a fatuous and conventional way, but as taking, I saw, real interest in them.' We are then given a direct comparison with this new country life with the country life of old.

'It is almost strange what a difference this intelligence made in my estimate of the country life of that day; for it used to be said in past times, and on the whole truly, that outside their daily work country people knew little of the country, and at least could tell you nothing about it; while here were these people as eager about all the goings on in the fields and woods and downs as if they had been Cockneys newly escaped from the tyranny of bricks and mortar.'³⁴

The antithesis between the country folks lack of curiosity and the inquisitiveness of the city dwellers is striking and, in all probability, a literary exaggeration. But it is an important theme in Morris's fiction. There was no political hope for people not interested in the world beyond their immediate concern, and the focus of socialist attention should be on the making and educating of more socialists within the already mentally engaged.

The city is again the site of political contestation in *News from Nowhere*. In Old Hammond's recounting of the revolutionary upheaval in the central chapter 'How the Change Came', the majority of the action takes place in London. Other important locations mentioned, Manchester, Glasgow and Bristol, are also significant cities. What is new is that Morris gives a portrait of how the antagonism between town and country may be overcome. It should be stressed that for Morris overcoming this antagonism is not itself a part of the revolutionary process but is something that happens after as society reorganises itself. Following the revolution there was a great movement of people from the cities to the countryside:

³⁴ Morris, 'News from Nowhere', *Commonweal*, 6.240 (16 August 1890), p. 258.

‘The town invaded the country; but the invaders, like the warlike invaders of early days, yielded to the influence of their surroundings, and became country people; and in their turn, as they become more numerous than the townsmen, influenced them also; so that the difference between town and country grew less and less; and it was indeed this world of the country vivified by the thought and briskness of town-bred folk which has produced that happy and leisurely but eager life of which you have had a first taste.’³⁵

The markers between town and country have not disappeared altogether, but the two are now in greater sympathy with and compliment the other. Morris mentions this process a second time when Guest meets an old man called Henry Morsom, ‘who seemed in a country way to be another edition of old Hammond.’

‘...he had detailed record of the period of the change to the present state of things, and told us a great deal about it, and especially of that exodus of the people from the town to the country, and the gradual recovery by the town-bred people on one side and the country-bred people on the other of those arts of life which they had each lost...’³⁶

The process is not incidental to Morris but a core part of the post-revolutionary movement and one necessary to create the simple and free society he desired. He does not himself make this connection clear but the process carries on much like the transition from state socialism to communism.

With Morris’s emphasis so often on the pleasures of physical labour and craftwork it is easy to miss that there is intellectual work being done in his utopia too, even if it is not explored in the same detail. Bob, Dick’s friend who takes over his role on the bathing boat

³⁵ *Ibid.*, *Commonweal*, 6.221 (5 April 1890), p. 106.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, *Commonweal*, 6.241 (23 August 1890), p. 266.

early in the story is both a weaver and a mathematician, and language learning is widespread amongst the youth. We learn from Hammond that many old country houses are still used, but ‘are more like the old colleges than ordinary houses as they used to be.’ These houses are ‘very pleasant’ to live in, ‘especially as some of the most studious men of our time live in them, and altogether there is a great variety of mind and mood to be found in them which brightens and quickens the society there.’³⁷ The country is no longer in a state of stupor or isolation from the energetic life of the town.

The Communist Manifesto argued for the ‘gradual abolition of the distinction between town and country, by a more equable distribution of population over the country.’³⁸ In *Socialism: Its Growth and Outcome* Morris and Bax likewise wrote that all schemes for the future ‘must take for granted as a matter of principle’ was ‘the doing away of all antagonism between town and country, and all tendency for the one to suck the life out of the other.’³⁹ This same idea is expressed by Hammond who explains to Guest that while the countryside is now more populous, ‘the population is pretty much the same as it was at the end of the nineteenth century; we have spread it, that is all.’⁴⁰ It is worth stressing again that for Morris this process is not part of the initial transition and establishment of socialism. For John Bellamy Foster the same is true of Marx and Engels. While they place importance on the division between town and country and on the ecological contradictions of capitalism, ‘they did not seem to believe that they were developed to such an extent that they were to play a central role in the transition to socialism. Rather such considerations with regard to the creation of a sustainable relation to nature were part of – even a distinguishing feature of –

³⁷ *Ibid.*, *Commonweal*, 2.221 (5 April 1890), p. 106.

³⁸ Marx & Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, in Draper, *The Adventures of the Communist Manifesto*, p. 155.

³⁹ Morris and Bax, *Socialism: Its Growth & Outcome* (2nd edition). London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1896, p. 316.

⁴⁰ ‘News from Nowhere’, *Commonweal*, 2.221, 5 April 1890, p. 106.

the later dialectic of the construction of communism.⁴¹ As towns and cities were the home of the proletariat, the revolutionary force, socialist energies should be directed there. But, for Morris at least, while the rural population did not contain the forms of association and ideas necessary to overthrow capitalism this did not mean they were without qualities that were worthy of attention and that could be useful in the struggle.

Stout and Strong

In E. P. Thompson's assessment of *The Pilgrims of Hope* he argued that the first section, 'The Message of the March Wind', 'leaves us not only with a sense of hope, but with the poignancy of loss? Surely it is no accident that it is to this idealized pastoral scene that the hero of the poem returns at last, with his love lost in the struggle, and "the half of life gone"''.⁴² Thompson is correct that in the poem as a whole Morris often curbs hope with loss. But there is a risk in overplaying this sense of loss, or of thinking that the poem's final end back in the country is a retreat into the protagonist's idyllic past where he can forget the struggle.

'I came not here to be bidding my happiness farewell,
And to nurse my grief and to win me the gain of a wounded life,
That because of the bygone sorrow may hide away from the strife.
I came to look to my son, and myself to get stout and strong,
That two men there might be hereafter to battle against the wrong;
And I cling to the love of the past and the love of the day to be,

⁴¹ John Bellamy Foster, *Marx's Ecology: Materialism and Nature*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000, p. 140.

⁴² E. P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1955, p. 776.

And the present, it is but the building of the man to be strong in me.⁴³

Richard returns to the country to raise his son, to regroup and be ready to continue the struggle in memory of his lost wife and of the Commune. The country may not produce the ideas and social conditions that will bring about revolutionary change but it can produce people capable of withstanding and holding firm during that revolutionary change.

This is an idea repeated a few times in *The Pilgrims of Hope*. In 'A New Birth' Richard reflects on the path that led him to his present situation in the city:

‘I look and behold the days of the years that are passed away,
And my soul is full of their wealth, for oft they were blithe and gay
As the hours of bird and beast: they have made me calm and strong
To wade the stream of confusion, the river of grief and wrong.’⁴⁴

As this ‘river of grief and wrong’ takes Richard into the middle of the fighting during the Paris Commune in the penultimate section, ‘Meeting the War-Machine’, this country strength is still in his mind:

‘The morn when we made that sally, some thought (and yet not I)
That a few days and all would be over: just a few had got to die,
And the rest would be happy thenceforward. But my stubborn country blood
Was bidding me hold my halloo till we were out of the wood.’⁴⁵

Morris was keenly aware that the fight for socialism would face victories and defeats before any lasting success, and therefore fortitude and strength would be key qualities. In *The*

⁴³ Morris, ‘The Story’s Ending’, *Commonweal*, 2.25 (3 July 1886), p. 107.

