

My Utopia is Your Utopia? William Morris, Utopian Theory and the Claims of the Past

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Abstract

This article examines the relationship between utopian production and reception via a reading of the work of the great utopian author and theorist William Morris. This relationship has invariably been defined by an inequality: utopian producers have claimed unlimited freedom in their attempts to imagine new worlds, while utopian recipients have been asked to adopt such visions as their own without question. Morris's work suggests two possible responses to this inequality. One response, associated with theorist Miguel Abensour, is to liberate reception, with Morris's utopianism containing an invitation to readers to reformulate the vision proffered. However, this response, despite its dominance in contemporary utopian theory, not only misreads Morris but also undermines the political efficacy of utopianism. Consequently, I suggest that Morris responds to the problem of utopian inequality by constraining production, proposing a historical control on utopianising; new utopias are directed by an archive of visions articulated in past struggles.

Keywords

Freedom, Miguel Abensour, Social change, Utopia, William Morris

Publication Information

Davidson, J. P. L. (2019) 'My utopia is your utopia? William Morris, utopian theory and the claims of the past', *Thesis Eleven*, 152(1), pp. 87–101. doi: [10.1177/0725513619852684](https://doi.org/10.1177/0725513619852684).

Introduction

It is something of a cliché to say that one person's utopia is another person's dystopia. This phrase, however tired, contains an important moment of insight, articulating a significant concern regarding the political and social value of utopia. To propose a utopian vision is a particularly audacious, we might even say brash, form of activity. Utopian authors, implicitly or explicitly, declare not only that they know what is wrong with contemporary society but also that they are in a position to propose a better society that will satisfy the needs of everyone. Utopias thus invariably make the claim that "my utopia is your utopia". The hope, as the character of the utopian author in Kim Stanley Robinson's novel *Pacific Edge* suggests, is that the visionary's ideal society will resonate widely and act as a goal in social struggle: 'History changed by a popular book, a utopia, everybody reads it and has ideas, or vague pokes in the direction of ideas, it changes their thinking, everyone starts working for a better world—' (1990: 147-148). Yet, as the abrupt finish to this sentence indicates, the utopian author is far from convinced this can happen; it is a symptom of his increasingly 'desperate' disposition that he even contemplates it (Robinson, 1990: 148). The challenge is that the claim "my utopia is your utopia" all too easily slips into a kind of authoritarianism, with utopian producers making unjustified claims to know the desires of all. In this context, the currency of the phrase "your utopia is my dystopia" is unsurprising, acting as a warning against the pretences characteristically associated with utopianising.

This problem is exacerbated by the relatively unconstrained nature of the activity of formulating utopias. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, in their famous critique of the utopian socialists in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, emphasise the utopian reliance on 'personal inventive action' (2010: 515). "Inventive" utopians are free to postulate – on the basis of nothing more than their own distinctive desires and idiosyncratic needs – the contours of the new society. Imagination is an infinite resource that is subject to few checks and liable to

overflow its proper bounds. Despite the freedom of utopian production, the reception of utopias is strictly regulated, with Marx and Engels noting that, for the utopian socialists, the working class was merely ‘the spectacle of a class without any historical initiative or any independent political movement’ (2010: 515). The utopian socialists denied the creativity of their interlocutors, assuming that all the important questions of a future socialist society had already been decided in their imaginative process of envisioning it. There is thus an inequality between utopian production and utopian reception: the former is unbound, with utopians free to imagine whatever they wish, whereas the latter is strictly constrained, with the recipients of utopian visions expected to simply adopt them as their own.

The work of William Morris offers a particularly productive resource for thinking about the relationship between utopian production and reception, on the one hand, and freedom and constraint, on the other. Morris, as the doyen of the Arts and Crafts movement, a noted poet and a tireless political activist, was one of the great Victorian polymaths. It is Morris’s socialist writings of the 1880s and 1890s, and in particular his utopian novel *News from Nowhere* (1890), that is of concern here. *News from Nowhere* – a luxurious vision of a transformed England in which money has been abolished, the state dismantled and ugliness of all kinds consigned to history – has long been recognised as one of the most important utopian novels of the nineteenth century, rivalled only by Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward* (1888). However, in more recent years, it has not only been the substantive content of Morris’s utopian vision that has been the subject of attention, but also the way in which Morris articulates a theory of utopia. Miguel Abensour, whose work is of crucial importance in understanding the place of Morris in contemporary utopian theory, suggests that Morris’s ‘theoretical, political, and even utopian texts contain a preliminary theorizing on utopia’, offering an original account of the activity of formulating and communicating utopian visions, regardless of their content (Abensour, 1999: 144).

