

Medieval Futura II: Now

The Future Demands Work: William Morris's utopian medievalism in an age of precarity, flexibility, and automation



News From Nowhere: or, An Epoch of Rest — serialised in *The Commonweal*, beginning January 1890. Revised and expanded version published in 1891.

William Morris begins his utopian novel *News From Nowhere* with a time-honoured plot device. The narrator, the aptly-named William Guest, wakes from a fitful sleep to find that he has been transported to a different world. In this case, Guest has been thrown forward in time from a cold winter night in his late nineteenth-century present to the twenty-second century, and to what soon emerges as a largely harmonious post-capitalist society. Hammersmith, where Guest lives, has been transformed from a “shabby London suburb” to a verdant riverside haven. Guest begins his day with a swim in the clear, unpolluted Thames, which glitters in the sun of a bright June morning.

The novel then follows Guest as he embarks on two linked journeys: the first, in London, from Hammersmith to Bloomsbury, in order to meet a historian named Hammond. Guest learns that the state has withered away, to be replaced by federated communes containing public gathering places, gardens, and markets. Large areas of the country have been re-forested, Guest is told, and he soon sees that London itself has been devolved into a network of urban villages. Over the course of the afternoon, Hammond describes to Guest how this new world was won through bloody class struggle and civil war during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. A testament to Morris's political awakening and socialist self-education during the 1880s, this part of the novel presents a rigorously materialist history of how the revolution came to pass. Morris's account of "How the change came" remains an underappreciated description of revolutionary transformation. In its detailed explanation of socialist organisation and action, as well as of the violent counter-revolutionary activities of the capitalist class, Morris's novel stands in stark contrast to earlier utopias, in which the mechanisms of change are either left unexplained or are attributed to the wise actions of a king or legislator.

The second journey takes Guest and his new companions on a more leisurely trip along the Thames toward Oxfordshire, where they plan to assist with the annual haymaking. The companions finally arrive at an old house that strongly resembles Morris's own Kelmscott Manor. They walk to a nearby church to take part in the harvest celebrations, but Guest is slowly pulled back into his nineteenth-century present—he awakes in Hammersmith once more, smoke from the nearby factories hanging in the air outside the bedroom window.

In his biography of Morris, the historian E. P. Thompson wrote of how certain themes from his writing "swim up now and then into revitalised discourse", including, Thompson notes, his incipient ecological awareness and his attitudes towards work (p. 801). It's the latter that I want to take up today, through reference both to some of the shortcomings in Morris's novel, but also to some of the ways it

can still challenge its readers to imagine different futures. My central contention, drawing on the broader themes of today's panel, is that *News From Nowhere* rewards renewed attention today, at a time when the increasingly precarious and exploitative nature of academic work is just one element in a broader, renewed awareness that work is in crisis, and that we need to imagine alternatives to the "work society" as it is currently constituted.

Never has the 'irreplaceable,' 'indispensable' function of labour as the source of 'social ties,' 'social cohesion,' 'integration,' 'socialization,' 'personalization,' 'personal identity' and meaning been invoked so obsessively as it has since the day it became unable any longer to fulfil *any* of these functions

André Gorz, Reclaiming Work: Beyond the Wage-Based Society (1999), p. 57

As the political theorist André Gorz wrote, presciently, in 1999 "Never has the 'irreplaceable,' 'indispensable' function of labour as the source of 'social ties,' 'social cohesion,' 'integration,' 'socialization,' 'personalization,' 'personal identity' and meaning been invoked so obsessively as it has since the day it became unable any longer to fulfil any of these functions". More recently, David Graeber's account of what he calls "bullshit jobs" describes just how pointless many people feel their work to be; a state of affairs that often has disastrous consequences for their physical and mental health. In a broad-ranging history, Graeber also traces the development

of what he argues is the necessary counterpart to the rise of socially useless, even socially detrimental, bullshit jobs: namely, the increasing precarity and poor pay for those who do socially *useful* jobs like nurses, carers, and teachers.

