'NEWS FROM NOWHERE: THE RENEWAL OF UTOPIA'

Krishan Kumar*

William Morris and Edward Bellamy

*News from Nowhere* (1890), it is well known, was written in indignant response to Edward Bellamy’s socialist utopia *Looking Backward*, published to huge popular acclaim in America in 1888.† Morris, after a decade of energetic proselytizing for the socialist cause, was appalled at Bellamy’s vision of socialism. Reviewing *Looking Backward* in *The Commonweal*, he described Bellamy’s scheme as ‘State Communism, worked by the very extreme of national centralization’. Bellamy’s mind, said Morris, was ‘fixed firmly on the mere machinery of life’. Every aspect of socialism was conceived by him in terms of organization. There was a ‘mechanical’ answer to every problem — including, of course, the problem of production. In the face of laborious and alienating work, Bellamy’s solution was not the humanization of work but its abolition, by progressively mechanizing it.‡

*News from Nowhere* was wrung from a somewhat reluctant Morris as a necessary antidote to Bellamy’s vision of socialism. Bellamy’s book, said Morris, had ‘produced a great impression on people who are really enquiring into socialism’, and ‘will be sure to be quoted as an authority for what socialists believe’. In his review of *Looking Backward* Morris offered the rudiments of an alternative socialist vision. He provided in effect a programmatic statement of the utopia that he was to publish in the following year.

[It is necessary to point out that there are some Socialists who do not think that the problem of the organization 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 onto the shoulders of an abstraction called the State, but must deal with it in

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conscious association with each other: that variety of life is as much an aim of a true Communism as equality of condition, and that nothing but an union of these two will bring about real freedom; that modern nationalities are mere artificial devices for the commercial war that we seek to put an end to, and will disappear with it. And, finally, that art, using that word in its widest and due signification, is not a mere adjunct of life which free and happy men can do without, but the necessary expression and indispensable instrument of human happiness.

But *News from Nowhere* did not simply provide a different description of socialism. Morris was not simply concerned to replace one account of the organization of society by a different account of an alternative organization. More fundamentally he wished to show his vision of socialism by means of a different way of writing and portraying utopia. Bellamy's failure, according to Morris, was not simply due to a wrong-headed conception of socialism; more seriously it was a failure of temperament, of an inability to conceive socialism in anything other than the prosaic terms of the professional middle classes. 'The only safe way of reading a utopia', said Morris, 'is to consider it as the expression of the temperament of its author.' Bellamy's utopia revealed a temperament 'perfectly satisfied with modern civilization, if only the injustice, misery, and waste of class society could be got rid of'. *Looking Backward* was 'a cockney paradise', an updated version of the Land of Cockayne where the prime concern of life is to avoid pain, hunger and hard work of any kind.

Morris's temperament was evidently of a quite different kind. *News from Nowhere* is the clearest evidence of this, even if we did not have all the other writings to judge him by. In seeking to express this temperament, Morris was led to draw on all the resources of his earlier engagement with poetry and history. *News from Nowhere* picks up and develops, in the most unselfconscious way, many of the themes of the romances in poetry and prose for which he had become famous.

Here again Morris's review of *Looking Backward* provides a clue to his purpose — or at least his practice — in *News from Nowhere*. Bellamy's book, he says, is cast into the form of 'a romance', 'but the author states very frankly in his preface that he has only given it this form as a sugar-coating to the pill'. The 'romance' is not of real importance to Bellamy, it is the merest piece of scaffolding to hold up the essay in social and political ideas that is his main concern. Accordingly 'it is the serious essay and not the slight envelope of romance which people have found interesting to them'.

Romance, we know, was a matter of the utmost importance to Morris. This is true not simply in the popular sense of the term, of the sexual relations between men and women. Morris certainly regarded that as a fit subject of utopia. One might even say that *News from Nowhere* was one of the first English utopias to treat the subject seriously (French utopias of the Enlighten-
ment had already fully explored this aspect). But there was an additional literary sense of the term romance that was equally central to Morris's purpose in *News from Nowhere*. What romance means, he once said, 'is the capacity for a true conception of history, a power of making the past part of the present'.

