

THE IDEA OF COMMUNITY IN *NEWS FROM NOWHERE*

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Abstract: Rejecting the concept of modern nationalities, William Morris promotes the idea of small administrative units in which everybody feels responsible for the well-being of the community. This ideal is embodied in several of his lectures on art and society and especially in his utopian romance, News from Nowhere. Insisting on the importance of fellowship, Morris presents the picture of a society in which people live in harmony, or rather in "reasonable strife", with nature and with each other. Small communities, fusions between village and city life, are therefore seen as a solution for the problems of an industrialised and mechanized world.

Keywords: utopia, romance, community, the Other, centralization

First published in 1890 in the pages of the socialist journal *Commonweal*, William Morris' *News from Nowhere* is constructed on the opposition between the Victorian 19th century and the society of the future. Alternatively, one of the two worlds becomes more real than the other, which comes to be seen in terms of dream, phantasmagoria, or nightmare. Taking the form of a voyage of discovery, the book depicts two trips into well-known places, the capital city and the borders of the Thames, a world which is transformed but familiar. In spite of the fictional pretence of foreignness, the reader can easily recognise the setting, from the opening pages where Hammersmith is identifiable from the street names, the peregrination through London, and further on to the upper reaches of the Thames. This transposition is based upon the real places of Morris's own world. There is a permanent contrast between present and past and Morris relies on the reader's familiarity with the world he depicts in order to build up an alternative, to draw attention to the fact that things have not always been the same and moreover need not remain the same.

The society of the future was a subject which preoccupied Morris long before he decided to write *News from Nowhere*. In a letter from March 1874 to Alfred Baldwin he discusses the condition of people living in the city and forwards his simple desire for a better life:

it seems to be nobody's business to try to better things – isn't mine you see in spite of all my grumbling – but look, suppose people lived in little communities among gardens and green fields, so that you could be in the country in five minutes' walk, and had few wants, almost no furniture for instance, and no servants, and studied the (difficult) arts of enjoying life, and finding out what they really wanted: then I think one might hope civilization had really begun. (in Henderson, 1850: 62)

He will later develop these ideas in a lecture delivered in 1887, "The Society of the Future", and in his review of Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* published in *Commonweal* in June 1889. It is not surprising that *News from Nowhere* appeared in such a short period of time as the ideas which form its foundation became crystallized after years of experience.

Having been born in a wealthy family is not necessarily a drawback for Morris' political thought and for his connection to socialism. Because of this fact he can ask for more, without being satisfied with the bare necessities for survival. Morris is convinced that what makes people happy is "Free and full life and the consciousness of life [...] the pleasurable

exercise of our energies, and the enjoyment of the rest which that exercise of expenditure of energy makes necessary to us.” (Morris, 1999: 176) He demands the extinction of asceticism and of luxury, the symbol of which is the clubs in Pall Mall. In the field of education he insists upon practical skills as well as upon knowing the basis of mending things, cultivating the land, cooking and, moreover, the art of thinking which is not taught in schools. Morris believes that the art and the literature of the future society will appeal more to the senses. The society in which he would like to live

is a society which does not know the meaning of the words rich or poor, or the rights of property, or law or legality, or nationality: a society which has no consciousness of being governed [...]. It is a society conscious of a wish to keep life simple, to forgo some of the power over nature won by past ages in order to be more human and less mechanical, and willing to sacrifice something to this end. It would be divided into small communities varying much within the limits allowed by due social ethics, but without rivalry between each other (ibid.: 183)

He refutes the accusation of stagnation associated with such a happy utopian society: “some say that such a condition of things might lead indeed to happiness but also to stagnation. Well, to my mind that would be a contradiction in terms, if indeed we agree that happiness is caused by the pleasurable exercise of our faculties.” (ibid.: 184) However, even rest would be beneficent for a society which has experienced so much trouble, at least for a period of time. This is precisely the stage achieved by the Nowherians.

William Morris is convinced that centralization and the passing on of responsibilities is not the answer for a better society: “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.” (Morris, 1889) As opposed to dystopias, real freedom and the absence of control form the basis of a democracy in Nowhere. Due to the fact that communities are small, there is no need for electing representatives and old Hammond declares that “our present parliament would be hard to house in one place, because the whole people is our parliament.” (Morris, 2003: 65) It is the will of the majority that is usually done, without harming the minority: selfishness and self-centredness are replaced with good will and tolerance. Morris believes in the power of cooperation rather than competition, resulting in a fruitful relationship in which everybody wins: “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.” (Morris, 1889)

Morris was familiar with a wide range of utopian literature and due to this fact his work contains echoes of classic utopias: More’s *Utopia*, Thomas Campanella’s *La Citta del Sole*, and Samuel Butler’s *Erewhon*. The last words of *Utopia*, in which More differentiates between the “wish for” and the “expectation of” change along utopian lines, is recalled by the final sentence of Morris’s novel. Moreover, *Utopia* is one of the books published by the Kelmscott Press, with an introduction written by Morris himself in which he declares that utopias are an expression of their author’s temperament. They are not a social recipe – they are the embodiment of a vision communicated to the reader who may become seduced by its beauty wishing it to become true.