Needless to say, there are no “bullshit jobs” in the future communist England depicted by Morris. Central to *News From Nowhere* is a social and moral economy of work that emphasises its constitutive and enjoyable nature; work has become a form of medievalised craftwork. Morris depicts a society in which work is centred around the reproduction of life rather than the production of wealth or of things. This is very much a society which operates according to the principle, popularised by Marx, of “from each according to their ability, to each according to their need”. Work appears to be flexible both in its nature and duration; the kinds of permanent specialisation that characterise many modern jobs are seemingly unthinkable.

I use the language of “flexibility” deliberately here, largely because of how compromised that concept has become in modern life. As I’m sure many of you will know all too well, when modern employers talk about “flexibility”, what they usually mean is deregulation, reductions in workers’ rights, and the curtailment of the influence of collective institutions like unions. Rather than providing individual freedom through working patterns more amenable to social and family life, flexibility has, for many, compelled a devotion to the expectations of employers and the market, further effacing the distinction between work and life. Worker flexibility in the society depicted by Morris is something close to a mirror image of this modern reality: it is community-oriented rather than decollectivizing, fitted to the demands of society as a whole, rather than to the personal advancement of individuals.

As a result, alienation from their work is not simply unfamiliar, but unthinkable to the inhabitants of this utopian future. Early in the novel, Guest’s suggestion that people might not always enjoy working is met with boisterous, uncomprehending laughter from one of his new companions, a moment at which

Guest seems to feel the distance between past and present most acutely. Later, another tells Guest that “Happiness without happy daily work is impossible”.

This is an appealing vision, in many ways, but it’s also one that comes with its own normative expectations around the relationship between work and social integration, as Morris himself seems to have realised. In a chapter added to the revised version of the novel in 1891, Morris describes an encounter between Guest and his companions and a team of masons working on an old, dilapidated house. Led by a master mason named Phillipa, this group have been dubbed “The Obstinate Refusers” by their fellow citizens. The Obstinate Refusers are refusers not because they don’t work, but because they want to do the wrong kind of work. Rather than contribute to the haymaking, like everyone else, Guest describes how they are engrossed by the task of refurbishing the house. And many of the masons, Phillipa included, are *so* engrossed by this task that they barely turn to greet their visitors. Here, even in utopia, are those who seem to live to work, rather than working to live.

For all of the flexibility of the society depicted by Morris, the account of the Obstinate Refusers reveals that there are expectations around how and when work is carried out. In particular, the expectation that some kinds of work take precedence over others, at certain times. As such, a social category exists, however light-heartedly it is framed in the novel, of those not working as they are expected to, and whose full membership in society could be called into question on that basis.

There’s also a spectre haunting this new world: the prospect of a *shortage* of useful work, or of what characters in the novel emotively call a “work-famine” (p.128). Morris imparts to his utopian society an existential fear that only really makes sense when read as part of a long leftist tradition that sees work as a profound good in and of itself, and perhaps even the highest calling and moral duty of all. In terms that could easily describe the society depicted in *News from Nowhere*, Jean Baudrillard

would later criticise this as Marxism's tendency toward an "unbridled romanticism of productivity".

Baudrillard's incisive comments direct us toward some of the familiar critiques of Morris and his work. Morris was a wealthy man who never relied on his craftwork for a living; he also came late to organised politics—he was in his 50s when he first read Marx, and the complex relationship between his romanticism, medievalism, craftwork, and later politics have long been the subject of debate. Having read the revised version of *News from Nowhere* shortly after its release in 1891, Engels curtly dismissed Morris as a "sentimental Socialist".

Baudrillard comments also direct us toward another strand of criticism of Morris's writing.