In this article, I weave between the particulars of Morris's understanding of utopia and the broader contours of contemporary utopian theory with the aim of advancing our understanding of the inequality between utopian production and reception. I first argue that Morris's work cuts against the dominant anti-authoritarian tendency of recent utopian theory. Many utopian theorists, partly inspired by Abensour's powerful reading of Morris's *News from Nowhere*, advocate the unconstrained reception of utopian visions. Utopias function to pique the imagination, pushing people to look beyond the horizons of contemporary society but not encouraging people to adopt a particular utopian vision as their own. In other words, the inequality between production and reception is resolved by freeing up the latter. By contrast, I contend that Morris, in a claim that chimes with a minority tendency within current utopian theory represented by David Harvey and Ruth Levitas, posits that utopian visions must have a prescriptive power, with his writings on political strategy suggesting that part of the point of articulating utopian visions is to unite the working class around a specific, delimited vision of a new society.

I then argue that Morris justifies the restricted reception of utopian visions via an account of the constraints on utopian production. Utopian visions must be grounded in something more than the "personal inventive action" of their authors. This argument is not entirely original in itself, with Ernst Bloch and Karl Mannheim advancing similar claims in the first half of the twentieth century. However, it is given a distinctive twist in Morris's work by virtue of his approach to history. I suggest that, for Morris, it is legitimate to claim authority for a utopia insofar that it is formulated through reference to the demands articulated by popular movements in past moments of collective struggle. That is to say, a particular emphasis is put by Morris on the constraints imposed on the utopian producer by tradition; the dreams of the past make a claim on the present, shaping its horizons and guiding it in new directions.

Beyond the Anti-authoritarian Utopia

The claim that Morris affirms the statement “my utopia is your utopia”, even with qualifications, may surprise readers familiar with utopian studies. Since Abensour’s reading of *News from Nowhere* in the 1970s, Morris’s primary theoretical contribution has been understood to be an anti-authoritarian conception of utopia, rejecting the prescriptiveness of previous utopian visions and offering his readers almost unlimited interpretative liberty. Abensour’s reading of Morris is of particular importance because it has been highly influential in both Morris studies and utopian studies more generally. “Les Formes de L’Utopie Socialiste-Communiste”, Abensour’s doctoral thesis completed under the supervision of Gilles Deleuze in 1973, is widely credited as one of the pioneering texts in the attempt to rethink utopia in the last third of the twentieth century, acting as a touchstone for prominent scholars of utopia – including E.P. Thompson (1976), Raymond Williams (1980), Tom Moylan (1986), Ruth Levitas (1990) and Krishnan Kumar (1993) – and helping to shape the broad interpretative contours of utopian theory (see Nadir, 2010; Allison, 2018). The contemporary emphasis on the ‘processual, critical, reflexive, open-ended, and immanent’ aspects of utopianism, its pragmatic and provisional disposition, is in no small part due to Abensour’s influential reading of Morris (Garforth, 2009: 5; see also Morgan, 2016).¹

What is of particular importance about Morris’s utopianism, on Abensour’s account, is its openness. For Abensour, classical utopianism – such as the type of utopian socialism critiqued by Marx and Engels – is defined by its ‘monologism’, functioning ‘as a traffic sign, placed on the road to the future: this way and not another, this goal and not another’ (1999: 147). The utopian author claims absolute knowledge of the constitution of the perfect social order, such that social struggle and democratic debate are foreclosed upon. Utopia thus has a blueprint function: an ideal society has already been planned, the task is to simply implement it. By contrast, Morris’s work is imbued with ‘a new utopian spirit’ that departs radically from the authoritarian tendencies of the utopianism that came before (Abensour, 2016: 5). This new

spirit is defined by pluralism and dialogism, with Morris's utopia encouraging the reader 'to engage in acts of conscious freedom' through the questioning and reformulation of the vision of the utopian society presented (Abensour, 1999: 148). Utopianism becomes provisional and contingent: it presupposes the possibility of many other utopias that can contest and challenge the contents of the utopia advanced.

Of importance here are what could be called, adapting a term from Gérard Genette (1997), the para-utopian moments of *News from Nowhere*, or those aspects of the text that frame the dream in which Morris's narrator accesses a transformed England (Abensour, 2017). Abensour's para-utopian reading first manifests itself in his attention to the publication history of *News from Nowhere*. The novel was first published not in the 'closed medium of the book' but in *Commonweal*, the newspaper of Morris's political organisation the Socialist League, in serialised form between January and October 1890 (Abensour, 1999: 128). *News from Nowhere*'s publication in *Commonweal* was, according to Abensour, designed 'to open a forum for the negative or positive reactions of readers during the very process of composition' (Abensour, 1999: 128). The novel was not presented as a *fait accompli* but instead as an evolving work that could be shaped by the revolutionary readers of *Commonweal*. *News from Nowhere* was written through an engagement with the socialist milieu to which it was directed.