⁴⁴ ‘A New Birth’, *Commonweal*, 1.7 (August 1885), p. 68.

⁴⁵ Morris, ‘Meeting the War-Machine’, *Commonweal*, 2.21 (5 June 1886), p. 75.

Pilgrims of Hope Morris suggests, through Richard, that country life is one source of that strength. Yet, this was obviously not a source for the mass of the population at large, especially as Morris also believes that it is city life where the impulse for socialism and revolution comes from.

The country is not just a source of strength in terms of resilience but also of bodily strength and beauty. The country body, both male and female, as strong and beautiful is repeated throughout Morris's *Commonweal* fiction and is deeply connected to an outdoor life and pleasurable labour. This is contrasted with the smoke and pollution of city life with its indoors miserable factory labour that saps bodies of their strength and vitality.

In 'Mother and Son' Richard's wife tells their new-born that 'thy mother's body is fair, / In the guise of the country maidens who play with the sun and the air'.

'My face and my hands are burned
By the lovely sun of the acres; three months of London-town
And thy birth-bed have bleached them indeed'⁴⁶

While the strength and resilience ingrained by country life can persist through city life, the outer body is more susceptible to change. Richard and his wife feel this loss strongly, reflecting on their new life in London:

'but country folk we were,
And she sickened sore for the grass and the breath of the fragrant air
That had made her lovely and strong'⁴⁷

⁴⁶ Morris, 'Mother and Son', *Commonweal*, 1.5 (June 1885), p. 44.

⁴⁷ Morris, 'The New Proletarian', *Commonweal*, 1.8 (September 1885), p. 80.

This change in appearance is reiterated when Richard is briefly in prison and his wife notes the change in herself.

‘O face, thou shalt lose yet more of thy fairness, be thinner no doubt,
And be waxen white and worn by the day that he cometh out!
Hand, how pale thou shalt be! how changed from the sunburnt hand
That he kissed as it handled the rake in the noon of the summer land!’⁴⁸

What Richard and his wife gain in social consciousness in moving to the city is paid for in the loss of their beauty, a beauty unappreciated by most in the city and only to be regained by all following the transition to socialism.

The appearance of the inhabitants in *News from Nowhere* is remarked upon so frequently that it should not be taken as merely an incidental part of Morris’s text. It is there in Guest’s first impressions of his new environs. Dick, the first person he meets is ‘dark-haired and berry-brown of skin, well-knit and strong, and obviously used to exercising his muscles, but nothing rough or coarse about him, and clean as might be.’⁴⁹ An immediate contrast is given with the next person Guest meets, Dick’s friend who as a weaver and mathematician spends more time indoors and as a result ‘was not so well-looking or so strongly made as my sculler friend, being sandy-haired, rather pale, and not stout-built’. Despite this paler skin and lack of muscle his face still had a ‘happy and friendly expression’.⁵⁰

Morris’s emphasis on strength of body applies to the women as well as the men. On first encountering women they are found to be ‘at least as good as the gardens, the architecture, and the male men.’ The comparison between the women and their physical

⁴⁸ Morris, ‘In Prison – And at Home’, *Commonweal*, 1.10 (November 1885), p. 96.

⁴⁹ ‘News from Nowhere’, *Commonweal*, 6.209 (11 January 1890), p.10.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, *Commonweal*, 6.210 (18 January 1890), p. 18.

surroundings highlights the extent to which Morris's aesthetic concern for beauty in the world applied not just to the landscape and natural world but to people as well. The women are described as 'so kind and happy-looking in expression of face, so shapely and well-knit of body and thoroughly healthy-looking and strong. All were at least comely, and one of them very handsome and regular of feature.'⁵¹ A good deal of this is due to the nature of the work done by the people. Both men and women undertake a variety of forms of labour including much of it outdoors. As it is told to Guest, 'we of these generations are strong and healthy of body, and live easily; we pass our lives in reasonable strife with nature exercising not one side of ourselves only, but all sides, taking the keenest pleasure in all the life of the world.'⁵² Many phrases recur when Morris describes bodies of both sexes, 'healthy', 'strong', 'well-knit', 'handsome', all indicative of Morris's concern that these qualities were being lost and could not be recovered in the industrial city.

With the gradual removal of the distinction between town and country following the transition to socialism and then to communism, there is no longer a clear difference in appearance between town and country folk. Making their way through Hammersmith, Guest and Dick come across a market and many carts with 'handsome, healthy-looking people' sat in them. With it being a market Guest asks if they are 'regular country people', adding, 'I ask because I do not see any of the country-looking people I should have expected to see at a market – I mean selling things there.' Dick replies that he doesn't understand what type of people should be expected at a market, 'nor quite what you mean by 'country' people.' There are however 'parts of these islands which are rougher and rainier than we are here, and there people are rougher in their dress; and they themselves are tougher and more hard-bitten than

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, *Commonweal*, 6. 211 (25 January 1890), p. 25, 26.

⁵² *Ibid.*, *Commonweal*, 6.218 (15 March 1890), p. 82.

we are to look at', but there is no immediate distinction between town folk and country folk.⁵³

Old Hammond, who has a greater understanding of the old times than Dick, puts forward the question of looks in the important chapters of dialogue between Guest and himself. Responding to Guest's astonishment that 'there could be so many good-looking people in any civilised country' Hammond remarks:

'What! are we still civilised...Well, as to our looks, the English and Jutish blood, which on the whole is predominant here, used not to produce much beauty. But I think we have improved it. I know a man who has a large collection of portraits printed from photographs of the nineteenth century, and going over them and comparing them with the everyday faces in these times, puts the improvement in our good looks beyond a doubt.'

It is not the English and Jutish blood itself which has caused these good looks, rather, the 'increase in beauty' is connected 'directly with our freedom' and with the fact that children are now 'born from the natural and healthy love between a man and a woman' and not from 'the respectable commercial marriage bed, or of the dull despair of the drudge of that system.'⁵⁴

That Morris's presentation of the people in *News from Nowhere* is near uniformly beautiful and strong is perhaps not surprising, it is after all a utopia. The presentation in *The Pilgrims of Hope* is more questionable however in its idealisation of the country life and bodies of Richard and his wife. To some extent Morris was aware of this, and in *News from Nowhere* we get a more pessimistic reflection on the actualities of nineteenth century country

⁵³ *Ibid.*, *Commonweal*, 6. 212 (1 February 1890), p. 34.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, *Commonweal*, 6.219 (22 March 1890), p. 90. On the potential eugenic implications of Morris's argument see Patrick Parrinder, 'Eugenics and Utopia: Sexual Selection from Galton to Morris', *Utopian Studies*, 8:2 (1997), pp. 1-12.

labour and country bodies. On the river journey up the Thames Guest is told by Dick of the simple beauty of the hay-harvest and how pretty the women look in the fine weather.