The first part of the subtitle of Morris' utopia, "An Epoch of Rest", is a concise description of the world that the narrator (and the reader) will discover. It is an expression of the narrator's hopes and aspirations, the future happy society being set in contrast with the misery of the past. This contrast is expressed once more in the novel when the narrator, William Guest, is disturbed by Richard's words: "suddenly the picture of the sordid squabble, the dirty and miserable tragedy of the life I had left for a while, came before my eyes; and I had, as it were, a vision of all my longings for rest and peace in the past, and I loathed the idea of going back to it again." (Morris, 2003: 116) For him, his staying in Nowhere is similar to a sunny holiday during which he gathers enough strength to continue with his daily struggle. It inspires him with hope and it suggests the possibility of difference.

The fact that the book represents only "some chapters" suggests that the depiction of this new world is not complete. This proves the fact that Nowhere is only *one* possible type of future society, a vision which Morris does not wish to impose on the readers. They are expected to dream for themselves, they do not have to believe in the validity or in the completeness of Morris's model. The new world visited by William Guest is not a perfect world, not even for Morris. Moreover, for him Nowhere is not only a possible world, but also the logical outcome towards which society was heading. This incomplete vision of the utopia is also an answer to the critics who describe Morris's paradise as being static and dull. Change is not only possible in the new society, but also inevitable, as suggested by the characters themselves. The idea that Nowhere is actually far from being a paradise is discussed by several of Morris's critics.

Although the utopian romance does not depict a perfect society, it is suggestive of an improved relationship with the environment and within society itself. The ideal of fellowship is realized in the small communities of Nowhere in which people share common aspirations and values. Old Hammond explains to the narrator the principles which guide people's conduct as well as their new traditions. The narrator is surprised to discover that although private property is extinct, the nucleus of a community is compared to an extended family: "though separate households are the rule amongst us, and though they differ in their habits more or less, yet no door is shut to any good-tempered person who is content to live as the other house-mates do". (2003: 56) After living in the same manner for more than one hundred and fifty years, Nowherians have acquired "a habit of acting on the whole for the best. It is easy for us to live without robbing each other. It would be possible for us to contend with and rob each other, but it would be harder for us than refraining from strife and robbery" (ibid.: 69) This is the rule rather than the exception and is the essential condition for living in small communities. Morris believes that man is inherently good and that it is the environment which influences his behavior. A friendly, stimulating environment helps him achieve his full potential, eliminating artificial competition and envy: "Each man is free to exercise his special faculty to the utmost, and every one encourages him in so doing." (ibid.: 70)

Equality of condition is not sufficient in itself; according to Morris, variety of life is also essential. His utopia acknowledges differences and welcomes strangers, even if adjustment to the new society can be a long and difficult process. A community is defined through the manner in which it deals with exterior influences and through its attitude to the Other. Utopias are usually closed communities, isolated from exterior influences and reluctant to change. The world of Nowhere, however, is extremely tolerant and even fascinated with

difference. The narrator's clothes draw attention to his foreignness and, in spite of the fact that they are a source of embarrassment for him, his new friends suggest that "it wouldn't be right for you to take away people's pleasure of studying your attire, by just going and making yourself like everybody else" (2003, 30). However, the narrator is given a beautiful suit after he condemns Nowherians for spending too much effort in the adornment of their bodies.

For William Guest the new world is a strange place, in spite of people's friendliness, and he needs a refuge to remind him of the past: "the old man, with his knowledge of past times, and even a kind of inverted sympathy for them caused by his active hatred of them, was as it were a blanket for me against the cold of this very new world, where I was, so to say, stripped bare of every habitual thought and way of acting" (ibid.: 89) When the new world rejects him, it becomes indifferent to his pain, as suggested in the following paragraph in which William Guest suffers in the middle of an uncaring nature: "I felt lonely and sick at heart past the power of words to describe. I hung about a minute longer, and then turned and went out of the porch again and through the lime-avenue into the road while blackbirds sang their strongest from the bushes about me in the hot June evening." (ibid.: 180) The narrator is a guest in this world, in which he cannot find his place. He represents *the Other*, a traveller who cannot understand utopia and is sceptical to its functioning, being imbued with 19th century preconceived ideas. At the end, he realizes that he was never part of utopia, that he was "conscious all along that I was really seeing all that new life from the outside, still wrapped up in the prejudices, the anxieties, the distrust of this time of doubt and struggle." (ibid.: 181) His new friends try to make him feel welcome, presenting him with the best that the new world has to offer. However, they seem to be aware that he is only a guest, even if Ellen, the epitome of Nowhere, wishes to accommodate him and use him as a source of knowledge from the past. After he returns to his dingy Hammersmith, the narrator realizes that he was not prepared for the new world: its tranquil happiness would have soon wearied him.