*News from Nowhere* is 'romantic' in this other sense, as well as being concerned with sexual and erotic life. It attempts a representation of the past, present and future of humanity. Pugin and Ruskin were important here, of course, in showing Morris how the past can be made 'part of the present'. Morris's 'medievalism' — which was the opposite of nostalgic wish-fulfilment — is the clearest expression of this intellectual legacy. But another figure, less commonly discussed in this context, is Thomas More. More's importance to Morris is the greater for his being not simply an exemplar of medievalism but, even more, an exemplar — indeed the inventor — of the utopian genre.

**William Morris and Thomas More**

Morris's admiration for More is well known. He listed *Utopia* as among his hundred favourite books. The Kelmscott Press published a beautiful edition of *Utopia*, to which Morris contributed a Preface. In a public lecture of 1885 he declared: 'I do not know of any better description of the new form of society than that described in More's *Utopia*. I will refer you to that for a description of the organisation . . . of society for all purposes, whether of Domestic life, laws, learning, Philosophy, Marriages, War and Religion'.

By the time he came to write the Kelmscott 'Preface' in 1893 Morris's view was more qualified. The value of More's book was 'rather historic than prophetic'. More wrote for his own times, not for ours. He stood out against the development of the modern commercial forces that were a necessary part of the making of the modern world, and so of its future. 'I think More must be looked upon rather as the last of the old than the first of the new'.

But this was far from diminishing More's achievement, and the value of his example. More recognized and showed that private property is the root cause of 'the whole evil'. He portrayed a society 'in which the individual man can scarcely conceive his existence apart from the Commonwealth of which he

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4 See May Morris's 'Introduction' to *Volume 22 of the Collected Works of William Morris* (London, 1914). She mentions also Samuel Butler's *Erewhon* as a 'household word'.


forms a portion’. That remains the goal still of modern socialists. More’s striking achievement was to give us ‘not a vision of the triumph of the new-born capitalistic society . . . but a picture (his own indeed, not ours) of the real New Birth which many men before him had desired, and which now indeed we may well hope is drawing near to realisation’.

More’s example went beyond providing a vision of the future. Just as important was his use of the past. In resisting the forces of his own day, the forces of a nascent capitalism, he drew for his vision on the values and institutions of the middle ages. In the guilds of the craftsmen, the monasteries of the monks, and the civic institutions of the self-governing medieval cities, More found the values and practices of community and citizenship that he portrayed in his Utopia.

Morris also of course drew upon the middle ages for his utopia. He followed More too in his use of history: history not just as a storehouse of values and practices, but as a living and active presence in the present, as a ‘romantic’ force. In some ways his most successful presentation of this is not in News from Nowhere — where the achieved state of perfection lessens somewhat the tension of the dialectic between past, present and future — but in A Dream of John Ball (1886–7). In a complex interaction, the modern narrator’s dream of returning to the time of the English Peasants’ revolt of 1381 is met by John Ball’s dream of a free and equal England. But the modern man knows that John Ball is mistaken, for his own time at least. It cannot be so. The modern man knows the future of John Ball’s society: not freedom and equality, but capitalism, exploitation and inequality. However the modern man too has a dream of the future. Having lived in the age of capitalism and seen the seeds of its decay and dissolution, he can envisage ‘the change beyond the change’, the future socialist society that is being forged out of the materials of the capitalist society that is transforming John Ball’s medieval society. So the narrator can both warn John Ball of the imminent failure of his struggle, but also at the same time reassure him of its ultimate triumph in ‘the change beyond the change’. As the narrator listens to John Ball’s sermon to the peasants before the battle with the King’s men, he ponders

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 . . . 7

John Ball’s last words to the narrator are: ‘I go to life and to death, and leave thee; and scarce do I know whether to wish thee some dream of the days beyond these to tell what shall be, as thou has told me, for I know not if that shall help or hinder thee.’