‘As we went, I could not help putting beside his promised picture of it as I remembered it, and especially the images of the women engaged in the work rose up before me: the row of gaunt figures, lean, flat-breasted, ugly, without a grace of form or face about them; dressed in wretched skimpy print gowns, and hideous flapping sun-bonnets, moving their rakes in a listless mechanical way. How often had that marred the loveliness of the June day to me...’⁵⁵

This is a long distance from the ‘sunburnt hand / That he [Richard] kissed as it handled the rake in the noon of the summer land!’. In *News from Nowhere* the main contrast is between present and future as against the town and country opposition in *The Pilgrims of Hope*, and this allows Morris to present a more honest and negative view of life and labour in the nineteenth century countryside as the positive communist future is there to balance the scene. Reginald Beckett shared this negative perspective on country life believing that capitalism ‘has done its work, and brought all to extremes. Just as it has created an unhappy rich class and unhappy poor class, so it has made the towns fierce gambling hells of life and death, and the country an abomination of desolation and cold isolated poverty.’⁵⁶

The image of labour in the hayfield also appears in ‘Under an Elm-Tree; or, Thoughts in the Country-Side’ from July 1889. Here Morris notes how the ‘hayfield is a pretty sight this month seen under the elm...till you look at the haymakers closely.’ The haymakers are ‘ungraceful, unbeautiful,’ and ‘as ungainly as the roan cart-horse’.⁵⁷ The haymakers were ungraceful and unbeautiful because, like the horse, they were working for the benefit of

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, *Commonweal*, 6.254 (5 July 1890), p. 210.

⁵⁶ Beckett, ‘A Day in the Country’, p. 117.

⁵⁷ Morris, ‘Under an Elm-Tree; or, Thoughts in the Country-Side’, *Commonweal*, 5.182, 6 July 1889, p. 213, 212.

someone else, a landlord farmer, and not themselves. They were unfree and could take no pleasure in their labour in contrast to the free labourers Guest is journeying to join. Outdoor labour in the country is not in itself pleasurable to Morris, it must also be free. A mass retreat to the country from the town would not be good enough as an escape from industrial and factory labour as the same capitalistic logic underpinned labour in the country. Nor would the occasionally popular schemes of peasant proprietorship effectively deal with the landlord situation, especially as they often appealed to those such as ‘the artisan and clerk, who may have known less about the reality of rural life but found it immensely attractive in prospect.’⁵⁸ As John Marshall put it, these schemes would in essence maintain the present system but with ‘a greater number of small landowners’ and ‘we should have the same difficulties to contend with in years to come as we are struggling against at present.’ Instead a system was needed that ‘would abolish the landlord and proprietor’ and ‘substitute in their stead the whole community’ with ‘labourers cultivating the soil to labour for their own and the community’s happiness’.⁵⁹ The only route to pleasurable labour was through the socialist revolution, and as has been shown, for Morris that lay through the city.

City squalor

Compared to the dramatic contrasts found in Morris’s *Commonweal* fiction, his ‘Under an Elm-Tree’ is a much more nuanced piece. We find in it his love of the country, of ‘the fields and hedges that are as it were one huge nosegay for you’, his adoration of a past time ‘when every craftsman was an artist and brought definite intelligence to bear upon his

⁵⁸ Marsh, *Back to the Land*, p. 112.

⁵⁹ John Marshall, ‘Peasant Proprietorship’, *Commonweal*, 5. 197 (19 October 1889), p. 330.

work, and of belief in a 'country-side worth fighting for...worth taking trouble to defend its peace.' But we can also find his sadness that this is a world whose time is passing, and that these pockets of rural beauty and peace are coming under attack as capitalism extends its search for new arenas of exploitation. He acknowledges that even those people who still live in the country do not feel its beauty in the way he feels they should. 'What will happen, say my gloomy thoughts to me under the elm tree, with all this country beauty so tragically incongruous in its richness with the country misery which cannot feel its existence?' The combination of 'country beauty' with 'country misery' in the same sentence is uneasy, and we can sense Morris's anxiety at wanting to preserve a countryside that only a small minority have the leisure to enjoy so that come the socialist transition there is something left. Otherwise, the 'beauty of the landscape will be exploited and artificialised for the sake of the villa-dweller's purses where it is striking enough to touch their jaded appetites; but in quiet places like this it will vanish year by year (as indeed it is now doing) under the attacks of the most grovelling commercialism.'⁶⁰

Another cause of Morris's unease is that he knew his position was not held equally amongst his comrades. He wants to be able to think of the country as it was, or as it he imagined it was, but keeps being dragged back to the reality.

'Let me turn the leaf and find a new picture, or my holiday is spoilt; and don't let some of my Socialist friends with whom I have wrangled about the horrors of London, say, "This is all that can come your country life." For as the round of the seasons under our system of landlord farmer and labourer produces in the country pinching parsimony and dullness, so does the "excitement of intellectual life" in the cities produce the slum under the capitalist system of turning out and selling market wares not for use but for waste. Turn the page I say.'

⁶⁰ Morris, 'Under an Elm-Tree', p. 212.

The piece ends where *News from Nowhere* picks up from with Morris turning the page to imagine a place where ‘the haymakers were friends working for friends on land which was theirs, as many as were needed, with leisure and hope ahead of them instead of hopeless toil and anxiety’.⁶¹

Morris’s insight that the excitement of intellectual life brings with it the squalor and slums of capitalism is repeated in *News from Nowhere*, though this time in reference to Oxford, a city much loved by Morris, like the countryside for what it once was rather than what it had become. During the trip up the Thames Guest and his friends skirt Oxford.

‘It was a matter of course that so far as they could be seen from the river, I missed none of the towers and spires of that once don-beridden city; but the meadows all round, which, when I had last passed through them, were getting daily more and more squalid, more and more impressed with the seal of the “stir and intellectual life of the nineteenth century,” were no longer intellectual, but had once again become as beautiful as they should be’.⁶²

The ‘stir and intellectual’ life may bring forth the formulation of ideas and new social relations but it does so while also spreading the ugliness of capitalism. The exact nature of the direction of causation is not altogether clear in Morris’s writing. In ‘Under an Elm-Tree’ he suggests that it is the intellectual life itself that produces the city slums, whereas in *News from Nowhere* it is that Oxford was becoming increasingly squalid and also ‘impressed’ with the intellectual world of the nineteenth century. Whether this is a difference between London and Oxford is unclear, but what is clear is that Morris believed the social and intellectual

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 213

⁶² ‘News from Nowhere’, *Commonweal*, 6.243 (6 September 1890), p. 284.

vitality of the city and its physical squalor were historically related and together brought forth the socialist critique and vision he was trying to spread.

While the diminution of the beauty of Oxford was hurtful to Morris, he was more of a Londoner, and it is London, the key site of political action, that appears more frequently in his socialist fiction. In 'The Bridge and the Street', the second section of *The Pilgrims of Hope*, Richard and his love arrive in London with its 'dull houses' along the 'dim street' and the 'pitiless faces' of its inhabitants.

“‘What’s this we are doing
In this grim net of London, this prison built stark
With the greed of the ages, our young lives pursuing
A phantom that leads but to death in the dark?’”⁶³

The idea of London as a prison is repeated later on when the 'shabby meanness' of a Soho dwelling is described as 'our prison-cell / In the jail of weary London.'⁶⁴ Fred Henderson's poem 'The Workers' Song of the Springtide' repeatedly uses the idea too, with 'our prisoning walls' growing closer and 'life but a prison cell' to the people of the city.⁶⁵

Morris's London is not dissimilar to that of William Blake. Blake's 'London', reprinted in *Commonweal* in July 1888, speaks of 'each chartered street' and 'the chartered Thames', markers of the city's legal and economic character as a capitalist centre. As in *The Pilgrims of Hope*, the people of London are physically affected by their surroundings with Blake noting 'in every face I meet, / Marks of weakness, marks of woe.' If London is a prison to Morris's pilgrims, Blake's Londoners are similarly trapped in 'mind-forged manacles' and

⁶³ Morris, 'The Bridge and the Street', *Commonweal*, 1.3 (April 1885), p. 20.