Furthermore, for Abensour, it is not only the case that *News from Nowhere* incited the response of other Socialist Leaguers in its moment of composition but also, perhaps more profoundly, it calls for them to reject Morris's vision and advance their own: '[T]he story of utopia itself contains an invitation for readers to respectively formulate and communicate their own vision of communism' (1999: 130). Morris's novel opens with a meeting of the Socialist League at which 'a brisk conversational discussion' takes place 'as to what would happen on the Morrow of the Revolution' (1912a: 3). Each Socialist Leaguer present offers a 'vigorous' statement on what 'the fully-developed new society' will look like, except for the narrator

William Guest (Morris, 1912a: 3). Instead, Guest muses ‘on the subject-matter of the discussion’, falls asleep and awakes in a remade England of the twenty-second century (Morris, 1912a: 3). The scene demonstrates, for Abensour, that the narrator is not the authoritative voice in this context. Guest does not get up ‘on a podium in order to impose the truth of his perspective’ (Abensour, 1999: 130). Morris’s utopia, like the meeting that opens the novel, provides an occasion for an ‘exchange of fantasy’; it encourages socialist activists to share their visions and hopes for a new world (Abensour, 1999: 138). The task is to follow Morris in the activity of utopianising, ‘to become immersed in the same open exploration’, rather than adhering to the contents of his utopia (Thompson, 1976: 790).

Abensour, in a famous phrase, refers to this effect of utopian visions as the ‘education of desire’ (1999: 145). For Abensour, ‘the “organizing function” of Morrisian utopia’ is not to ‘assign “true” or “just” goals to desire’ but instead to ‘stimulate it, to awaken it’ by teaching it to ‘desire otherwise’ to the present (1999: 145-146).² That is to say, the point is not to convince readers to adopt Morris’s utopia as their own; the novel makes few claims on the reader, leaving them free to reject Morris’s vision of the future and propose their own. No assertion is made by Morris, on Abensour’s account, to absolute knowledge of the perfect social order. The society imagined represents an object for debate not an exact plan to be implemented. In this way, Abensour resolves the inequality between utopian production and reception by liberating reception. Both utopian writer and reader are free: the former can be as inventive as they wish on the proviso that the latter are encouraged to reject or reform the vision presented.

Abensour’s anti-authoritarian reading chimes with the resonant themes of recent utopian theorising, anticipating the now widespread emphasis on the provisional nature of images of the good society and the function of utopias as critiques of what exists rather than visions to be adopted by others (see McKenna, 2001; Cooke, 2004; Jacoby, 2005; Jameson, 2005; Sargisson, 2012; Geuss, 2015). Such a perspective is strongly attractive not least because

it allows us to read Morris as our contemporary, offering insights into the activity of utopianising that remain relevant and important despite their age. Yet, for all the power of Abensour's reading, it fails to do justice to Morris's understanding of utopia.³ In particular, taking a lead from Perry Anderson's (1980) instructive critique of Thompson's Abensour-inspired reading of Morris, it should be stressed that there is a significant discrepancy between Abensour's anti-authoritarian perspective on political praxis and Morris's own. A brief detour through Morris's writings on political strategy make the interpretative problems of the anti-authoritarian reading clear.

From Morris's conversion to socialism in the early 1880s, he devoted much intellectual energy to the strategic question of how socialism would be achieved. Morris was concerned with what needed to be done in the here-and-now in order to advance the cause of socialism, and developed a lucid and original strategy for social change. This strategy was predicated on the idea that the first step to the achievement of socialism was the creation of an organised body of socialists via the preaching of the socialist ideal. Morris recognised that the working class already felt a 'vague discontent' towards capitalism (1994a: 361). There was a need, however, to do more than amass support by appealing to the already existing dissatisfaction of the working class, which Morris termed the 'aggregation of discontent' (1936: 448). Socialists had to transform the inchoate feeling of opposition into an organised force endowed with a 'definite aim' (Morris, 1994a: 361) and 'give form to vague aspirations' (Morris, 1915: 269). To this end, Morris urged socialists to 'plainly and honestly' put the aims of socialism 'before the people' in the hope that the '*workers [would] accept them as their own*' (1994a: 361 [emphasis added]). The point of the 'educational process' was to offer a coherent vision of complete communism that could act as a 'rallying point' for working class struggle (Morris, 1994b: 126). To form a body of socialists, there was a necessity to 'put the highest ideal' of socialism to the working class in order to 'encourage them to the utmost' (Morris, 1996: 372).

The ideal of socialism offered a means by which to give direction to the dissatisfaction of the working class.