Whether or not this means that Morris was already contemplating a tale of the future — and the hint is decidedly ambiguous — Bellamy’s *Looking Backward* forced his hand. The result was *News from Nowhere*. Once more, as in *A Dream of John Ball*, history is employed both for the recovery of certain forms — the layout of cities, the design of buildings and clothes, for example — as well as to place the future society in perspective. Unlike many other utopian societies created by the *fiat* of a wise king or legislator — or simply the *fiat* of the author — Morris, good Marxist that he is, conceives the future society as built with the materials of the past. This is true even of the technology of future society, though Morris is notoriously vague about such details as the ‘force-barges’ that ply up and down the Thames. Morris’s vision is not primitivist. He shows us his future society at a highly developed stage of its existence — some two hundred years after the revolution of 1952 that launched it. There is plenty of time in this period for the citizens to have worked out their attitude to technology: to retain some large-scale technology where work simply could not be made fit for humans, and to eliminate much other technology where craftwork could be substituted, or where the products of that technology were worthless or harmful.

History exists in the moral as well as the material equipment of the new society. The citizens of the new society have been educated in the course of a revolutionary struggle against the old order. Far from being completed in the revolution of 1952, this struggle had another century to run. In that time the citizens have had to wrestle not just with the overgrown towns and overblown technology of the old society but also with their own mental and emotional attitudes. The society that we see portrayed in the twenty-second century is one that has come through a ‘cleansing struggle’. It has had to learn new attitudes to work, to the relations between men and women, to the natural physical world in which it is placed. The world, says old Hammond, has been brought to ‘its second birth’.

The spirit of the new days, of our days, was to delight in the life of the world; intense and overwhelming love of the very skin and surface of the earth on which man dwells, such as a lover has in the fair flesh of the woman he loves... 

Edward Bellamy’s socialist utopia also had a role for history. History was the process that, as it were effortlessly, ‘behind the backs of men’, brought into being the new society. Evolution, not revolution, is the theme. The new society arises not against the grain of the old society, not in an unrelenting struggle with all its ways, but as a continuation and consummation of its logic. The society of large capitalist trusts and oligopolies metamorphoses; almost, it seems, without anyone realizing it, into a society where the state is the sole owner, the

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sole monopolist. We are told by Bellamy that social attitudes change, that people behave differently in the new society, but we are given no account of how this subjective transformation comes about. Indeed, apart from the change in economic organization, it is not clear that there has been much change in other aspects of the life of society. Society is more productive and more efficient; everyone is economically secure; a good deal of the pain and distress of capitalist society has been removed (much of it by technical means, as by machines and medicines). But in other respects, as Morris pointed out in his review of Bellamy, not much else has changed. Essentially the life of the Boston bourgeoisie — comfortable, materialistic, moralistic — has been extended to encompass everyone.

Morris's utopia is unique in placing a bloody revolution at the centre of its account of 'how the change came'. (The twentieth century dystopia was to borrow this for its own pessimistic purposes.) The new society, Morris insists, does not and cannot evolve painlessly out of the old. There has to be a wrenching and a disruption, a distinct break with the past. This has to be learned in the bodies and the souls of the citizens of the new society. The 'second birth' demands a second baptism, a baptism of fire. The new society does not recklessly demolish everything from the past — capitalism is, as Marx insists, the necessary prerequisite for socialism — but it wages war against the whole intent and ideology of past society. This is history, in Morris's — and Marx's — understanding of it, not as peaceful evolution but as dialectical leaps by way of revolution. 'It was', says old Hammond, 'war from beginning to end: bitter war, till hope and pleasure put an end to it.'

The Renewal of Utopia

News from Nowhere renewed utopia both in its form and in its content. The use of a sophisticated theory of society, refined by the leading thinkers of the day, allowed Morris to escape from some of the more simple-minded techniques of earlier utopias — the voyage to distant parts of the globe, the miraculous emergence of a wise legislator or philosopher-king. True, Morris is happy to resort to the medieval device of the dream, a device already put to highly effective use in A Dream of John Ball. But what the dream elaborates is not a simple fantasy of happy times but a complex account of social development linking past, present and future. The dream, that is, embodies a realistic and densely historical understanding of the course of modern history. Whatever we think of this way — essentially the Marxist way — of conceiving history, we have to accept that Morris's utopia is exceptional in the extent to which it engages and draws upon some of the most sophisticated social theory of its time (and ours).

