How the Change Came:
*News from Nowhere* and Revolution

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*News from Nowhere* derives its reputation more from its wonderfully attractive depiction of communist society than from its account of how communism was achieved. This is not to say that Morris’s views on revolution and social change are without value. Far from it. There is much in Morris’s description of class struggle and social upheaval that is illuminating and from which we can learn even one hundred years later. Yet it is also true that there are aspects of his account of an imaginary revolution that are unconvincing, contradictory and insufficiently thought out. Hence it is probably fair to say that, if the main purpose of *News from Nowhere* had been to describe a process of revolution and social change, the book would very likely be regarded as a minor work of communism instead of one of the great contributions to communist literature.

The aim of this chapter is to identify the strengths and the weaknesses of Morris’s ideas on revolution, as they are revealed in *News from Nowhere*. Before this can be done, however, we need to summarize the description Morris gives of how a communist revolution developed in Britain. Most of what he has to say on the subject comes from the lips of Old Hammond in Chapter xvii of *News from Nowhere*, which is entitled ‘How the Change Came’. A summary cannot hope to match the immediacy and excitement conveyed by the original, especially when Old Hammond quotes an eye-witness to a massacre in Trafalgar Square, but a synopsis does provide the opportunity systematically to identify the stages through which Morris saw a communist revolution passing.
Morris's revolution does not emerge from nowhere. It is the outcome of an extended struggle for reforms and the accompanying effort of workers to organize themselves. Various improvements in the position of the workers within capitalism are achieved by these methods, including better conditions of labour, a reduction of working hours, the legal establishment of minimum wage levels and the imposition of price controls on basic necessities. Such reforms are termed by Morris 'steps on the path of "State Socialism"', which was a nineteenth-century expression for what is more commonly known these days as state capitalism. Moves towards state capitalism gather further momentum when the government establishes state enterprises and the upshot of this trend is that 'it tended more and more to upset the commercial system . . . without providing anything really effective in its place'. The result is a succession of economic crises, brought about by the encroachment of 'State Socialism' into capitalist society and the impediments this puts in the way of capital accumulation, culminating in a terrible crisis which, interestingly enough, Morris locates in 1952.

For the workers, economic dislocation means hunger and deprivation, and they react to this by passing the 'Resolution' by a 'solemn and universal vote of the whole of their federated societies'. These federated societies are the labour unions and the 'Resolution' contains the key demand that all natural resources and means of production be transferred into the hands of the 'Combined Workers', as the unions are collectively known. In the eyes of both the workers and the capitalists, the 'Resolution' is regarded as a virtual declaration of class war, leading to stage two of the revolution.

Stage two begins with a mass meeting which is held in Trafalgar Square in the charged atmosphere created by the economic crisis and the 'Resolution'. The meeting is attacked by the police, resulting in five deaths and many more hurt or imprisoned. A further meeting is then organized 'to retort on the authorities' and, although three or four people are again killed, ten or so policemen are crushed to death and the rest chased away, resulting in 'a victory for the people as far as it went'.

At this point, the situation is polarized. Many of the rich flee to the countryside, while those that remain in the cities are enrolled into
a militia. Commerce more or less grinds to a halt. The government mobilises its troops but does 'not dare to use them', while the police are over-stretched because 'riots or threats of riots' are everywhere. One development that proves to be of crucial importance is that, although in Manchester several 'popular leaders' are arrested, 'in London a convention of leaders was got together from the Federation of Combined Workmen, and sat under the old revolutionary name of the Committee of Public Safety'. Although, when compared with the government, this Committee of Public Safety initially has few forces at its command, it gradually becomes an alternative source of legitimacy. One of its first acts is to requisition provisions from big stores and to take over several bakeries in order to provide food. Even though it deposits 'papers with the shop managers promising to pay the price' of the goods it has appropriated, the capitalists regard this as a challenge to the very basis of capitalism. 'A deputation of leading commercial people' threatens to take action into its own hands if the government does not arrest the Committee of Public Safety.

Faced with this ultimatum, the government proclaims a state of siege and puts London under martial law. The Committee of Public Safety meanwhile continues with its activities. In addition to arranging food supplies, it does what it can to organize an ill-armed assortment of men and calls another mass meeting in Trafalgar Square. This meeting provides the opportunity for the military to carry out a well-planned massacre. Between 1,000 and 2,000 workers are mown down by machine guns, while a mere six soldiers are killed and a dozen wounded. Nevertheless, it is significant that many of the troops are horrified by their actions and refuse to keep firing into the crowd after the first blood-letting.