Given Morris's desire to present the highest ideal of socialism to the people, it is unsurprising that he turned to the utopian novel as a means by which to advance the socialist cause. There is a correspondence between the form of Morris's utopian novel and his political project: both involve the articulation and propagation of socialism in its highest and purest form. Morris's insistence that only socialism in its ideal form would suffice as an orientation for political action finds an affinity with the generic form of the utopian novel, which is defined by its attempt to elaborate a vision of an ideal society. The world described in *News from Nowhere*, as the narrator Guest recognises, is the embodiment of 'complete Communism', or socialism in its full and undiluted form (Morris, 1912a: 186). A specific kind of prescriptive utopia emerges out of the encounter between Morris's strategy for change and his utopianism. Just as Morris's political strategy contains a utopian moment, insofar that it involves putting the highest ideal of socialism before the people, his utopia contains a political moment, insofar that it is designed to be taken up by others as their own. It offers a pole of attraction for those who are dissatisfied, however inchoately, with the world as it exists. Utopia's purpose, therefore, is to offer a vision of a new society that the discontented can collectively commit to; it provides a definite and durable aim around which to unite.

A possible objection to the interpretation of Morris's utopia as prescriptive can be raised here: How can this reading be reconciled with the publication history of *News from Nowhere* and the discussion that opens the text, the two para-utopian moments that form the basis of Abensour's interpretation? Two points should be stressed here. First, Owen Holland notes that *News from Nowhere's* 'serialisation in the pages of *Commonweal* [...] invites consideration of the text as a distinctive kind of propagandistic piece' (2017: 19). As propaganda, Morris's utopia is concerned not with openness and plurality but 'ideological closure and the

instrumental pursuit of concrete goals' (Holland, 2017: 34). *News from Nowhere*, like the output of *Commonweal* more generally, was focussed on the task of convincing people of the rightness of the League's socialist position and discrediting alternatives. Morris's text was thus in continuity with the polemical articles, updates from the movement and notifications of Socialist League meetings amongst which it was nestled. The novel, read as a propaganda piece, worked to communicate a vision of the new society to the socialist movement and called for readers to adhere to the vision presented against other possible visions.

The opening of *News from Nowhere* can also be re-read in prescriptive terms. As Mark Allison (2018) argues, the reader is hardly meant to admire the chaotic discussion that opens *News from Nowhere*. Guest recounts that there were 'six persons' present at the meeting and, consequently, the 'six sections of the party were represented'; there are *six people* and *six different* visions of socialism (Morris, 1912a: 3). The discussion does not demonstrate the value of dialogue but rather the perils of ideological disunity; it represents a kind of 'unproductive cacophony' (Allison, 2018: 49). In this context, the socialist society described in Guest's dream is not simply one view amongst many. Rather, it is an attempt to overcome the differences exhibited by presenting an image of a new society that all present can unite around. Such a reading is given support by the final lines of the text, an important para-utopian moment not considered by Abensour. The narrator, returning to the nineteenth century after exiting *Nowhere*, states 'if others can see it as I have seen it, then it may be called a vision rather than a dream' (Morris, 1912a: 211). As we would expect given Morris's political strategy, the socialist society described provides a rallying point for the six divergent sections of the League present at the meeting and, by implication, for all of those who feel dissatisfaction with the society of the present.

Given this, there are some good textual and intertextual reasons for reading Morris's utopianism in prescriptive terms, going beyond the negative task of the "education of desire"

to the positive task of organising desire according to a specific set of shared principles. It might be argued, however, that these criticisms of Abensour's interpretation, while accurate from a narrow textual perspective, are limited from the perspective of theorising utopia. The worry here is that by emphasising the constraints Morris puts on utopian reception, his work is consigned to irrelevance. *News from Nowhere*, rather than offering a means of thinking utopia anew, is aligned with discredited and unsustainable authoritarian tendencies within the utopian tradition. Morris, it would appear, once distanced from Abensour's interpretation, is just another monologic classic utopian. If Abensour gets Morris wrong, so much the worse for Morris, one might say. In this context, Abensour's Morris would thus be something of a vanishing mediator in utopian theory; his somewhat violent reading was necessary to guide the study of utopia in new directions but, this having been done, we can leave Morris behind.