9 Ibid., p. 287.
But, just as important, News from Nowhere cannot simply be equated with social theory. It was one of Morris's principal objections to Looking Backward that the story was there simply as 'a sugar coating to the pill', that Bellamy's interest, as that of his intended readers, was only in 'the serious essay' and scarcely at all 'the slight envelope of romance' in which it was encased.

For Morris this simply could not be so. Not that he was uninterested in putting over serious ideas in his utopia. That indeed was the very point of it. But how best to put over serious ideas? Morris had tried poetry, lectures, and articles in political journals. He had tramped the length and breadth of England speaking to audiences of all kinds, from students at Oxford to workers in the East End of London. Now, spurred on by Bellamy, he returned to the form of the prose romance that he had used so successfully a few years ago in A Dream of John Ball. The point of the prose romance was that form — 'the slight envelope of romance', the way and manner of expression — mattered as much as content, 'the serious essay', the exposition of socialist ideas. To separate the two, as in Bellamy, not only produced an aesthetic mess but ran the risk also of failing in the political task. For someone of Morris's way of thinking, it was quite inconceivable that good ideas did not at the same time require good form. If he were to convince his readers of the rightness of socialism, if he were to inspire in them something of his love and enthusiasm for the socialist vision of mankind, he had to be as artful and attentive to the mode of expression as to the ideas themselves, literally conceived.

Here again More was an inspiration and, I believe, an exemplar. More's Utopia has always fascinated readers — and frustrated scholars — by a certain inscrutability, a certain uncertainty as to the author's intent and purpose. Did More really offer his utopia as a realizable project? Is the 'More' of the book, who puts seemingly plausible objections to communism, and who at the end opines that utopia is to be rather 'wished for than hoped for', the same More as the author of the book? Does he, that is, express More's own view? Or, again, was Utopia simply a humanist jeu d'esprit, a tract penned by More for the amusement and edification of his scholarly friends, such as Erasmus and Peter Giles? We do not know, and probably never will. More covered his tracks so carefully, by such an artful use of pastiche, parody, wit and teasing allusiveness, that it is really left to each reader to make of the description of 'the best society' what he or she will.10

I do not of course argue that the same problem of intention exists in relation to News from Nowhere. We know from all his other writings that Morris not only believed deeply in socialism but also in the practicability of its realization. He did not expect to see it in his own time, and increasingly came to regard it as a project that might take several generations to accomplish. But there seems

10 For a brief account of this problem see Krishan Kumar, Utopianism (Milton Keynes, 1991), pp. 23–7.
no reason to doubt that News from Nowhere is a vision of a future that Morris both hoped and expected to come into being. That project though depends crucially on a collective sharing of hopes and intent: for only 'if others can see it as I have seen it, then it may be called a vision rather than a dream'.

Where Morris echoes More, then, is not on the question of intent, it is on the question of how that intent is best expressed. Should utopia be merely a thinly disguised political treatise, as it is say in Harrington’s Oceana, or Cabet’s Voyage in Icaria, or Bellamy’s Looking Backward? Or is it a literary form sui generis, capable of carrying its social and political message in its own way?

More’s example suggests the latter. In More, the social and political content is transfigured by devices — irony, punning, a playful interaction between author and reader — that force one to consider the social and political issues quite differently from the way one confronts a work, say, such as Hobbes’s Leviathan or Rousseau’s Social Contract. The classic political treatise states its axioms — about nature, man and society — and then constructs on these its ideal commonwealth. There is a straightforward logic to the procedure that allows for no intervention on the part of the reader. We may or may not like Hobbes’s authoritarian society or Rousseau’s moral community; but the texts give us no choice other than acceptance or rejection.