A significant change, which occurred rather early in the new society, was the migration from city to the countryside. According to Hammond, "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." (ibid., 62) The fusion between village and city benefits from all the advantages of the two ways of living. It is the sign of a different relationship with the natural environment, of which everybody is a part, a return to nature, to traditional crafts and to the use of machines as tools. Britain is compared to a garden in which nothing is wasted and nothing is spoilt and this image is blended with a very harsh and realistic criticism of Victorian society.

David Latham focuses on *News from Nowhere* as a response to the myth of the Fall, a cure for cynicism and an expression of hope, an invitation or rather a challenge to imagine life in a terrestrial paradise. This invitation should not be dismissed as naïve but it should be interpreted as a spur to action. Latham believes that what is important is not the verisimilitude of such a paradise but the fact that people no longer dream of it or wish it to come to life (2007: 9). The entire utopian romance is a challenge to conventions; even the inspiration from the Middle Ages is a reversal of the idea of history and progress.

The Great Change which occurred in the world of Nowhere is more than anything a change in attitudes. The binding force of the new communities, the essential characteristic of

the inhabitants' happy lives, is pleasure found in work itself, which becomes a source of art. Morris often discusses art in his lectures and articles and he clarifies his understanding of the concept by providing a very broad definition for art: "the human pleasure of life." (Morris, 1884) This is what differentiates man from beast and moreover it is the only source of complete happiness: "unless we have this peculiarly human pleasure of life we cannot be happy as men." (idem) Man is seen as a creator in full harmony with his environment exercising his mental as well as his physical powers. His creations are beautiful "just as everything that nature makes is always beautiful." (idem)

What must have seemed a peculiar idea to Morris' contemporaries is the rejection of the artist's privileged status; for Morris, art cannot be the result of "the conscious efforts of a few cultivated men apart from the work of the great mass of men" (idem); it is so much interwoven with the spirit of humans that it cannot be reserved only for an elite. Art is always born in the middle of a community and it is a means of perpetuating its values. Morris believes that art in all its forms cannot be separated from the life which creates it; in its abundance or in its barrenness, it testifies to the society's state of development. Talking about architecture in the British Isles, he forwards the idea that in the past houses were built in accord with the natural environment and, as a result, their image produces pleasure in the eyes of the beholder, "a satisfying untroubled happiness that few things else could bring us." (Morris, 1879)

In "Art and the Beauty of the Earth" (1881) Morris declares that art must always be associated with the idea of freedom. He compares Mediaeval art oriented towards the future, indicative of what it represents, aiming to help humanity, to the art of Renaissance, looking backward, self-centred, being its own end. The conclusion is that Renaissance has brought about a "severance of art from the daily lives of men" (Morris, 1881) Morris is convinced that in the past all the products made by man's hands were both useful and beautiful and, most importantly, their production was a source of pleasure. Although he admires the past, he is well-aware of its shortcomings, which were however diminished due to the fact that people found pleasure in work and this pleasure was inscribed in the products of their work. The division of labour has robbed people of their pleasure in work while the disappearance of the lesser arts meant that higher arts are unable to supplant for the loss as they are accessible only to the highly educated. This is the opposite of what Morris desires: "Art will not grow and flourish, nay, it will not long exist, unless it be shared by all people." (Morris, 1881) The solution offered by industrialization is to reduce the amount of necessary work and also to give up ornament. For Morris, the true solution is found in art which acquires an incredible moral value, becoming a guiding force; being shared, it is no longer a luxury: "it will destroy all degrading toil, all enervating luxury, all foppish frivolity. It will be the deadly foe of ignorance, dishonesty, and tyranny, and will foster good-will, fair dealing, and confidence between man and man." (idem) The ideas expressed in this lecture are later developed in Morris' utopian romance which presents a desirable world of stimulating work followed by peaceful rest: "What other blessings are there in life save these two, fearless rest and hopeful work?" (Morris, 1882) The utopia bears therefore the title *News from Nowhere or An Epoch of Rest*.