But are we in a position to move beyond Morris? There are reasons to think that the mediating role of Morris is not entirely complete. The prescriptiveness of Morris's utopia, his claim that utopian visions can have a unifying effect in political struggle, contains an important moment of insight. A number of prominent utopian scholars have suggested that there is something insufficient about the post-Abensour embrace of anti-authoritarianism. David Harvey, for example, commenting on Roberto Mangabeira Unger's utopianism, stresses that 'anti-authoritarianism' in utopian theory results in a failure to comprehend the possibility of 'closure around any one particular set of institutional arrangements or modes of social relating', leaving the utopian impulse as a 'pure signifier of hope destined never to acquire a material referent' (2000: 188-189). Ruth Levitas, taking up some of Harvey's concerns, has stressed that there is a need for a balance between 'openness and closure, between process and structure' in thinking about utopianism (2014: 259). There is something 'politically evasive' about the attempt to keep utopian visions 'endlessly open'; without some closure, 'we cannot define or discuss where we might want, collectively, to go' (Levitas, 2013: 124). As Morris intimates in

his work on strategy, utopias have the potential to play an important role in political struggle. However, this potential can only be realised, for Harvey and Levitas, if utopians assert authority, making the claim that their vision has the capacity to be shared and affirming the statement “my utopia is your utopia”. Morris’s prescriptive utopia responds to these concerns, asserting both the possibility and desirability of the formulation of common utopias that unify a plurality of different struggles around a single vision of a new society.

However, despite the value of Morris’s prescriptiveness, a problem still remains: How can the ideological closure posited by Morris, Harvey and Levitas be justified? Where do the authors of utopias legitimately gain the power to recommend visions that should be adopted by others? Without a response to these questions, we are caught in an interpretative and theoretical bind. On the one hand, to accept Abensour’s reading of Morris’s conception of utopia means ignoring important elements of the textual matter in question (namely, Morris’s writings on political strategy) and the political problems of the anti-authoritarian reading. On the other hand, a rejection of Abensour’s reading risks returning Morris’s conception of utopia to authoritarian utopianism and accepting the inequality between utopian production and reception. Yet, as I argue in the next section, it is possible to find a path beyond this impasse by focussing not on the side of utopian reception, as Abensour does, but rather utopian production.

Constraining Utopian Production

To begin to address the issue of utopian production, it is first worth turning to two of the great utopian scholars of the first half of the twentieth century: Ernst Bloch and Karl Mannheim. Both Bloch and Mannheim were concerned with developing a set of normative and epistemological standards to govern the activity of utopianising. Bloch, writing in the 1930s, posited that the authority of utopian producers should be grounded in broader social tendencies.

The Blochian distinction between abstract and concrete utopias is important here. Abstract utopias eschew any relationship to actually existing society, offering no more than a fantastic image of a future world derived from the wishes of its author alone, while concrete utopia works to articulate real social possibilities, anticipating a new society that is immanent to the structure of the contemporary world (Bloch, 1995; Levitas, 1990). Mannheim does not deny the value of the social approach to grounding utopias, making it clear that utopias must in some way elaborate upon already existing social tendencies. Yet, this process is a creative one for Mannheim, with the utopian producer working to clarify and sharpen the demands of discontented groups via the elaboration of a utopian vision: ‘Only when the utopian conception of the individual seizes upon currents already present in society and gives expression to them, when in this form it flows back into the outlook of the whole group [...] can the existing order be challenged’ (1936: 187). Utopian production involves the task of knitting together a range of resonant themes and meaningful elements into a whole that unifies the disparate wishes of a broader social group in a coherent fashion.

Even from this brief discussion of Bloch and Mannheim, the rudiments of an alternative approach to the problem of the inequality between utopian production and reception is evident. For both Bloch and Mannheim, restrictions on utopian reception can be justified via an account of the reciprocal restrictions on utopian production, rather than (as for Abensour) the liberation of reception. On Bloch’s account, certain utopian visions are, by virtue of their relationship to actually existing social tendencies, more legitimate than others and command greater authority. Similarly, for Mannheim, the authority of a vision can be measured by the extent to which it resonates with broader collectives and helps to clarify the inchoate desires of political movements. The “personal inventive action” of the utopian, to use Marx and Engels’s phrase, is thus restricted by these standards; the utopia is grounded in the real movement of society or

the desires of its recipients. As such, if a vision is to have prescriptive power, it cannot be the fruit of the individual utopian's imagination alone.

Aspects of both these accounts of utopian production can be found in Morris's work. In line with Bloch, Morris, as a Marxist, was concerned with offering a 'morphological forecast' in his utopia; its depiction of a communist society imaginatively extrapolates from already existing tendencies in the structure of late nineteenth-century British society (Abensour, 2012: 28). Orthodox Marxist readers of Morris – namely the early E.P. Thompson (1955), A.L. Morton (1969) and Paul Meier (1978) – stress the "scientific" character of Morris's utopianism, arguing that *News from Nowhere* goes beyond 'mere fantasy' to offer an image of a new society that is 'deduced from the present and from the existing relations of classes' (Morton, 1969: 221). Furthermore, as my discussion of Morris's utopian political strategy above indicates, there are grounds for reading Morris in terms of Mannheim's approach to utopian production. Allison, drawing on Morris's lecture "How Shall We Live Then?", posits that Morris's utopia was a synthesis of multiple perspectives, bringing together a diversity of wishes and desires with the aim to encourage his readers to 'converge upon a common utopian vision' (2018: 61).