⁶⁴ 'The New Proletarian', *Commonweal*, 1.8 (September 1885), p. 81.

⁶⁵ Fred Henderson, 'The Workers' Song of the Springtide', *Commonweal*, 2.23 (19 June 1886), p. 91. As the title suggests, Henderson's poem bears similarities to Morris's 'The Message of the March Wind'. Another of Henderson's poems, 'A Vision of Civilisation', follows a very similar path to Morris's work too, Henderson, 'A Vision of Civilisation', *Commonweal*, 2.19 (22 May 1886), p. 59.

crying for release.⁶⁶ Next to Blake's 'London' is a poem by C. W. Beckett, 'Come, Brothers, Come' that carried an echo of *The Pilgrims of Hope*. Much like Morris's March Wind carrying its message of hope of the morrow, Beckett writes of 'the Sun of Righteousness appearing, / Freedom and Joy and Brotherhood he brings. / Hail, happy morn, that endeth hate and fearing!'⁶⁷ It is this Sun of Righteousness, this March Wind, that Morris is trying to spread through his political education in an attempt to lift the 'mind-forged manacles' keeping the working class invested in the capitalist system.

At the end of *A Dream of John Ball*, the narrator wakes to realise he is still in late-nineteenth century London with its 'bleak sky' and 'wretched-looking blue-slatted houses'. The road outside his house managed to be 'sooty and muddy at once', and 'in the air was that sense of dirty discomfort which one is never quit of in London.' Despite the river being 'dirty' it 'seemed to woo me toward the country side, where away from the miseries of the "Great Wen" I might of my own will carry on a day-dream of the friends I had made in the dream of the night'.⁶⁸ Yet Morris was aware that this option of temporary escape to the country was not an option to the mass of the urban population. Even if they could they would not fully appreciate their surroundings. In 'The Message of the March Wind' Richard reflects on how the people in the city are denied the land he has grown up in:

'This land we have loved in our love and our leisure
For them hangs in heaven, high out of their reach;
The wide hills o'er the sea-plain for them have no pleasure,
The grey homes of their fathers no story to teach.'⁶⁹

⁶⁶ William Blake, 'London', *Commonweal*, 4.132 (21 July 1888), p. 229.

⁶⁷ C. W. Beckett, 'Come, Brothers, Come', *ibid.*

⁶⁸ 'A Dream of John Ball', *Commonweal*, 3.54 (22 January 1887), p. 29.

⁶⁹ 'The Message of the March Wind', *Commonweal*, 1.2 (March 1885), p. 12.

The idea is expressed by Henderson too, from the perspective of the city worker:

‘We know there are some with leisure,
Who roam where the world is sweet,
But we to our factory prisons
Are chained by the hands and feet’⁷⁰

Morris extended the argument in ‘Under an Elm-Tree’ where the rural population under the landlord farmer are in a position of such ‘misery’ that even they, amidst what is left of the ‘country beauty’ ‘cannot feel its existence’.⁷¹ As with his thought on pleasurable labour, Morris wanted everyone to have the ability to enjoy the country in the same way he did. Yet he was in a bind. The measures and projects which might give the working classes and city population more access to the country, such as the Ambleside Railway, were commercial measures that risked accelerating the destructive power of capitalism and destroying what was left of the beauty of the land. He could not in his own conscience support such measures. It would have to be after the transition to socialism that access to country beauty would be universalised along with the beautification of the town.

One of Guest’s first observations of the London he has woken in, recalling both the ending of *A Dream of John Ball* and *The Earthly Paradise*, is to note how ‘clear the water is this morning!’⁷² This clear Thames was now bordered in both sides with ‘a line of very pretty houses’ and ‘a continuous garden in front of them, going down to the water’s edge’. London is no longer a prison, it ‘long ago dropped the pretention to be the market of the world’ and

⁷⁰ Henderson, ‘The Workers’ Song of the Springtide’.

⁷¹ Morris, ‘Under an Elm-Tree’, p. 212.

⁷² ‘News from Nowhere’, *Commonweal*, 6.209 (11 January 1890), p. 9.

has cleared the slums while keeping some of the better and historically interesting architecture.⁷³

Outside of London, Hammond explains that ‘the big murky places which were once, as we know, the centres of manufactures, they have, like the brick and mortar desert of London, disappeared; only, since they were centres of nothing but ‘manufacture,’ and served no purpose but that of the gambling market, they have left less signs of their existence than London.’ Manchester, the emblematic city of Victorian capitalism and the factory system, has disappeared completely. The smaller towns have undergone much rebuilding and their suburbs ‘have melted away into the general country, and space and elbow-room as been got in their centres’.⁷⁴ Just as the intellectual vitality of town-bred people flocking to the country created the eager and curious population that Guest encounters, so the country beauty has made its way into the towns and cities creating space, harmony, and pleasant surroundings for all.

In his discussion with Guest, Hammond is at pains to point out that during the transition from capitalism to socialism and then to communism ‘many blunders were made, but we have had time to set them right’, another reminder that the society being depicted is not one in the immediate aftermath of a socialist revolution but one that has slowly developed. Hammond gives a sweeping historical picture of the landscape of the county:

‘This is how we stand. 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 the folk, gathering-places for the craftsmen. It then became a country of huge and foul workshops and fouler gambling-dens, surrounded by an ill-kept, poverty-stricken farm pillaged by the masters of the workshops. It is now a garden, where nothing is wasted and nothing is spoilt,

⁷³ *Ibid.*, *Commonweal*, 6.220 (29 March 1890), p. 98.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

with the necessary dwellings, sheds, and workshops scattered up and down the country, all trim and neat and pretty. For, indeed, we should be too much ashamed of ourselves if we allowed the making of goods, even on a large scale, to carry with it the appearance even of desolation and misery.⁷⁵

This new England is not a simple return to the medieval landscape but a new environment and one quite consciously shaped to the needs and desires of a society capable of equitably directing itself.

The idea of England as a garden is one that recurs in Morris's writing. It is repeated later in *News from Nowhere* where the fields are described as being 'everywhere treated as a garden made for the pleasure as well as the livelihood of all, as old Hammond told me was the case.'⁷⁶ To paraphrase from one of Morris's most famous lines, the fields, like gardens, are both beautiful and useful. Early in *A Dream of John Ball* the narrator is surprised to find himself in a place with 'unhedged tillage and a certain unwonted trimness and handiness about the enclosures of the garden and orchards' and *The Earthly Paradise* spoke of the 'clear Thames bordered by its gardens green.'⁷⁷ Gardens, Morris argued in one of his pre-socialist lectures, 'should look both orderly and rich' and 'should by no means imitate either the wilfulness or the wildness of Nature'. In towns and cities, he considered both public and private gardens as 'positive necessities if the citizens are to live reasonable and healthy lives in body and mind.'⁷⁸

England as a garden also has origins in the thought of John Ruskin. In *Sesame and Lilies* Ruskin argued for 'the help of wild and fair nature' in the raising of young children, particularly girls.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, *Commonweal*, 2.221 (5 April 1890), p. 106.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, *Commonweal*, 2.44 (13 September 1890), p. 292.

⁷⁷ 'A Dream of John Ball', *Commonweal*, 2.44 (13 November 1886), p. 258.

⁷⁸ Morris, 'Making the Best of It', *CW XXII*, p. 91.