Utopia proceeds differently. The fictional form allows for an element of doubt and questioning that is not simply window-dressing but absolutely central to the utopian way of writing. Utopia has a central vision, no doubt, and the picture of the ideal society is usually clear enough. But at the same time it insistently raises questions about that vision, tests it against the scepticism of visitors and outsiders, even sometimes apparently mocks it, so that the author supplies the reader with plenty of ammunition to fire at the utopian ideal. To read More’s Utopia is to be aware of a genuine argument going on about the nature of the good society, even though it is clear where More’s own sympathies lie. To the end More leaves us uncertain whether the practical pursuit of the good society, as portrayed in Utopia, is a possible or even desirable thing. Utopia may be better an object of critical or philosophical contemplation than a realizable political project.

This conception of utopia dominated the writing of utopia until the end of the eighteenth century. At this point — at the time of the Industrial and French Revolutions — utopian social theory took over from the literary utopia. Utopia now seemed realizable, capable of actual construction. Why then write fictions of utopia? The need now was for ‘scientific’ treatises in economics and sociology. In the writings of Condorcet, Owen, Fourier, Saint-Simon, Marx and Engels, utopia was indeed preserved: but within the context now of scientific discourses on history and society. As with the political tracts of Hobbes and

11 ‘News from Nowhere’, p. 401.
12 For further discussion of this, see Kumar, Utopianism, pp. 64–73.
Locke, there was now no room for argument about the good society. The good society was 'inevitable': it was the destiny of the human race. Whether or not you liked it was irrelevant.13

This was the situation of utopia still at the time of Bellamy's *Looking Backward*, which was precisely a case of utopia as more or less unqualifiedly social theory. It was against this conception that Morris revolted. He returned to More in reviving utopia as a genuinely literary form, different in kind from the political or sociological treatise. *News from Nowhere* renews utopia as a form of the literary imagination. Its preaching is qualified by the need to appeal not just to the historical and social sciences but to the senses. For Morris, utopia is as much an aesthetic as a social or political matter. Utopia must be beautiful or it is not utopia.

*News from Nowhere* and the 'Education of Desire'

Morris, I have said, was a reluctant utopian. While he was very happy to sketch pictures of the future in such lectures as 'The Society of the Future', 'How we Live and How we Might Live' and 'A Factory as it Might Be', he hesitated to put down a fully-drawn portrait of the future society. His attitude seems to have been rather like that of Marx's who, in response to repeated demands to say what the future communist society would look like, testily remarked: 'I do not write recipes for the cook-shops of the future.' For both Marx and Morris, the future society was not something to be constructed according to a plan or blueprint; it would be made by men and women in the process of their own self-transformation. No one could predict the future society in anything other than the most general terms; it remained to be invented by those who would live in it.

Pushed into writing a utopia by the success of *Looking Backward*, Morris maintained this conception of the nature of the future society. His utopian society is every bit as socialist as Bellamy's — in Morris's eyes, far more truly so — but in almost every respect it presents this socialism as a totally different thing from that found in Bellamy. In a sense, the utopian form was an ideal vehicle for Morris in that it not only allowed but encouraged him to give expression to that aesthetic vision of socialism that was at the opposite pole to Bellamy's mechanistic socialism.

Let us not be misunderstood. This aesthetic vision in Morris, as is well known, is an intensely practical affair, a conception of the whole of life lived according to the means and modes of beauty. Nature is to be beautified, cities and dwellings are to be beautified, dress is to be beautified, human bodies are to be beautified. Beauty is to be the standard not just of the conventionally aesthetic spheres, the spheres of art and literature, but also of the spheres of

13 For the history of utopia after More, see Kumar, *Utopia and Anti-Utopia in Modern Times*, pp. 34-68.
politics and production, of family life, of the relations between young and old and men and women. The aesthetic vision of socialism does not oppose beauty, as something different and special, to the banal activities of economic and political life. It does not plead for it as something that needs to be protected and preserved against the admitted necessities of mundane social life (that is nearer to the Wildean vision of socialism). Instead it suffuses these everyday activities with the balm of the beautiful. It turns the whole of society into a work of art.