Yet, there is a third strategy for grounding the visions of utopian producers that, in contrast to the approaches of Bloch and Mannheim, is specific to Morris. One of Morris's distinctive contributions to utopian theory is to position his own authority as an author of visions of a new world in historical terms. The remainder of this section will focus on elaborating the Morrisian historical constraint on utopian production. To begin to understand this, it is first necessary to turn to one of the most significant chapters of *News from Nowhere*: "How the Change Came". Guest, having arrived in the twenty-second century and immersed himself in the communistic world of Nowhere, has been brought to Hammond the Elder to learn more about the strange society in which he finds himself. One issue that Guest is eager

to hear more about is how communism came into being. Hammond, ensconced in the British Museum and exhibiting a certain ‘inverted sympathy’ for the pre-revolutionary world of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, is the perfect figure to offer a response to Guest (Morris, 1912a: 103). Hammond proceeds to tell an epic tale of the ‘eager, restless heroism of a declared revolutionary period’, complete with accounts of mass demonstrations against the government, the formation of a Committee of Public Safety, a general strike and a civil war (Morris, 1912a: 128). Indeed, Morris, almost cheekily, provides a kind of retrospective justification for his own revolutionary strategy, with Hammond suggesting that the revolution was only possible because socialists had ‘leavened’ the masses with the ideal of socialism, perhaps through utopian novels such as *News from Nowhere* (Morris, 1912a: 125).

As others have recognised, “How the Change Came” is important insofar that it demonstrates that, for Morris, utopia can only be realised through revolutionary social struggle (Crump, 1990). Eschewing the idea that utopia can be legislated for by a wise figure as in Thomas More’s *Utopia*, or that it will emerge in an evolutionary fashion out of the existing dynamics of capitalist society as in Bellamy’s *Looking Backward*, Morris emphasises the collective and democratic nature of the struggle for socialism. However, more important for our purposes is the fact that Morris’s speculative account of revolution is not divorced from the reality of social struggle in the 1880s and 1890s. The sub-textual content of Hammond’s historical account is Morris’s ‘experience of the preceding decade – the unemployed agitations, the free speech fight [...], and the great strike wave of 1888 with its accompanying revitalisation of Trade Unionism’ (Morton, 1969: 219). For example, one of the key events in Hammond’s tale is a massacre by the government in Trafalgar Square in London. This event sparks the civil war that eventually ushers in communism. The massacre in *News from Nowhere* recalls the attack of the police on anti-unemployment and pro-free speech protesters in

Trafalgar Square on November 13, 1887, an event which became known as Bloody Sunday (Fellman, 1990).

Hammond's history of revolution is a tacit reflection on Morris's own struggles in the late nineteenth-century socialist movement, reconstructing and rearranging actual historical events into a coherent narrative of revolutionary triumph. "How the Change Came" thus brings together fantastical flights of the imagination with actual historical events. The effect of this move is to emphasise the continuities between the struggles of the real past and those of the imaginative future. The mirroring of the struggles of Morris and his comrades in Hammond's triumphant narrative grants these events – which, like Bloody Sunday, often ended in catastrophic defeat – a hidden place within the history of the victory of communism. It is this kind of historical sensibility that Morris alludes to in an 1887 article on the Paris Commune. Morris opposes the view that 'it is a mistake to commemorate a defeat', arguing that those who view the Commune in this way look 'not at this event only, but at all history in too narrow a way' (Morris, 1994c: 232). This event, instead of being understood merely as an isolated defeat of Parisian workers, has a universal significance: 'The Commune of Paris is but one link in the struggle which has gone on through all history of the oppressed against the oppressors; and without all the defeats of past times we should now have no hope of the final victory' (Morris, 1994c: 232-233). Morris's enlarged view of history posits a dialectic of defeat and victory; in a Benjaminian fashion, the defeats of the past are never final and instead form part of a wider chain of struggles that reach across time and space (Benjamin, 2003). Hammond's narrative serves to emphasise the continuity between the travails of the socialist movement in the 1880s and the postulated victory of communism in the twentieth century; the struggles of the past are immanently contained in the victories of the future, and *vice versa*.