The Trafalgar Square massacre takes the revolution into its third stage—that of the general strike. Although initially terrified by the killings, the workers' fear soon gives way to fury at the authorities' actions. This widespread disaffection is reflected in the fact that, when the Committee of Public Safety is arrested and its members brought to trial, the jury acquits them. Having been released from prison, the Committee of Public Safety continues to have a role to play as a symbol of opposition to the government and Parliament. But what is of immensely more importance is the emergence, at grass-roots level,
of a new network of workmen's associations... whose avowed single object was the tiding over of the ship of the community into a simple condition of Communism'. It is these 'workmen's associations' (which a twentieth-century writer would probably call 'workers' councils') which become 'the mouthpiece and intermediary of the whole of the working classes'.

In the meantime, the economic crisis has worsened inexorably. A point has been reached where there is 'the rapidly approaching breakdown of the whole system founded on the World-Market and its supply'. Alarmed by this prospect, all those who support capitalism tend to close ranks. Guilt-ridden liberals, previously appalled by the army's brutality, bury their consciences and the Liberal government of the day allows itself to be voted out of office by Parliament, to be replaced by an unambiguously pro-capitalist Conservative government. It is this collusion between the capitalist parties which finally destroys any lingering parliamentary illusions entertained by the workers. The 'popular representatives', having attempted 'to fight the matter out by divisions in the House of Commons', walk out of Parliament for good and come over 'in a body to the Committee of Public Safety'.

The next turn of events is that the new Conservative government arrests the Committee of Public Safety and stands poised to unleash its military forces on the revolutionaries. Yet, even though the Committee of Public Safety has by now considerable armed forces of its own, it responds to its own arrest by employing 'a weapon which they thought stronger than street fighting'. This is the general strike, which paralyses the newspapers, communications, the commercial distribution of foodstuffs and so on. Not only is the government confounded by this tactic, since there are no armed revolutionaries against whom it can deploy its soldiers and its police, but it also finds that the arrest of the Committee of Public Safety has not decapitated the revolution. The removal of the Committee of Public Safety has little practical effect, since the centre of gravity of the revolution has already shifted to the workers' councils. The revolution has assumed the form of 'a huge mass of people in thorough sympathy with the movement, bound together by a great number of links of small centres with very simple instructions'. Even more noteworthy is the fact
that it is probably this juncture that one can identify with the concrete emergence of communism, albeit in a rudimentary form. No longer is the Committee of Public Safety issuing vouchers as substitute money in payment for requisitioned goods. Rather it is the case that:

The workmen's committees were extended, and gave relief to great numbers of people, for they had organized a considerable amount of production of food by men whom they could depend upon.¹⁴

Defeated by the general strike, the government has no option but to release the Committee of Public Safety from prison for the second time and agree to a truce. 'All the definite claims of the people' are conceded and, although many of these demands are trifling and of little more than symbolic value, there is one concession that is of considerable importance:

This was the claim of recognition and formal status for the Committee of Public Safety, and all the associations which it fostered under its wing. This it is clear meant two things: first, amnesty for 'the rebels', great and small, who, without a distinct act of civil war, could no longer be attacked; and next, a continuance of the organized revolution.¹⁵

The only concession that is made on the workers' side is that, as a sop to the government and reactionary opinion generally, the Committee of Public Safety renames itself the 'Board of Conciliation and its local offices'.

The fourth and final stage of the revolution is the civil war. In a sense, the successful outcome of the general strike already spells victory for the revolutionary cause. But there are elements among the reactionaries who are not prepared to give up the counter-revolutionary struggle and who are determined to fight on, however hopeless their prospects. Bands of young men from 'the upper and middle classes' organize themselves under the preposterous name of the 'Friends of Order' and engage in guerilla warfare, being joined by officers of the regular army, who 'were mostly the very stupidest men in the country'.¹⁶ Initially, the government pretends to be neutral, but eventually it shows its true colours, joins with the 'Friends of
Order' and the reactionary section of the regular army, and takes on the revolutionary forces.