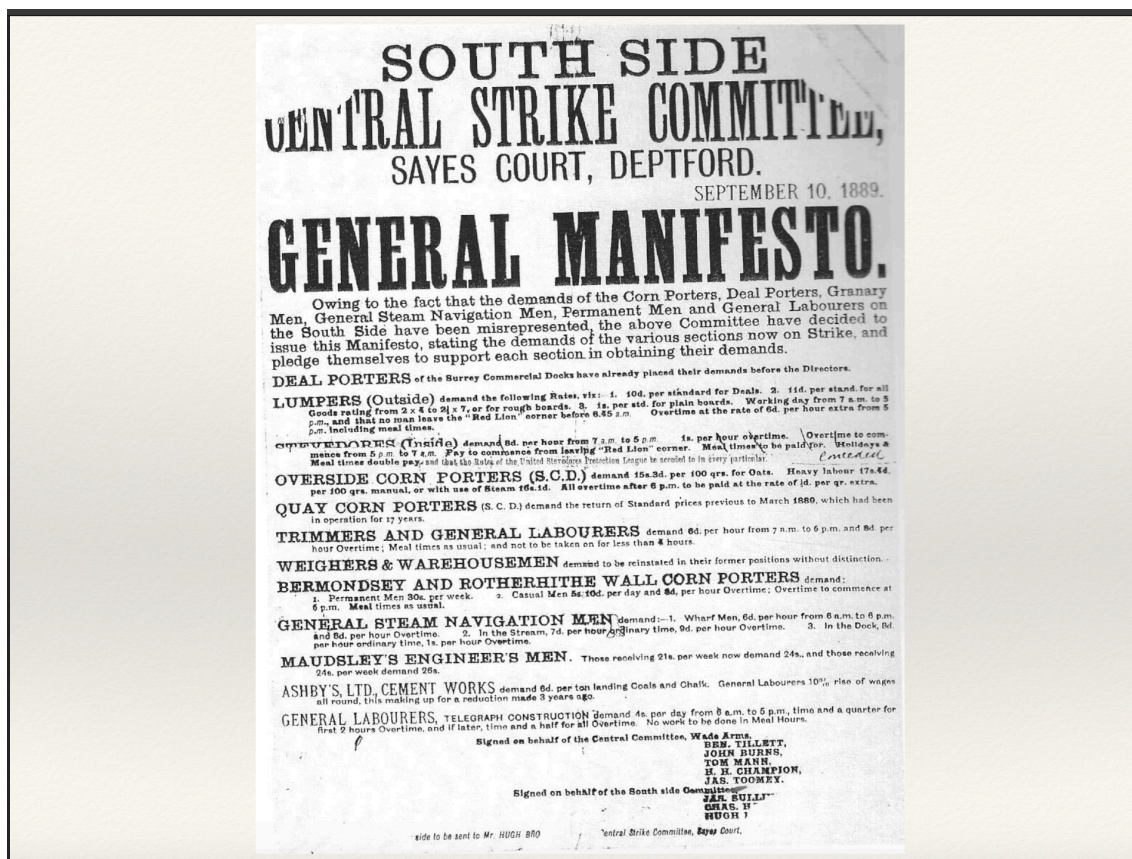
...a fantasy of the Middle Ages where work and identity were one, an idealized category of the "medieval" that could function as a foil for a nineteenth-century capitalist system based primarily on alienated wage labor. In order to accomplish this, however, Morris and other nineteenth-century critics had to ignore the many passages in his own poetry where Chaucer explored the contested nature of work

Kellie Robertson, The Laborer's Two Bodies: Labor and the "Work" of the Text in Medieval Britain, 1350-1500, p. 77

Kellie Robertson argues that Morris and Marx shared "a fantasy of the Middle Ages where work and identity were one, an idealized category of the "medieval" that

could function as a foil for a nineteenth-century capitalist system based primarily on alienated wage labor". For all his professed love of Chaucer, there is little space in Morris's medievalism for those moments where, as Robertson writes, he "explored the contested nature of work". In particular, there is little sense in Morris's work that *wage* labour was already the site of bitter class conflict by the second half of the fourteenth century; conflict that was fuelled, in significant part, by the proliferation of mechanical clocks, which played an important role in the increasing quantification and objectification of work.

In a similar vein, in her account of the relationship between his politics, craftwork and medievalism, Kathleen Biddick connects Morris's medieval nostalgia and what she calls his "melancholy for work", to his lamentable position on contemporary events. In particular, Morris and the Socialist League, the political organisation he co-founded in 1885, did not comprehend the significance of the 1889 London Dock Strikes.