‘Suppose you had each, at the back of your houses, a garden, large enough for your children to play in, with just as much lawn as would give them room to run, - no more – and that you could not change your abode; but that, if you chose, you could double your income, or quadruple it, by digging a coal shaft in the middle of the lawn, and turning the flower-beds into heaps of coke. Would you do it? I hope not. I can tell you, you would be wrong if you did, though it gave you income sixty-fold instead of four-fold.’

Yet this is exactly what Ruskin thought England was doing. ‘The whole country is but a little garden’ and that ‘this little garden you will turn into furnace ground, and fill with heaps of cinders, if you can; and those children of yours, not you, will suffer for it.’⁷⁹ The trading of the lands beauty for short term economic gain similarly exercised Morris, and his reluctance to countenance any measure that would lead to the commercial exploitation of nature (even if improving access at the same time) can be partly traced to this Ruskinian heritage.

For Raymond Williams, the London of *News from Nowhere* is ‘a combination of what is essentially restoration, turning back history and drawing on medieval and rural patterns, and what was to express itself, formally, as town-planning, the creation of urban order and control.’ It is both ‘an imagined old London’ and ‘a projected new London, in the contemporary sense of the garden city.’⁸⁰ Exactly what Morris would have made of the garden city movement is unclear as he died before they were realised, but it is worth remembering that Raymond Unwin, one of the principal figures behind Letchworth, was a member of the Socialist League and occasional contributor to *Commonweal*.⁸¹

⁷⁹ John Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies* (1865). London: George Allen & Sons, 1910, p. 126, 127.

⁸⁰ Williams, *The Country & the City*, p. 273.

⁸¹ On Morris and the Garden City movement see Anna Vaninskaya, ‘William Morris and the Garden City’, in John Rignall, H. Gustav Klaus, and Valentine Cunningham eds., *Ecology and the Literature of the British Left: The Red and the Green*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2012, pp. 125-136.

The creation of England as a garden in Morris's utopia is a creation of the transition from socialism to communism and not one that could, or should, be fashioned within capitalism, and it is quite consciously created. It is not nature establishing itself over the country and running its course, rather it is the fruits of nature guided and ordered by free human labour. As Anna Vaninskaya notes, while 'Morris did wish for something similar to the wave of barbarism that swept away Rome to cleanse capitalist civilisation, he never indicated that its aftermath should be 'wild'.⁸² In this it is rather different from the almost post-apocalyptic landscape of Richard Jefferies 1885 novel *After London*, where following an undescribed catastrophe nature runs wild and London becomes a swamp.⁸³ While the two novels share a hatred of the commercial ugliness of the Victorian city, Morris is at heart more optimistic about the potential for society to shape its own future and the future of the landscape while also keeping open the possibility of sections of the country given over to 'wild nature' which, Hammond says, as everything else is properly ordered, society 'can afford them, so we have them'.⁸⁴ When Highgate Wood was acquired by the City of London Corporation from the Ecclesiastical Commission for public benefit Reginald Beckett remarked how the woods 'have long been famous with the poorer classes in the North of London for the comparatively wild and uncivilised beauty'. On attending the 'opening' ceremony he remarked that the woods were undoubtedly good for the public and that 'the spectacle of people pompously and elaborately giving away what never belonged to them is worth looking at.'⁸⁵

⁸² Vaninskaya, *William Morris and the Idea of Community: Romance, History and Propaganda 1880-1914*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, p. 57.

⁸³ On Jefferies and Morris, see Jed Mayer, 'A Darker Shade of Green: William Morris, Richard Jefferies, and Posthumanist Ecologies', *JWMS*, 19.3 (Winter 2011), pp. 79-92.

⁸⁴ 'News from Nowhere', *Commonweal*, 6.221 (5 April 1890), p. 106.

⁸⁵ Reginald A. Beckett, 'The "Opening" of Highgate Woods', *Commonweal*, 2. 46 (27 November 1886), p. 273, 274.

His vision of the landscape of England as a garden also contains similarities to his patterns. Morris's work in this area, and that of the other designers who worked with Morris & Co. such as John Dearle and Kate Faulkner, takes its inspiration and ideas from the natural world and transforms them into neat and orderly repetitive patterns. What we are presented with is a deliberately designed nature, a surface organised to please. Beauty and order were closely connected to Morris. Hammond remarks that he and his fellow citizens are similar to 'the mediævals, we like everything trim and clean, and orderly and bright'.⁸⁶ In 1892 he again reiterated his desire for 'the town to be clean, orderly, and tidy' and like 'a garden with beautiful houses in it'.⁸⁷ Trim, tidy, clean, orderly and bright is a reasonable description of Morris's patterns. There were three essential qualities to pattern-work according to Morris, beauty, imagination, and order. Without order, 'neither the beauty nor the imagination could be made visible; it is the bond of their life, and as good as creates them, if they are to be of any use to people in general.'⁸⁸ Without the imposition of order nature may inspire awe but it will not produce the combination of beauty and usefulness that Morris needed.

Hatred of the ugliness of modern civilisation, the smoke and pollution of the industrial city, and the desire for beauty in people's lives and surroundings was a key inspiration for Morris's work as artist, craftsman, and socialist. But this should not obscure the fact that Morris did not believe these were issues that could be resolved within capitalism. The locus of political action is always the urban environment and most predominantly the capital city. It is only after the transition to socialism and the security of the new order has been initially established that the distinction between town and country can be overcome, an act which itself further counters the possibility of counter-revolt and leads to the free and pleasure filled life of Morris's political vision. Its consistent presence in Morris's socialist

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ Morris, quoted in Mackail, *Life of William Morris*, Vol. II, p. 306.

⁸⁸ Morris, 'Some Hints on Pattern-Designing', *CW XXII*, p. 180.

propaganda is part of his effort to instil hope in to the movement that it was able to shape events. If socialism was inevitable it was far from inevitable that it would result in the beauty Morris longed for. That would require a strong desire and willingness on the part of society to actively create it.

Conclusion

The future relationship between society, labour and nature is a recurring theme in Morris's *Commonweal* fiction. One of the most striking examples comes towards the end of *News from Nowhere* when Guest, Dick and Clara are talking to Morsom about the use of machinery in past times. Clara, responding to Morsom's statement that soon after 'the Great Change' people 'soon began to find out their mistake, and that only slaves and slaveholders could live solely by setting machines going', ventures her own thoughts on the subject:

'Was not their mistake once more bred of the life of slavery that they had been living? – a life which was always looking upon everything, except mankind, animate and inanimate – 'nature,' as people used to call it – as one thing, and mankind another. It was natural to people thinking in this way that they should try to make 'nature' their slave, since they thought 'nature' was something outside them.'⁸⁹

This is the clearest example in Morris's writing that he thought through communism the nature/society dualism can be superseded. For John Bellamy Foster such dualisms, particularly the supposed dichotomy between anthropocentric and ecocentric approaches, are

⁸⁹ 'News from Nowhere', *Commonweal*, 6.241 (23 August 1890), p. 266. On nature and *News from Nowhere* see also Tony Pinkney, 'The Dialectic of Nature in Nowhere', *JWMS*, 19.3 (Winter 2011), pp. 50-63.

in many ways part of the problem of much environmental thinking as they ‘do little to help us understand the real, continuously changing material conditions of human existence within the biosphere’.⁹⁰

It is not clear, however, if Clara’s statement can be taken as definitive. Earlier in the story when Hammond tells Guest how people like their surroundings to be orderly and clean he adds that they do so ‘as people always do when they have any sense of architectural power; because then they know that they can have what they want, and they won’t stand any nonsense from Nature in their dealings with her.’⁹¹ This passage implies the continuing presence of a divide between nature and society, and that society is very much in a position of domination over nature. Yet there is room for nuance here. As Foster points out, ‘the notion of the human “domination of nature”...does not necessarily imply extreme disregard of nature or its laws.’⁹² Mastery and domination of nature can also be based in a deep understanding of and sympathy for nature. This seems to be much closer to the situation envisioned by Morris. The idea of England as a garden suggests that Morris sees society as maintaining the power and the right to order nature in line with its own interests but that it does so in sympathy with nature’s own rhythms and flows.