This turn of events ensures that the revolution must be fought through to nothing less than a communist conclusion, compromise now being impossible:

The end, it was seen clearly, must be either absolute slavery for all but the privileged, or a system of life founded on equality and Communism. ¹⁷

The civil war lasts about two years and is accompanied by enormous destruction. Awful though this is, Morris implies that it has its positive side. Not only is much that is ugly and harmful within capitalism destroyed, allowing a fresh start to be made on a communist basis, but the struggle has a beneficial effect on the revolutionaries. The needs of the moment draw out from within the working class the organizational skills and other latent talents that the situation demands, causing Old Hammond to reflect that:

from all I have read and heard, I much doubt whether, without this seemingly dreadful civil war, the due talent for administration would have been developed amongst the working men. ¹⁸

The civil war ends in victory for the working class and the subsequent flowering of communism.

It is now possible to examine various features of the revolution which Morris clearly intends his readers to see as contributing to the successful overthrow of the old order. The first such feature is the class struggle. Although Morris refers in places to the revolutionary 'people' and 'popular' demands, it is the working class that occupies centre stage in the revolutionary drama that he describes. Morris writes as a communist critic of capitalist society and what appals him about this social system is not just that its ugliness and brutality offends his sensitive nature as an artist, but that human community is torn apart by capitalism's class divisions. Yet for Morris the divisive effect of social classes is not a cause merely of dismay and regret. As a communist, he sees not only the negative side of the class struggle but also the promise of human liberation that it contains. In order to represent the negative side of the equation, Morris outlines the
view of the working class held by some socialists who, prior to the revolution, are inclined to reformism. These reformists:

saw the huge mass of the oppressed classes too much burdened with the misery of their lives, and too much overwhelmed by the selfishness of misery, to be able to form a conception of any escape from it except by the ordinary way prescribed by the system of slavery under which they lived; which was nothing more than a remote chance of climbing out of the oppressed into the oppressing class.29

Morris is generous to a fault when he writes that the strategy pursued by the reformists was, theoretically at any rate, 'not altogether unreasonable', but equally he reveals that his own assessment of the working class's potential is fundamentally different from that of the reformists when he refers to the 'instinct for freedom' of this 'slave-class'. Even if most wage slaves had no clear picture of 'the happiness of a free life' and 'could not look forward to the happiness or peace' of the new society, they did 'at least look forward to the war which a vague hope told them would bring that peace about'.20

The importance of the class struggle is also underlined by the various stages through which the revolution passes. The crucial breakthrough in the revolution is not achieved by the undifferentiated 'people' flocking to the barricades, but by the wage workers using the power which derives from their role as the producers of wealth within capitalism. By refusing any longer to produce profits for the bosses, they force the capitalist government to accede to their demands. Looked at from the other side of the class divide, the civil war breaks out because, even though from a rational point of view it may be obvious that the days of capitalism are numbered, members of the aristocracy and the capitalist class find the impending loss of their property and privileges such a painful prospect that they lash out in illogical rage. Hence, for Morris, the class struggle is both the ultimate source of the revolution and influences the course it takes at each stage of its development.

A second feature of Morris's revolution, which is not unconnected with the first, is the importance attributed to working class self-liberation, and the accompanying playing down of the role of
leadership. Revolution is portrayed by Morris as a process whereby workers learn to organize themselves and develop the ability to administer their own affairs in their own collective interest. Leaders are not entirely absent from this process, but their role is largely symbolic. Prominent individuals, like the members of the Committee of Public Safety, might be useful as symbols of revolt and galvanizers of resistance, but they do not lead the revolution. No individuals are irreplaceable in the revolutionary struggle and no party orchestrates the action. In contrast to capitalist revolutions, which elevate certain ‘great men’ as they unfold (and hence are pregnant with a new ruling class), the role played by the Committee of Public Safety diminishes as the communist revolution progresses.