As we have seen, Morris alludes to a great range of struggles in Hammond's tale: anti-unemployment riots, free speech agitation, the great strikes of 1888, and so on. What force

binds together these struggles? How does Morris account for the continuity that underlies “all history” in the struggle between the oppressed and the oppressors? The key to answering these questions lies in Hammond’s comment, at the beginning of his account, that ‘the great motive-power of the change was a longing for freedom and equality, akin if you please to the unreasonable passion of the lover’ (Morris, 1912a: 104-105). Commonality is forged through the utopian demands of the movements; it is the ultimate ends, the hope for full freedom and equality, of the struggles that bind them together, not their more immediate aims. The desire for a radically new state of affairs, defined by freedom and equality, is for Morris present in an inchoate fashion – at the level of “longing” or instinct rather than in a fully worked out form – in all struggles between the oppressed and oppressors. As Morris comments, in a co-authored pamphlet on the Paris Commune, that the ‘time will come when the Revolt of Paris, quenched in blood though it was – and apparently the unluckiest of all attempts of slaves to free themselves – will be recognised as one of the noblest of those steps whereby mankind has risen to freedom and happiness’ (Bax, Dave and Morris, 1886: 61). From the vantage point of utopia, it is possible to discern a common thread running through the struggles of the past.

This claim is most forcefully and fully pursued by Morris in his prose romance *A Dream of John Ball*, which was first published in serialised form in *Commonweal* in 1886 and 1887. *A Dream of John Ball* focuses on a nineteenth-century socialist agitator who falls asleep and awakes during the peasants’ revolt of 1381. The dreamer witnesses a powerful speech from the radical priest leading the revolt, the eponymous John Ball, in which he extolls the peasants to end the system of serfdom and build a new society predicated on equality and freedom – in other words, a form of communism. In a famous remark, Ball declares that ‘fellowship is heaven, and lack of fellowship is hell: fellowship is life, and lack of fellowship is death’ (Morris, 1912b: 230). Having witnessed this speech, the dreamer enters into dialogue with Ball. Just as Guest in *News from Nowhere* is concerned with how communism was achieved, Ball is

eager to learn from the nineteenth-century dreamer what the consequences of the peasants' revolt were. The dreamer informs Ball of something that, as readers, we already know: the revolt does not result in communism. In fact, if anything, in freeing the peasants from serfdom, it contributed to the formation of a new class of landless, proletarian labourers who are forced to 'pawn [...] labour for leave to labour' (Morris, 1912b: 282). As Ball comes to recognise, the capitalist consequences of the revolt are far removed from its communistic aims: '[T]his time of the conquest of the earth shall not bring heaven down to the earth, as erst I deemed it would, but rather that it shall bring hell up on to the earth!' (Morris, 1912b: 284).

The dreamer does not, however, leave Ball in this state of despair and instead cultivates a renewed hope in the priest, albeit on a different basis. Of particular significance here is the dreamer's attempt to distinguish the temporally delimited aspects of the peasants' revolt from its transtemporal implications:

And what shall it be, as I told thee before, save that men shall be determined to be free; yea, free as thou wouldst have them, when thine hope rises the highest, and thou art thinking not of the king's uncles, and poll-groat bailiffs, and the villeinage of Essex, but of the end of all, when men shall have the fruits of the earth and the fruits of their toil thereon, without money and without price (Morris, 1912b: 285).

The specific demands advanced by the peasants' in 1381, this suggests, will die with the revolt, either because they were achieved through the actions of the peasants or because they lack any relevance for the struggles of the future. By contrast, the "highest hopes" of Ball's revolt contain a utopian surplus; the call for the end of exploitation and complete equality leaps over the initial conditions of its articulation, and resonates with the "longing" for freedom that is registered across all historical ages. Ball's vision of fellowship may have been inspired by the particular conditions of medieval England (the king's uncles, poll-groat bailiffs and villeinage)

but it makes a claim on the capitalist social relations that are to come. Ball's vision of fellowship maintains a critical hold on the workers of the nineteenth century, representing an 'undischarged past' that calls to be realised (Bloch, 1991: 308).

The relevance of Morris's understanding of history to the problem of the inequality between utopian production and reception can, on this basis, be made clear. The transtemporal resonance of utopian demands implies that history places certain constraints on the utopian producer. It is legitimate to present a prescriptive utopia claiming to represent the desires of a collective insofar that the vision is grounded in the utopian tradition of this collective itself. The archive of unrealised futures presents to the individual utopian certain collectively articulated visions of a new world and not others. In restricting themselves to the utopian demands that have repeated themselves in struggles in different historical moments, contemporary utopians can develop a vision shaped by transtemporal collective desires and disappointed popular hopes. By appealing to past moments when (in the dreamer's words) hopes rose to their highest, it is possible for a utopian to legitimately offer a definite aim to the inchoate discontents of the present. So, on this Morrisian account, utopias can legitimately assert authority, working to prescribe to others a vision of the new world, through an orientation towards the history of collective utopian dreaming. Both producer and recipient of utopian visions, on Morris's account, stand in the same historical tradition; their hopes are informed by a common store of dreams of future liberation and grounded in the inchoate "longing" for freedom and equality that cuts across time and space.