If Morris is reluctant for society to relinquish its power over nature there is no doubt that he wished for a more harmonious relationship in the future, and that a love for nature in all its little details was a significant aspect of his political vision. This love is encapsulated clearly in the figure of Ellen. Towards the end of the story Ellen leads Guest up to a house and lays ‘her shapely sun-browned hand and arm on the lichen wall as if to embrace it’ and cries out ‘O me! O me! How I love the earth, and the seasons, and weather, and all things that

⁹⁰ Foster, *Marx’s Ecology*, p. 11.

⁹¹ ‘News from Nowhere’, *Commonweal*, 6.221 (5 April 1890), p. 106.

⁹² Foster, *Marx’s Ecology*, p. 12.

deal with it, and all that grows out of it, - as this has done!’⁹³ The people of Morris’s utopia may take no nonsense from nature but they also care for it deeply.

This love of the earth is also a motivating factor for Morris’s pilgrims:

‘Their life was thy deliverance, O Earth, and for thee they fought;
‘Mid the jeers of the happy and deedless, ‘mid failing friends they went
To their foredoomed fruitful ending on the love of thee intent.’⁹⁴

When Richard arrives in Paris and sees how ‘the promise of spring-tide’ can be made real he thinks of the world to come:

‘Once all was the work of sorrow and the life without reward,
And the toil that fear hath bidden, and the folly of master and lord;
But now are all things changing, and hope without a fear
Shall speed us on through the story of the changes of the year.
Now spring shall pluck the garland that summer weaves for all,
And autumn spread the banquet and winter fill the hall.
O earth, thou kind bestower, thou ancient fruitful place,
How lovely and beloved now gleams thy happy face!’⁹⁵

The lovely and happy face of the earth is connected with the move beyond the capitalist ‘folly of master and lord’. As it is through labour that society shapes and remakes the world, the freeing of labour is the starting point for establishing a new relationship with the earth.

The bounteousness of the earth is captured in John Bedford Leno’s ‘In the Storehouse of Nature’, originally published in 1861 and reprinted in *Commonweal*:

⁹³ ‘News from Nowhere’, *Commonweal*, 6. 246 (27 September 1890), p. 306.

⁹⁴ ‘Meeting the War-Machine’, *Commonweal*, 2.21 (5 June 1886), p. 75.

⁹⁵ ‘A Glimpse of the Coming Day’, *Commonweal*, 2.17 (8 May 1886), p. 45.

‘In the storehouse of Nature there’s wealth for each comer,
 I care not how many or few they may be;
 When the bare limbs of Winter appeal to the Summer,
 She sends them new vestures befitting and free.’

What Leno’s poem further emphasises is the importance of labour to this natural wealth:

‘When Labour and Hope guide the strength of a nation,
 Kind heaven will rain plenty to succour and save.’⁹⁶

The centrality of labour to the socialist transformation of the land into a source of plenty and pleasure is made clear in two poems by C. W. Beckett. In ‘A Song for Socialism’ his words are meant as a motivation to continue in the fight for the promise of the future:

‘Are ye willing to work and to wait,
 To work and to wait for the day
 When brotherhood and mirth shall beautify the earth,
 And weariness and want be away?’⁹⁷

And in ‘The Reign of Labour’ he challenges the idea that all labour necessarily mars the earth’s beauty:

‘Is not Labour Beauty’s foe,
 Earth’s fairness rudely soiling?
 Nay, what loveliness should flow
 From forced and gainless toiling?
 Give her hope, and ye shall know.’⁹⁸

⁹⁶ John Bedford Leno, ‘In the Storehouse of Nature’, *Commonweal*, 5.161 (9 February 1889), p. 47.

⁹⁷ C. W. Beckett, ‘A Song for Socialism’, *Commonweal*, 4.114 (17 March 1888), p. 87.

⁹⁸ C. W. Beckett, ‘The Reign of Labour’, *Commonweal*, 4.129 (30 June 1888), p. 203.

Hopeful, free and pleasurable labour will bring beauty to the earth. The desire for this may be a driving force for engagement in socialist activism and politics but it would not itself be possible without the successful transition out of capitalism, into socialism and towards communism.

Bradley Macdonald has argued rightly, if obviously, that when it comes to ‘the tradition of socialism, there is no clear and necessary connection between socialism and ecological sustainability.’ When it comes to Morris, ‘it was his attachment to a critical notion of beauty that moved him in an ecological direction, and which gave the importance of the ‘eco’ to his ecosocialism.’⁹⁹ In a similar vein Elizabeth Carolyn Miller has argued that Morris’s political writings ‘exhibit a prescient eco-socialist analysis of extraction capitalism’ that is connected to what she terms his ‘surface aesthetic’, a term drawn from the fact that depictions ‘of the natural environment in Morris’s work are characterized by a focus on surface beauty.’¹⁰⁰ Both are correct in seeing the importance of the idea of beauty in Morris’s accounts of nature, but neither quite emphasise the extent to which this beauty is a product of human labour. It is the ordering of nature by free labour and imaginative minds that creates the surface beauty, the surface of the land but also of the human body, thus it is the freeing of labour that is the most urgent political task.

Both Macdonald and Miller use the term ecosocialism to describe Morris’s position. Morris also appears as an important figure in accounts of ecosocialism from Joel Kovel and David Pepper respectively.¹⁰¹ Predominantly a coinage of the late twentieth century the term should be used with caution, or not at all, in relation to Morris. It is not a term in Morris’s

⁹⁹ Macdonald, ‘Morris and the vision of ecosocialism’, p. 301.

¹⁰⁰ Elizabeth Carolyn Miller, ‘William Morris, Extraction Capitalism, and the Aesthetics of Surface’, *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 57, No. 3 (Spring 2015), pp. 395-404, p. 395, 402.

¹⁰¹ Joel Kovel, *The Enemy of Nature: The End of Capitalism or the End of the World?* London: Zed Books, 2007; David Pepper, *Eco-socialism: From deep ecology to social justice*. London: Routledge, 1995.

vocabulary. For Morris the issues of town and country, the relationship between labour, nature and beauty, were all subsumed within communism. The society, its land and its people, pictured in *News from Nowhere* is a communist one. Hammond tells Guest, who surely already knows this piece of information, that in the late-nineteenth century ‘some of those more enlightened men who were then called Socialists, although they well knew, and even stated in public, that the only reasonable condition of society was that of pure Communism (such as you now see around you)’.¹⁰²

Given the environmental and ecological record of twentieth century communism, it is understandable why contemporary theorists and activists have sought to avoid the term. But from the historical point of view there is no need to do so when looking at Morris. The damaged relationship between nature and society could only be fixed through communism. If it was technology and the unfree wage-labour of capitalism that was destroying the world it could only be made beautiful again through the free and imaginative labour of a communist society. The overthrow of capitalism was thus the initial project and one that had to be undertaken through the city, then the move towards communism could be taken where the prison cell of the city could be transformed into a beautiful, clean and ordered garden.