It has already been noted that the centre of gravity of the revolution progressively shifts to Morris’s ‘workmen’s associations’ and that a twentieth-century author would probably have used the term ‘workers’ councils’ to describe these organizations of working class self-administration. What is remarkable about Morris’s account written in 1890, is that easily recognizable in his description of grass-roots bodies which are thrown up spontaneously in the heat of revolutionary struggle are the workers’ councils that emerged historically for the first time only fifteen years later in the Russian revolution of 1905. In Morris’s revolution it is these workmen’s associations/workers’ councils which both guarantee that the revolutionary movement will be multifocal (and hence will not be dominated by a centralized leadership) and provide an environment in which workers’ initiative can flourish. Far from being in a position to lead the revolution, the old members of the Committee of Public Safety ‘had little administrative capacity’, thus leaving the ground clear for organizational links and an administrative structure to crystallize among the broad mass of revolutionary workers. This trend is enhanced as the revolution gathers momentum and reaches its climax in the general strike and the civil war. Morris’s vision of a process of working class self-liberation that is largely free from leadership stems from the strategy encapsulated in the maxim of the International Working Men’s Association that ‘the emancipation of the working class must be the act of the working class itself.’
HOW THE CHANGE CAME

A third feature of Morris's account of a communist revolution is the vital importance of understanding, and the part played by socialist education in bringing this about. Although the heroes of Morris's revolution are the ordinary workers in their rank and file organizations, he is far from glamourizing the working class. Morris was too aware of the brutalizing effect of capitalism to pretend that there was anything noble about wage labourers. Capitalism reduces a 'vast number of working people' to a condition in which they are 'used to act as their masters drove them, or rather as the system drove, of which their masters were a part'.23 Workers who are in the habit of taking orders from their bosses are not the raw material from which a new society can be constructed. Even if the old system collapses and the pressures that have previously acted on workers with this attitude are removed, they will not respond by behaving as free, co-operative human beings. Rather, without any other influences acting on them, Morris expects that 'nothing but the mere animal necessities and passions of men would have any hold on them'.24 In the revolution that Morris describes, one factor that prevents the generalization of such self-centred and destructive attitudes, which would produce nothing more than mere social breakdown, is the educational effect of socialist propaganda. The mass of the working class 'had been leavened by Socialist opinion in the first place, and in the second place by actual contact with declared Socialists, many or indeed most of whom were members of those bodies of workmen'.25 Morris believes that it is to this end that socialists have a key role to play in spreading socialist ideas among their fellow workers.

However, Morris was too much of a materialist to imagine that the force of ideas alone, even socialist ideas, could somehow retrieve a situation that otherwise teetered on the brink of imminent social breakdown. In his eyes, socialist education is not reducible to a set of ideas that is acquired by the working class solely thanks to the efforts of socialists. Morris took the view that understanding of communism is acquired, at least in part, through the workers' own activity in a communist revolution. For Morris, communist revolution is not simply a process whereby the working class changes the purpose and organization of society. Part and parcel of a communist revolution is that, in struggling to change society, workers also change
themselves. In line with this perception of the educational effect of revolutionary struggle, Morris does not suggest that communist revolution comes on to the agenda only when a sufficient number of workers have had their otherwise empty heads filled with socialist propaganda. Rather it is that, through their own experiences of struggle, first within capitalism and ultimately against capitalism, workers come to understand not only how to fight but also what it is they are fighting for. In the first stage of a communist revolution workers might be conscious of little more than the facts that they are oppressed and that they do not need the bosses, although the bosses need them. As successive stages of the revolution are experienced, so workers’ organizational skills and grasp of the situation are enhanced, until a point is reached where:

I will not say that the people of that time foresaw the life we are leading now, but there was a general instinct amongst them towards the essential part of that life, and many men saw clearly beyond the desperate struggle of the day into the peace which it was to bring about.

Morris impresses on his readers that communist revolution does not depend on inspired leaders, but consists of masses of ordinary workers deepening their understanding of communism as they advance further along the revolutionary path, all the while benefiting from the educational activities of the socialists within their own ranks.

The final feature of Morris’s account of a communist revolution to which attention needs to be drawn is the contempt in which he holds Parliament. It speaks volumes that, having described the workers’ councils as ‘the mouthpiece and intermediary of the whole of the working classes’, he continues:

and the manufacturing profit-grinders now found themselves powerless before this combination; unless *their* committee, Parliament, plucked up courage to begin the civil war again, and to shoot right and left, they were bound to yield to the demands of the men whom they employed, and pay higher and higher wages for shorter and shorter day’s work.
Parliament figures in *News from Nowhere* as an instrument of the capitalists and a setting for double-dealing, so that its only point of contact with the revolution is when the 'popular representatives' withdraw from the House of Commons and come over to the Committee of Public Safety. Parliament is presented as irrelevant to the working class, and the communist revolution is depicted as an extra-parliamentary struggle, fought out on the streets and at the point of production (in the general strike).