In "Art under Plutocracy" (1883) Morris declares that there are two types of art – one intellectual, addressing only the mind, and the other decorative, more concerned with the

useful. The ideal state is that in which the two types of art are interconnected and difficult to separate. Morris believes that this complete harmony existed in the past, when people had an inborn instinct for beauty which made them receptive to works of art. In this lecture Morris expresses a desire to escape:

I can myself sympathize with a feeling which I suppose is still not rare, a craving to escape sometimes to mere Nature, not only from ugliness and squalor, not only from a condition of superabundance of art, but even from a condition of art severe and well ordered. (idem)

This is a craving for a simpler way of life in communion with nature and with an accent on “innocent beast-like pleasure” (idem), an atavistic thirst for rest as it was possible only before modern civilization began. The degradation of the natural and of the man-made environment is responsible for the disappearance of true art which in Morris’ belief is popular art: “any art which professes to be founded on the special education or refinement of a limited body or class must of necessity be unreal and short-lived. ART IS MAN’S EXPRESSION OF HIS JOY IN LABOUR.” (idem) He insists upon the importance of a beautiful environment, with good conditions for the workers, a fact which influences the production of art. Morris believes that the commercial system destroyed romance in art while encouraging the commonplace. The simple pleasure found in nature is not enough; man’s true power is revealed only by means of art which provides him a worthy and dignified occupation: “it seems to me that the sense of beauty in the external world, of interest in the life of man as a drama, and the desire of communicating this sense of beauty and interest to our fellows is or ought to be an essential part of the humanity of man.” (ibid)

News from Nowhere is a protest against the society in which Morris lived and it is thus full of virulent attacks – Morris was known for his hot temperament – on everything which was cherished by that society. Morris’s bitter criticism is directed at all the British institutions and bodies – the Parliament, the education system, the bourgeois family, the police – to mention only a few of them. Morris turns upside down all the popular conventions, questioning even the idea of progress. This means that his discourse relies precisely on these conventions, which are mentioned only to be rejected. However, some of the reversals in *Nowhere* do not reflect Morris’s own beliefs, which proves the fact that his utopia is not the image of a perfect society but a quest which is never ended and whose object can only be glimpsed. The criticism of Victorian England springs from Morris’s deep discontent with the direction of historical change. Despite this criticism, the general atmosphere of the book is one of blissfulness. Morris wanted to influence his readers, to prepare them for a new type of life, to change their mentality. For him, socialism represented hope, and it was this hope that he wanted to impart to his readers. It presented him with the possibility of transforming his dreams into reality, of recreating an ideal community, a Paradise on Earth and an epoch of rest and peacefulness. He wanted to provide an image of a future society in such a form as would make readers wish for it to come true and long for it with the nostalgia of a lost paradise. In Krishan Kumar’s words, “*News from Nowhere* is a dream of socialism; but Morris aspired to make it so alluring, so compelling, that others would wish to join in the task of realizing it, and so transform the dream into a collective vision that could remake the world.” (in Morris, 1995: xxii)

The extent to which *News from Nowhere* is idiosyncratic and truly an expression of its author's temperament can be indicated by the fact that the embodiment of the Earthly Paradise is... Morris' own house. In the Kelmscott Press edition of the utopia, the frontispiece is an engraving of Kelmscott Manor. *News from Nowhere* contains so many allusions to Morris' own interests and even recycled passages from his lectures and letters that it seems to depict his private Paradise. The voyage to the upper reaches of the Thames which inspired him when writing *News from Nowhere* is first described in a letter to Georgiana Burne-Jones from August 1880. In another letter to Georgiana from the same year he mentions his desire of doing something more than complaining or public speaking for the fast improvement of society: "I have more than ever at my heart the importance for people of living in beautiful places; I mean the sort of beauty which would be attainable by all, if people could but begin to look for it." (in Henderson, 1950: 139) This idea is developed in his utopian romance, together with several other subjects already discussed in his lectures. In addition, Morris occasionally includes childhood memories, such as the image of Epping Forest, of the herb patch in his home garden, or of traditional haymaking.

For Victorian readers, the greatest challenge was the book's mixture of the real and the imagined. Morris' Nowhere is not a far-away island, it is their own country and it is easily recognizable, only beautified. In Nowhere, London is less changed than after the Great Fire, less changed than the London of the 21st century in certain respects, as most of its monuments and important landmarks have survived. However, its inhabitants have different habits and patterns of thought. They enjoy their work and art, in its widest sense of pleasure arising from creative activities, is essential for their happiness. By rejecting individualism and focusing on the importance of living in small communities, Morris draws attention to his ideal of fellowship as a possible solution against alienation in an industrialised society.

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