This mass worker-led movement brought London's docks to a standstill as over 100,000 workers walked out over demands for better wages and a shorter working day. Biddick quotes Thompson, who wrote that by the time *News from Nowhere* was being serialised in *The Commonwealth*, the magazine was "out of touch with the working-class movement" (p. 463). For all the sincerity of Morris's vision in *News From Nowhere*, and all his own tireless political organising in the 1880s, there is something undeniably galling in knowing that as the 1889 strikes began, Morris was not on the picket line in Deptford or Woolwich, but miles away in the secluded environs of Kelmscott Manor.

Finally, I want to note that Morris's medievalised productivism also raises the question of technology. Morris's anti-technological leanings have often been overstated, I think, but it is the case that *News from Nowhere* depicts a society in which technology plays only a marginal role. David Matthews is probably right to say that in *News from Nowhere* "future communist utopian England looks a lot like the fourteenth century with the grimmer parts removed" (p. 59). And as some recent critics have noted, it's this anti- or non-technological aspect of Morris's novel that is perhaps most distancing for 21st century readers, for whom the prospect of technological change and spreading automation might generate both utopian and dystopian visions.

However, in his later political writings on industrial machinery, particularly the short but punchy essay *A Factory As It Might Be*, Morris emphasised that he was opposed not to industrial machinery as such, but rather to the capitalist *use* of industrial machinery. We would do well to remember the broader political point embedded in this strand of Morris's writing. Namely, that technological change is not an ideologically neutral process, but will unfold according to the distribution of power in society. Under neoliberal capitalism, there is a strong possibility that automation won't "free" everyone from work, so much as produce a growing class

of people increasingly dependent on insecure task work, in what has euphemistically been called the “gig” or “sharing” economy. And for those who do remain in more stable forms of work, the prospect of automation will be wielded against anyone with the audacity to demand better treatment or wages; a tendency that is already well underway, in a range of occupations.

There will, of course, be certain jobs that we might prefer not to be automated: various forms of care work and health provision, for example, or teaching. Nevertheless, large-scale automation does present a significant, and perhaps unique, challenge to the kind of productivism and praise of work that still dominates leftist theory, even after the critiques from Autonomist and feminist Marxist groups in the twentieth century. As those groups foresaw, the broader progressive task in this century may well be to entirely undo the idea that the performance of work—paid or otherwise—should form the basis of full membership in society.

Biddick, Robertson, and maybe even Engels all provide important critiques of Morris’s idiosyncratic blend of medievalism and Marxist humanism. But I think it’s also true that by the time of *News From Nowhere*, the medieval wasn’t simply a refuge from the present for Morris, as it had been in his earlier work. Instead, the Middle Ages function as part of an attempt to imagine what a different, post-capitalist future *could* look like, and to think carefully about the relationship between the state, democracy and utopianism. It was this aspect of Morris’s work that so appealed to the French philosopher and theorist of utopias Miguel Abensour during the early 1970s, a period with its own fading dreams of revolutionary change. In Abensour’s memorable phrase, *News From Nowhere* was primarily concerned not with setting out a blueprint for the future, but with “the education of desire”. Morris’s work was caught up by the antipathy toward utopian thinking in Marxist theory that lasted until well into the twentieth century, but Abensour sought to draw out one of its more enduring elements: namely, that living as though a better world is possible is an everyday occurrence, shared by many.

As I've sought to suggest, the task of rethinking the relationship between work and community is an increasingly urgent one, for which we can't have too many resources. In her 2011 book *The Problem With Work*, Kathi Weeks offers a compelling defence of various forms of utopianism, focusing in particular on feminist critiques of Marxism in the second half of the twentieth century, and the related demands for a shorter working week and for a universal basic income. In Weeks's description, both literary utopias and utopian political demands provide "partial glimpses of and incitements toward the imagination and construction of alternatives" (p. 176).

Despite its clear shortcomings, it's in this lineage, I'd suggest, that we can still read *News from Nowhere* today. That is, as part of a long tradition of attempts to defamiliarize and repoliticise work, and to name possible directions of travel, rather than final destinations. Morris, dedicated Marxist that he was by 1890, dreams in *News from Nowhere* of what a society that is post *waged* work might look like. In the shadow of the increasing precariousness and flexibilization of work, and the looming prospect of large-scale automation, it remains for *us* to dream a society that is even more radically post-work.