The only people for whom Morris's handling of this issue is likely to pose problems are those who equate democracy with parliamentary institutions. What Morris is pointing out to his readers is that Parliament does not even remotely approximate to an organ of genuine democracy. Old Hammond asks the rhetorical question:

> Was not the Parliament on the one side a kind of watch-committee sitting to see that the interests of the Upper Classes took no hurt; and on the other side a sort of blind to delude the people into supposing that they had some share in the management of their own affairs?²⁹

Morris believes that this is indeed the case and that, in contrast to Parliament, it is the communist revolution which is really democratic. The communist revolution is democratic because, in the first place, it pits the oppressed majority against those who are seeking to defend minority privileges. Secondly, and more important however, the communist revolution is democratic not simply because it is in the interests of a majority but because, through the organizations they have constructed, the working class majority can, in a direct and unmediated fashion, shape their own destiny and control their own lives. Morris tells us frustratingly little about the workers' councils but, from the limited sketch he does provide, their essential features can be discerned. Clearly they are mass, grass-roots organizations. As 'mouthpieces', they directly express the views of their members, rather than, in the style of Parliament, taking decisions on behalf of constituents who have forfeited all rights once elections have taken place. And, as 'intermediaries', they are horizontally arranged bodies for communicating and negotiating, rather than vertically aligned.
structures with ruling and controlling functions, again as typified by parliamentary government.

Morris’s view of a communist revolution occurring beyond and against Parliament is at one with the other features of the imaginary revolution that we have been considering. Morris’s revolution is anti-parliamentary precisely because it is based on the class struggle, precisely because it is an act of workers’ self-liberation that dispenses with leadership and precisely because it is informed by an understanding of communism.

One problem raised by Morris’s account of ‘how the change came’ is that he limits his description to the confines of a single nation-state. Too much should not be made of this. Certainly, it would be unfair to suggest that Morris imagined that communism could be achieved within a single country, be it Britain or any other. The realized communist society takes in a good part, if not all, of the world, for as Old Hammond puts it in Chapter xiv:

I will tell you at once that the whole system of rival and contending nations which played so great a part in the ‘government’ of the world of civilization has disappeared along with the inequality betwixt man and man in society. ¹⁰

Be that as it may, Morris’s account of a communist revolution is confined solely to events in Britain and this is unfortunate. The reasons for this could well have been literary rather than ideological, in that Morris might have shrunk from the difficult task of attempting to portray the revolution on an international rather than a national scale. All the same, there were devices he could have used to circumvent this difficulty. Even on a national scale, his account of the communist revolution is largely confined to London. Provincial centres such as Manchester and Glasgow are given only brief mentions, merely to indicate that the revolution is proceeding in the provinces as well as in the capital. It would not have stretched Morris’s literary skills much further to have included similar passing references to, for example, Paris and Berlin.

Whatever the reason for this oversight, it is regrettable because it might be taken as implying that, by means of a successful communist revolution, a single country could withdraw from the worldwide
system of production for profit. Not only is this impossible under circumstances where the capitalist world market dominates the decisions taken about production in every corner of the globe, but equally the momentous events which Morris describes as taking place in Britain could not have occurred without causing major repercussions in other countries. By the time Morris was writing in the late nineteenth century, capital was an international phenomenon and the extent of trans-national investment was already considerable. Similarly, the working class was already open to international influences, as evidenced by the spread of social-democratic illusions from one country to another during the years of Morris’s political activity. Hence it is inconceivable that class warfare on the scale that Morris relates could have been fought out in Britain without provoking class conflict and influencing events elsewhere.