At this point, it is worth considering two possible objections to the historical constraint on utopian production. First, it might be argued that this requirement is too limiting, forcing utopians to simply repeat what has been proposed before and preventing them from the flights of the imagination that are characteristic of the genre of utopia. It is worth stressing here that,

for Morris, the constraints of the utopian tradition do not take the form of specific proposals but rather a set of axiomatic demands that cut across history. In a manner akin to Alain Badiou's 'communist invariants', Morris's utopian tradition offers a set of principles that are common to collective revolts occurring in different contexts (2008: 100). So, the task is to imagine a world that is loyal to the demands of the utopian tradition in which one stands, but the exact way in which utopians meet these demands depends on the conditions in which they find themselves. For example, Ball's language in *A Dream of John Ball* is infused with images of rural life familiar to the peasants he is addressing, stating that when the heavenly state of fellowship is realised 'no man [will] mow the deep grass for another, while his own kine lack cow-meat' (Morris, 1912b: 237). Although the particular content of this demand may no longer be relevant for the nineteenth century dreamer, the principle that it embodies – that all needs are met in an egalitarian fashion – provides a touchstone for utopian production.

A second worry might be that Morris, in his attempt to ground a common utopia in the past, shifts from a 'boisterous, assertive and self-confident utopia' to a 'diffident, dejected and defeatist retrotopia', nostalgically attempting to salvage something of value from the movement of history (Bauman, 2017: 123). To put this in Reinhart Koselleck's (2004) terms, it could be suggested that Morris breaks the characteristic association of utopia with the "horizon of expectation", the temporal realm of unprecedented change and radical transformation, and drives it back into the "space of experience", the realm of stability and continuity. This, however, would be a misreading of what Morris is attempting in the texts discussed above. It should be stressed here that Morris looks back to history not for successful models to imitate but rather for failed visions of the future to take up; the utopian returns to the past not to understand what actually occurred but to recuperate disappointed dreams and unfulfilled hopes for the contemporary moment. Insofar that the demands of the past remain unrealised, they contain something novel for the present. Morris's temporalisation of utopian

production does not equate with the negation of its association with the radical new and, instead, a temporal mixing occurs. The “horizon of expectation” is driven back into the “space of experience”, the new breaks out of the old.

Conclusion: Reading Morris Today

An anonymous review of *A Dream of John Ball*, published in the socialist journal *To-day* in 1888, suggested that ‘we are not altogether without hopes of someday being present when Mr. Morris unveils a statue of John Ball in Trafalgar Square’ (quoted in Holland, 2017: 225). We do not know what Morris’s response to this review was, but one can imagine the image of a statue of Ball located at the site of the Bloody Sunday attack in the heart of a future revolutionary London would have pleased him. Most obviously, it evokes the triumph of socialism, suggesting that Britain is on the brink of a transformative change that would sweep away the inequality and exploitation of the Victorian era. More profoundly, however, the image of Morris unveiling a statue of Ball nicely captures the Morrisian sense of the solidarity of utopians, evoking the constraining power of Ball’s vision of fellowship on the contours of Morris’s own utopianism. The imaginary homage to Ball from an as yet unrealised revolutionary London offers a clue as to how we should read Morris today, encouraging us to ask the question of what Morris’s work would look like from the vantage point of utopia. *News from Nowhere* would not appear as an exact prediction; it does not offer a blueprint for future socialist society. However, Morris’s utopianism maintains an untimely claim on us. The principles it elaborates still carry authority, embodying a utopian excess that reaches beyond the nineteenth century to the contemporary world. To read Morris today means excavating these principles and bringing them to bear on our own desires and hopes.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/ or publication of this article: This work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council [grant number ES/J500033/1].

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Notes

¹ This is all the more remarkable when one considers that, for many years, the only available English-language source on Abensour was E.P. Thompson's extended commentary on his reading of Morris (1976: 786-794). Fortunately, the important work of translating Abensour has proceeded apace in recent years (see Abensour, 1999; Abensour, 2012; Abensour, 2016; Abensour, 2017). In an instructive essay, Chistine Nadir (2010) suggests that, in part because of this lack of English-language sources, Anglophone utopian theorists have consistently misread Abensour. By contrast, though I cannot argue the case here, my sense is that scholars have been loyal to the spirit of Abensour's account, if not all the details.

² It should be noted that the concatenation of desire and utopia in Abensour's work reflects a broader tendency in recent work on utopianism (see Levitas, 1990; Passerini, 2002; Nadir, 2010).

³ Indeed, there has recently been something of a turn against Abensour in Morris studies, with Owen Holland (2017) and Mark Allison (2018) advancing critiques of his anti-authoritarian reading. I discuss their work further below.