The utopian form and the aesthetic conception of socialism — the ‘content’ — are clearly well matched. Morris can and does dispense with the details of economic production and political organization. This is not a matter for utopia — not, that is, if utopia is really trying to bring about a desirable future. What utopia must communicate is the feel of the future: the look and expressions of men and women, their gestures and intonations, the sights and sounds surrounding them. The evening of his dream the narrator had said longingly to himself: ‘If I could but see a day of it: if I could but see it.’ In *News from Nowhere* he does indeed see the future, and the emphasis is on the ‘see’. *News from Nowhere* is, again, unique among utopias for the way it conveys the look of the new society: the faces of men and women, their dress, the appearance of buildings, above all, perhaps, the face of nature and the countryside as they reveal their significance to us in the future scheme of things. It is in this way of seeing, rather than through the exposition of ideas or the details of the economic and political organization of society, that Morris hopes to persuade us to want the future: the future as he sees it.

*News from Nowhere* is a utopia acutely aware of the utopian tradition. In several of the chapters (e.g. Chapter XI, ‘concerning government’) Morris mocks the ‘question and answer’ method of the older utopias, such as Plato’s *Republic*. It is as if he wishes to say, ‘I know what a utopia is supposed to look like, but this is a different kind of utopia. I am doing it my way’. There is also a highly playful element in the way Morris makes jokes about aspects of his own life and activities, as when he finds to his chagrin that the much-hated Houses of Parliament have been preserved for the future by ‘a queer antiquarian society’ — a reference to the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, the celebrated organization founded by Morris himself. Morris also at various places has much fun with Oxford and its university, both institutions for which he had much love but which he felt were increasingly corrupted by commercial forces. There are many other personal references throughout the book, on such matters as Morris’s unhappy love life and the compensations he found in the peace and beauty of his two Thameside homes, Kelmscott House and Kelmscott Manor.

*News from Nowhere* is, in other words, a utopia that recharged the utopian genre. It recovered elements lost for over a century; it added preoccupations

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14 ‘News from Nowhere’, p. 182.
and themes relevant to its own time, and ours (it is, among other things, the first 'ecotopia', the first ecological utopia). It mixed these elements in a way to distinguish it completely from the reigning form, as exemplified by Bellamy's Looking Backward. Morris's utopia does not attempt to preach socialist ideology — or rather, it does so in a way that avoids preaching and lecturing. It aims rather to make us desire socialism by giving us the feel of a socialist society: its characteristic tones and textures, the sights and sounds one experiences as one moves within it, the sentiments and emotions of its people, and the corresponding sentiments of desire that they evoke in the visitor from our times.

Miguel Abensour has spoken of News from Nowhere as a utopia concerned with 'the education of desire'. Eschewing juridico-political model-building, it seeks rather 'to teach desire to desire, to desire better, to desire more, and above all to desire in a different way'. Edward Thompson, in an emphatic endorsement of this view, has said that Morris's utopianism 'liberates desire to an uninterrupted interrogation of our values and also to its own self-interrogation'.

This seems the right direction to move in considering News from Nowhere. Morris broke with the traditional forms and expectations of the nineteenth-century utopia. He renewed it partly by going back to More’s example, to rehabilitate utopia as a literary genre, as a form of the literary imagination. The socialist case, in terms of history and theory, was argued at length in his political lectures and essays, and in such books as Socialism: Its Growth and Outcome (written with Belfort Bax, 1893). News from Nowhere more or less took the socialist case for granted. Its function was different from Morris’s other political writings. As a utopia, its task was not to argue the scientific correctness of Morris’s position, but to show the future society in a manner that would make the reader long for it, and so provide the necessary emotional spur to action. Marx had said, in the Theses on Feuerbach, that ‘the philosophers have only interpreted the world; the point is to change it’. For Morris utopia was about changing the world. News from Nowhere sought to make the dream of socialism 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 re-make the world. As the whole concept of socialism and, with it, of utopia, comes under attack in the ferment of change in Eastern Europe today, it may well be that it is only the power and beauty of a socialist utopia like Morris’s that can restore some faith in the great utopia of modern times.

Krishan Kumar