A second weakness in Morris’s account of a communist revolution, and probably a more serious one, is the attitude he takes towards ‘State Socialism’. The role Morris allots to ‘State Socialism’ during the build up to full-scale communist revolution is that of an agency which undermines capitalism and puts the capitalist class on the defensive. Presented in this fashion, ‘State Socialism’ could be interpreted by readers of News from Nowhere as an anti-capitalist form which, objectively at any rate, works in communism’s favour in the struggle against capitalism. Yet, if we examine the concrete policies which Morris details as comprising ‘State Socialism’, we find that, without exception, they consist of reforms implemented within the framework of existing capitalist society. These reforms (improved conditions of labour, reduction in working hours, minimum wage levels etc.) impose certain regulations on the relationship between capital and wage labour, but in no way do they abolish that relationship, which stands at the very heart of capitalism. Even the state enterprises that are established under the auspices of ‘State Socialism’ are evidently still engaged in commodity production since, when the economic crisis of 1932 occurs, they are at least as severely affected as private companies:

the partial inefficient government factories, which were terribly jobbed, all but broke down and a vast part of the population had for the time being to be fed on undisguised ‘charity’ as it was called.$^{11}$

69
Thus everything we are told about 'State Socialism' leads inevitably to the conclusion that, far from representing an assault on capital, it is nothing more than a modified version of capitalism itself. It is in recognition of the real nature of 'State Socialism' that, in subsequent years, it has come to be known as state capitalism. Unfortunately, however, Morris reveals in News from Nowhere that he is far from having grasped that 'State Socialism' is an unalloyed form of capitalism. The 'establishment of government factories for the production of necessary wares, and markets for their sale' is described by him as 'a measure hostile to the masters', while 'the spread of communistic theories, and the partial practice of State Socialism had at first disturbed, and at last almost paralysed the marvellous system of commerce under which the old world had lived so feverishly'. In line with Morris's confusion about the nature of 'State Socialism', he harboured illusions about the effect of reforms on the standing of the capitalist class. Referring to the capitalists at the time when the 'Combined Workers' pass the 'Resolution', he writes as follows:

as they were in many ways still very powerful, or seemed so to be, they still hoped by means of brute force to regain some of what they had lost, and perhaps in the end the whole of it.

Such remarks beg the question: what had the capitalists supposedly 'lost' as a result of a series of piecemeal, state capitalist reforms? Surely it was the very fact that their ownership of capital was still intact that made a revolution necessary. Had state capitalist reforms really been eroding their position, the evolutionary process could have been allowed to take its course and revolution avoided. Morris failed to realize this and consequently quite misread the impact of state capitalist measures on the capitalists' grip on the means of life. In this way, the clear boundary between state capitalism and communism was blurred and the illusion was fostered that these incompatible social formations had elements in common.

To turn to a third weakness in Morris's account, we have already seen that, as the communist revolution progresses, it is the workers' councils which increasingly provide an organizational structure within which working class initiative and action can take place, while the Committee of Public Safety acquires a mainly symbolic
importance. Nevertheless, the Committee of Public Safety undoubtedly functions as a rallying point for resistance to capitalism at various crucial stages of the revolution and there is never any doubt expressed about its commitment to the revolutionary struggle. Bearing in mind that the Committee of Public Safety derives from the leadership of the Federation of Combined Workmen (in other words, the union movement), this raises the question of Morris’s attitude towards the labour unions and their leaders.

In general, Morris takes an extremely rosy view of the union leaders. Old Hammond recollects that those who formed themselves into the Committee of Public Safety were mostly ‘honest, courageous men’, which certainly characterizes News from Nowhere as a fictional work, in view of the behaviour of most real-life union bureaucrats over the past hundred years. It is true that not all leaders of the Federation of Combined Workmen are presented as paragons of virtue. Despite the passage of time, Old Hammond is still physically discomforted when he recalls the careerism of some union leaders. Yet, conveniently (one might say over-conveniently) the deepening economic and social crisis eliminates such opportunist. Things reach such a pitch that they are ‘too dangerous for mere traitors and self-seekers, and one by one they were thrust out and mostly joined the declared reactionaries’. Other fortuitous circumstances also conspire to propel the union leaders/Committee of Public Safety ever forward along the path that leads them away from the role of reformist bureaucrats to that of symbols of revolutionary struggle. To take just one example, we find that when confronted with martial law on the eve of the great massacre in Trafalgar Square,

the Committee of Public Safety, whatever they thought of their position... had now gone too far to draw back; and many of them, it seems, thought that the Government would not act.\footnote{35}

While it may be impossible to dismiss such a turn of events out of hand, a severe strain may nevertheless be imposed on the credulity of many of Morris’s readers. We know that the unions comprising the Federation of Combined Workmen are long-standing organizations which are equipped with leaders and substantial accumulated reserves (‘a biggis fund of money for the support of strikes’).\footnote{36} We
are asked to believe that the leaders of these unions are prepared to risk everything, including their positions, their organizations and the funds at their disposal, in pursuit of a general strike and a rapidly escalating confrontation with a ruling class which will stop at nothing to defend its privileges. Moreover, even when isolated in prison, they unanimously reject the blandishments of the authorities and stand firm for the revolution. Maybe it really did happen just as Morris tells it but, if so, the workers in his novel are lucky indeed to be led by a different breed of men from the union bureaucrats most of us have observed going about their business in the real world.