¹⁰² ‘News from Nowhere’, *Commonweal*, 6.227 (17 May 1890), p. 156.

Conclusion

‘We have spoken of the New Left as a “movement of ideas”: the phrase suggests, both the place we accord to socialist analysis and polemic, and the natural growth of ideas, through people, into socialist activity. It is in one sense, education which the socialist movement lacks most of all: the job of the New Left is to provide this kind of service for the Labour Movement.’ *New Left Review*, January/February 1960¹

75 years after the first appearance of *Commonweal*, Stuart Hall drew on William Morris for inspiration in his opening editorial for the *New Left Review*. It is a quote from one of Morris’s *Commonweal* articles that serves as an epigraph for Hall’s editorial and by extension the project of the *New Left Review*. It is not too surprising that Hall should take his cues from Morris. E. P. Thompson’s book had only a few years earlier established Morris as a socialist thinker of significance, even if as John Goode points out the book did not take centre stage in left circles in the late 1950s due to ‘an historical moment walled off by Hungary and Suez’.² Nevertheless, Thompson was an important figure for Hall and it is easy to see how Morris’s breadth of vision sat well with the New Left’s wide conception of socialism, one that ‘must be developed in cultural and social terms, as well as in economic and political.’³

The bulk of Morris’s political writings were written over a decade before the establishment of the Labour Representation Committee, which would become the Labour Party, a body about which Morris would no doubt have been ambivalent. At the time of

¹ Stuart Hall, ‘Editorial’, *New Left Review*, 1.1 (January/February 1960), pp. 1-3, p. 2.

² John Goode, ‘E. P. Thompson and ‘the Significance of Literature’’, in Harvey J. Kaye and Keith McClelland eds., *E. P. Thompson: Critical Perspectives*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990, pp. 183-203, p. 183.

³ Hall, ‘Editorial’, p. 1.

founding of the *New Left Review* the Labour Party were nearing a decade in opposition but had nevertheless established themselves as one of the two main parties of government. Despite this, Hall's analysis of the political moment directly echoes Morris's own. Along with all the legwork of political organising, 'there is always the work of "the Socialist Propaganda"'. The Labour Movement is not in its insurrectionary phase: we are in our missionary phase.⁴ It was necessary therefore to 'go out into towns and cities, universities and technical colleges, youth clubs and Trade Union branches, - and, as Morris said – *make socialists* there.' Even the religious language, of propaganda being missionary work, that appeared so frequently in late nineteenth century socialism is carried on to this new context.⁵ It is obvious to say that the work of political education is and has to be constant and ongoing. And it is also obvious to say, and yet necessary also, that Morris's longed for and envisioned revolution has not happened. If, as Hall states, Morris 'looked right across history and, with remarkable insight, saw into our particular predicament', it was the pessimistic side of Morris that proved more accurate than the hopeful side.⁶

While the longer-term comparison with Hall and assessment of Morris's political project is interesting and not without historical merit, it is more pertinent to examine Morris's own assessment. 'Where Are We Now?', from mid-November 1890 was Morris's final contribution to *Commonweal*. In May of that year he had been replaced as editor and his relationship with the anarchist wing of the Socialist League now in control continued to deteriorate until Morris could no longer politically, or financially, justify his co-operation. The article, then, was a summation and assessment of the socialist movement up until that point, a chance to take stock and to proffer thoughts on what should be done going forward.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁵ See Stephen Yeo, 'A New Life: The Religion of Socialism in Britain, 1883-1896', *History Workshop Journal*, No. 4 (Autumn 1977), pp. 5-56.

⁶ Hall, 'Editorial', p. 3.

Morris, always historically aware, knew that socialism in its latest phase was young, even if to many ‘the time will seem long’ with ‘so many hopes and disappointments’ already experienced. He was optimistic though, for ‘in the history of a serious movement seven years is a short time enough; and few movements surely have made so much progress during this short time in one way or another as Socialism has done.’ For a movement that set out to ‘change the system of society on which the stupendous fabric of civilisation is founded’, seven years was hardly a realistic timescale for success. Mistakes had been made, quarrels had and necessary quarrels avoided, and alongside ‘self-seeking...and vainglory, and sloth, and rashness’ there had ‘been at least courage and devotion also.’ Yet progress had been made through the propaganda work, and ‘because that seemingly inexpugnable [sic] fabric of modern society is verging towards its fall; it has done its work, and is going to change into something else.’⁷ Morris’s faith in the demise of capitalism and the transition to socialism (of one form or another) was unshaken by the disappointments he had experienced.

His assessment of the past seven years done, Morris turns to the future. If socialism was inevitable the shape it will take was not, and questions about the realisation of socialism were ever more taking the place of preaching its ideals. Here Morris gives a “condensed highlights” package of arguments he had been making over the previous years. He states his disagreement with ‘our old acquaintance palliation, elevated now into vastly greater importance than it used to have’, and with ‘the method of partial, necessarily futile, inconsequent revolt, or riot rather, against the authorities, who are our absolute masters, and can easily put it down.’ This last point is a jab at the anarchists who were increasingly drawn to propaganda of the deed. Morris re-iterates his belief that state socialism was not desirable in itself or sustainable, even if it was likely to be tried. ‘The success of Mr. Bellamy’s utopian book, deadly dull as it is, is a straw to show which way the wind blows. The general attention

⁷ Morris, ‘Where Are We Now?’, *Commonweal*, 6.253 (15 Nov, 1890), p. 361.

paid to our clever friends, the Fabian lecturers and pamphleteers, is not altogether due to the literary ability; people have really got their heads turned more or less in their direction.’⁸ If the socialist movement broadly taken had made significant headway in the previous years, it was not going in the way Morris thought it should.

What then should those who agreed with Morris, ‘those who are complete Socialists – or let us call them Communists’, do? The answer is predictable and repeated across the final three paragraphs. ‘I say for us *to make Socialists* is *the* business at present, and at present I do not think we can have any other useful business.’ ‘Our business, I repeat, is the making of Socialists, *i.e.*, convincing people that Socialism is good for them and is possible.’ And finally, his last words in *Commonweal*:

‘Therefore, I say, make Socialists. We Socialists can do nothing else that is useful, and preaching and teaching is not out of date for that purpose; but rather for those who, like myself, do not believe in State Socialism, it is the only rational means of attaining to the New Order of Things.’⁹

This focus didn’t shift in his final years after leaving the Socialist League either. As May Morris put it, ‘in his latest lectures as in the earliest, the main point he dwelt on was the necessity of ‘making Socialists.’¹⁰

As this thesis has demonstrated Morris’s project was not just that of making socialists but of shaping them as revolutionary socialists and communists. All socialists of the period believed in the importance of making more socialists, but for Morris it was especially crucial.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 361, 362.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 362.

¹⁰ May Morris, in *AWS II*, p. 361.

While his understanding of Marx and scientific socialism had convinced him of the historically inevitable demise of capitalism, what shape the socialist future would take was open for contestation and Morris simply did not believe that the state socialist visions put forward by the likes of the Fabians were good enough. His own vision and strategy relied on the creation and maintenance of a large network of like-minded revolutionaries across the country learning to manage their own affairs in preparation for the final crisis of capitalism. Given his own admitted weakness in political organisation, it was always going to be a tall order. But this is not necessarily a criticism. In any movement there will be people best suited to different roles, and Morris was forced by circumstances to take on the dual role of propagandist and also of party operative.