Morris’s handling of the labour unions is a specific example of a general criticism that can be levelled at his account of a communist revolution. In general he employs a ‘best scenario’ technique to take the revolution on from one stage to the next. Morris seems to have found it difficult to envisage the degree of brutality that the ruling class would employ as it fought to preserve its rule. At the height of the general strike, it is a strangely civilized form of repression that he describes. The ‘offices of the Federated Workmen’ and the works where the ‘Socialist papers’ are printed are not attacked, and the government refrains from treating ‘their army as a real army, and [using] them strategically as a general would have done, looking on the people as a mere open enemy to be shot at and dispersed wherever they turned up’. In the real world of capitalist viciousness, events rarely turn out so advantageously for the working class. This is one reason why, in a real communist revolution, workers would be well advised to abandon the bureaucratized structure of the unions at an early opportunity and rely on organizations under their direct control, such as the workers’ councils.

Throughout the writing of this chapter, it has played on my mind how incongruous it is that, one hundred years after the event, we should be considering the strengths and weaknesses of Morris’s account of a revolution located nowhere except in his imagination, instead of assessing the outcome of a struggle for communism enacted here in the real world. The fact is that Morris wrote about a communist revolution that is still unrealized and about a new society that remains a dream. Why, then, did Morris devote his talents to a revolutionary cause whose prospects were far from certain? The
question is probably as pointless as asking why Morris expended his energy on artistic works. An artist transmits a landscape to canvas for no better reason than that it is there in all its charm and beauty, and Morris struggled against capitalism for no better reason than that it existed in all its ugliness and brutality. The century that has elapsed has provided no example of a revolution that even remotely approximates to the one Morris described [except perhaps that in Spain in 1936—editor]. Capitalism remains impregnable... and yet one hundred years later, there is still the same relative handful as in Morris's day to dream the dream and continue the struggle. We communist dreamers have not succeeded in removing the blight of capitalism from the world, but neither has capitalism succeeded in eradicating the dream of communism. The final scene of the drama has yet to be enacted and only then will we know whether Morris's account of a communist revolution is a dream of Nowhere or a dream of Everywhere. At this stage of the action, only one thing is certain: the more dreamers there are, the less it becomes a dream.
NOTES

38 E. P. Thompson, op. cit., p. 244.
41 N.E.N., pp. 337-8.
42 'How We Live and How We Might Live', in A. L. Morton, op. cit., p. 154.
43 'Communism', ibid., p. 229.

2. HOW THE CHANGE CAME

2 Ibid., p. 290.
3 Ibid., pp. 293-4.
4 Ibid., p. 295.
5 Ibid., p. 295.
6 Ibid., p. 296.
7 Ibid., p. 296.
8 Ibid., p. 297.
9 Ibid., p. 304.
10 Ibid., p. 304.
11 Ibid., p. 305.
12 Ibid., p. 305.
13 Ibid., p. 305.
14 Ibid., p. 308.
15 Ibid., p. 312.
16 Ibid., p. 312.
17 Ibid., p. 313.
18 Ibid., p. 314.
19 Ibid., p. 288.
20 Ibid., p. 290.
21 Ibid., p. 304.
3. HOW MATTERS ARE MANAGED

1 News from Nowhere, p. 223.
2 Ibid., p. 197.
3 Ibid., p. 332.
4 Ibid., p. 395.
5 Ibid., p. 207.
6 Ibid., p. 203.
7 Ibid., pp. 185-6.
8 Ibid., p. 330.
9 Ibid., p. 371.
10 Ibid., p. 390.
11 Ibid., p. 318.
12 Ibid., p. 239.
13 Ibid., p. 286.
14 Ibid., p. 254.
15 There is no basic difference between the Judeo-Christian and the Islamic conception of human nature. I refer here to the

189