The failure and demise of the Socialist League as an organisation should not however blind us to its importance to Morris, and of its principal propaganda organ, *Commonweal*.¹¹ *Commonweal* was a site of education in more than one sense. It was the regular vehicle by which Morris and the League communicated outwards, where they could educate their readers, shaping and directing their political energies. But it was also a site of education for Morris too. Morris as editor shaped *Commonweal* and *Commonweal* in turn shaped him. Whether it was through Ernest Belfort Bax's articles on the causes and consequences of imperialism or debates with anarchists over the nature of authority in the future society, *Commonweal* and its contributors helped Morris to reflect upon and refine his own thought.

By studying Morris's thought within the context of *Commonweal* and wider socialist debates at the time, key aspects of his politics come to light. The crucial importance of freedom to Morris's conception of socialism and communism has been highlighted,

¹¹ It is hard not to see the Socialist League as anything but a failure, at least in the short term and in relation to its own revolutionary socialist goals. The Social Democratic Federation fared a little better, lasted longer and eventually melded into the Communist Party of Great Party. But this, as Gareth Stedman Jones writes, 'London Marxism left no lasting imprint upon the traditions of the British Labour movement.' Gareth Stedman Jones, *Outcast London: A Study in the Relationship Between Class in Victorian Society*. London: Verso, 2013, p. 349.

especially in relation to labour where it provides a more material basis to his hopes for the revival of art. The importance of freedom to Morris is evident also in his severe dislike of state socialism; people would not be free if they were dependent on a state but rather they must have control, exercised co-operatively, over their own lives and surroundings.

Emphasised throughout the thesis has been the transition phase from socialism to communism in Morris's political thought. First highlighted by Paul Meier this part of Morris's thinking cuts across and unites much of his thinking of the future. The simplification of life in the move towards small-scale self-managed communes is part of the same process as the eradication of the division of labour and the revival of handicraft which is also connected to the distribution of population across the country in overcoming the town/country divide. All these facets work together and enable the vision as a whole to cohere, even if Morris himself doesn't draw specific attention to this fact.

Also considered has been the interplay between a belief in the inevitability of socialism and the need to instil conscious hope in converts to the cause. As demonstrated, Morris believed that this inevitability was capable of being interrupted, which was why the project of making socialists and educating them towards revolution through the criticisms of reform and palliation was of such importance. Explaining the theoretical underpinnings of socialism was important yet difficult. If Morris is generally taken not to be a 'scientific socialist' it is not because he didn't believe in it but that he decided his energy as a writer was better direct towards a multi-faceted propaganda campaign that utilised imaginative fiction, lectures, punchy commentary and more. If Marxism came to be seen as a rigidly determinist system and the British Labour movement went firmly down the parliamentary path, Morris's thought presents a road not taken towards an expansive version of socialism emphasising freedom, beauty and self-management.

Many different versions of Morris and his political outlook have been presented in the past and no doubt as many, if not more, will be presented in the future. The version of Morris given here, the Morris of *Commonweal*, is that of a committed socialist and communist who was convinced of the class struggle playing out under capitalism and of the necessity of seeing it through. Not himself of the working class, he nonetheless put his faith in the working class as the vehicle for the achievement of socialism and equality. An internationalist and lover of freedom, he believed that people should have the possibility and the responsibility of managing their own lives and communities without the imposition of a powerful state. Cognisant of the pace of historical change he knew that a communist society would not be created in an instant out of the ashes of capitalism, but that a transitional stage of socialism would be necessary in order to establish and bed-in the relations and habits needed to achieve lasting change. Morris was passionate about beauty and art, in labour and in the natural and built environment, but believed that fundamentally the conditions for the rebirth of art could only come about through socialism and communism. The fundamental task therefore was the social and political fight against capitalism and its defenders, to educate the working class in the possibilities of socialism, and it was to this that Morris put his mental, physical, and financial resources.

Even in a work of this length, focused as it has been on Morris, it has been possible only to scratch the surface of *Commonweal*. There is much more historical work to be done not only with *Commonweal*, but with the socialist periodical press of the late-nineteenth century more broadly. It is not been possible, for example, to examine the Revolutionary Calendar started in 1888 and see how *Commonweal* was relating itself to and remembering a longer history of political radicalism. This regular feature, an adoption of similar calendars produced by foreign groupings, was described in advance as a way for English socialists ‘to

keep them in mind of the tidings of past years as the days go by.’¹² Nor has there been adequate space, unfortunately, to give proper attention to the journal’s many articles and reports on the police and the function of the law in capitalist society.¹³

Along with more mining of *Commonweal* for insight into the political thought and activity of members of the Socialist League there are opportunities for comparative work. A detailed comparison of the content and role of *Commonweal* and the longer lasting *Justice* is long overdue, as is work fleshing out the wider world of libertarian and anarchist papers such as *Freedom* and *Liberty*. There is a need to move away, and this thesis is no doubt indicative of the problem, from the focus on the established intellectuals and known figures to think about how journals and the periodical press function as part of a broader intellectual culture.

Beyond these publications based in England, principally London, there is scope for exploring the international networks that made up the socialist and radical press, particularly in assessing how the British publications related to their European contemporaries in the period of the Second International. This thesis has highlighted the trans-Atlantic connection linking *Commonweal* with the papers of The Knights of Labor and there is further work to be done in establishing in what ways British and American activists related to each other.

In relation to Morris, though interest waxes and wanes there is little fear that people will stop finding new ways of thinking and writing about him. Each generation finds Morris anew, and with the bicentenary of his birth a little over a decade away there will no doubt be a plethora of books, articles, and exhibitions given over to him. As to his political thought, again, interest has and will continue to come and go. *News from Nowhere* is re-issued frequently in new editions, introduced for new readers in a new age. The same cannot be said for *A Dream of John Ball* or *The Pilgrims of Hope*, often sadly overlooked texts.

¹² ‘Revolutionary Calendar and Book of Days’, *Commonweal*, 3. 103 (31 December 1887), p. 422.

¹³ For example, John Bruce Glasier, ‘Men Who Are Not Socialists VI: The Police’, *Commonweal*, 6. 241 (23 August 1890), pp. 265-266.

Recently the left-wing publisher Verso have published a collection of Morris's political writings containing a wide selection of lectures and journalism. Introducing the collection Owen Hatherley reflects that the book is being published at a time 'when the first attempt in many decades in this country to crash socialism into Parliament has comprehensively failed, leaving a generation of young socialists bitterly angry and disoriented.' If Stuart Hall thought Morris saw clearly into the predicament of 1960, the same can be said of now, well over a century since his death. Hatherley recommends that the disappointed could do worse than read some Morris. 'Whereas reading other thinkers from the time can be a melancholic experience,' reading Morris is different for 'it is bracing to see someone that early expect much of what would happen, and be unshaken in his socialism despite that.'¹⁴ Raymond Williams once remarked he 'would willingly lose' Morris's socialist fiction 'if to do so were the price of retaining and getting people to read' his lectures.¹⁵ Fortunately we do not have to make the choice. Morris's texts are more widely and freely available than ever for occasional reading and detailed study. They remain, as Williams himself might have put it, resources of hope.

¹⁴ Owen Hatherley, 'Introduction' in William Morris, *How I Became A Socialist*. London: Verso, 2020, p. 15, 11.

¹⁵ Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society 1780-1950*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971, p. 159.

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