



SOCIALISM and the LITERARY ARTISTRY of WILLIAM MORRIS

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openness of all her folk, and the simplicity of a community reconciled in work, in play, and even sometimes in sexual love. And having understood the community that results, he must depart from it, never to return.

He has also lost something more personal, his own created place and his soul-mate in one (which entails losing his childhood and his achieved self in one). In Nowhere his work and faith and life are valued—except by name—and make perfect heroic sense. In Nowhere his young and passionate muse is grateful and supportive; she understands him, often, even before he speaks. In Nowhere his love of Ellen, mankind, and the Thames Valley makes him a kind of *genius loci*. As the pair row the Upper Thames, names fall away and the places are offered to Ellen as if new-created—as if Guest is creating them! It is not surprising that as the value of the experience increases, so his forebodings increase, until he is expelled from the *locus amoenus*, the heart of his paradise.

As we, along with the original reader of *News*, still encoded in the text, share Guest's loving and humble discovery and become guests in Nowhere, we also share Nowhere's sympathetic and protective attitude to Guest—and to the author so amusingly visible behind him. Morris has invited us to laugh at him, especially in the opening pages, but his presence is also highly purposeful. The integrity of *News* becomes so much a matter of the reader's own concern, as a co-enthusiast with Morris, that the failure and return of Guest guarantees the triumph of both the book and Nowhere itself, for which our imaginations are all working.

LYMAN TOWER SARGENT

William Morris and the Anarchist Tradition

Any discussion of the relationship of William Morris and anarchism must begin by recognizing that Morris vehemently rejected the connection, opposed the contemporary anarchists in England, and called himself a Marxist or communist. Much of the recent literature on Morris's political ideas—and it is substantial—insists that we stop there. Such authors argue that Morris was a self-proclaimed communist who opposed anarchism; therefore, there can be no relationship between the two.¹

Admitting that these descriptions of Morris's position are generally correct, I argue that Morris was more of an anarchist theorist than perhaps even he recognized. However, I am not going back to an earlier school of Morris interpretation that tried to depict him as essentially apolitical or alternatively argued that the political activity that took up so much of the last years of his life was an aberration. I accept the importance of political activity in Morris's life; I accept that he saw himself as a Marxist or a communist; and I accept that he fought with the anarchists over the control of the journal *Commonweal* and the Socialist League.² Anarchism has two forms, collectivist and individualist. The parallels between Morris and anarchism are all to a form of collectivist anarchism usually labeled communist anarchism and most commonly identified with Kropotkin. Morris displayed no affinities with a second form of collectivist anarchism, called anarcho-syndicalism, which stresses trade union activity, and Morris ridiculed individualism; therefore, I shall only discuss communist anarchism here.

1. For variations of this position, see Paul Meier, *William Morris the Marxist Dreamer*, trans. Frank Gubb, 2 vols. (Hassocks, England: Harvester, 1978); A. L. Morton, "Introduction," in *Political Writings of William Morris*, ed. A. L. Morton (New York: International Publishers, 1973), 11–30; and E. P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (New York: Pantheon, 1977).

2. Evidence on the relationship between Morris and the London anarchists can be found in "William Morris's Socialist Diary," ed. Florence Boos, *History Workshop* no. 13 (Spring 1982): 1–75; John W. Hulse, "William Morris: Pilgrim of Hope," in *Revolutionists in London: A Study of Five Unorthodox Socialists* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 77–110; Hermia Oliver, *The International Anarchist Movement in Late Victorian London* (London: Croom Helm, 1983); and John Quail, *The Slow Burning Fuse: [The Lost History of the British Anarchists]* (London: Paladin, 1978).

Morris rejected the tactics of the anarchists of his time—specifically their advocacy of violence—but a comparison of the anarchist tradition with Morris's political writings shows him to be part of that tradition despite his denials. The works of Morris that I shall use to make my argument include *News from Nowhere* (1889–1890), *A Dream of John Ball* (1886–1887), a number of essays, including “The Society of the Future” (1889), “The Beauty of Life” (1880), and “Looking Backward” (1888)—his criticism of Bellamy, and a little known play, “The Tables Turned” (1887). Of these writings only *News from Nowhere* has been carefully analyzed by a variety of scholars concerned with Morris's political attitudes, and they disagree about as fundamentally as possible.

John Quail has argued that discussing whether or not Morris was an anarchist or a communist diminishes Morris because it fails to see him as “a powerful and original thinker.”³ I do not want to reduce Morris's stature as a thinker, and I believe Quail is correct that, in one sense, it does not matter much if Morris is called a libertarian Marxist or a communist anarchist with strong leanings toward Marxism. In another sense, however, it does matter, because, as I hope to show, Morris's creativity as a political thinker was within the anarchist tradition.

The Anarchist Tradition

The popular image of anarchism that relates it to violence and even the scholarly image that frequently stresses the individualism of anarchism and excludes its communal side are simply wrong. Anarchism is a political theory advocating social order without coercion.⁴ It is a consensual theory, not, except in a minority position, an individual-centered theory.

Peter Kropotkin (1842–1921) once defined anarchism as:

the name given to a principle or theory of life and conduct under which society is conceived without government—harmony in such a society being obtained, not by submission to law or by obedience to any authority, but by free agreements concluded between the various groups, territorial and professional, freely constituted for the sake of production and consumption, as also for the satisfaction of the infinite variety of needs and aspirations of a civilized being.⁵

3. Quail, *Slow Burning Fuse*, 28.

4. For general studies of anarchism in English, see April Carter, *The Political Theory of Anarchism* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1971); James Joll, *The Anarchists*, 2d ed. (London: Methuen, 1979); Alan Ritter, *Anarchism: A Theoretical Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980); and George Woodcock, *Anarchism: A History of Libertarian Ideas and Movements* (Cleveland: World, 1982). This section is based on the chapter “Anarchism” in Lyman Tower Sargent, *Contemporary Political Ideologies: A Comparative Analysis*, 7th ed. (Homewood, Ill.: Dorsey Press, 1987), 178–95.

5. Peter Kropotkin, “Anarchism,” in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 11th ed., 1:914.

To the extent that a definition of anarchism is agreed upon, this is it.

As a political philosophy, anarchism advocates a society in which no person is in a position to coerce another. This result is achieved through freedom within a community. As Alexander Berkman (1870–1936) put it, “Anarchism teaches that we can live in a society where there is no compulsion of any kind. A life without compulsion naturally means liberty; it means freedom from being forced or coerced, a chance to lead the life that suits you best.”⁶ Anarchists believe coercion (the exercise of power) corrupts both the person using power and the person on which it is used. Therefore, a social organization must be developed where the possibility of coercion is dramatically lessened or, ideally, eliminated.

The reduction or elimination of coercion does not eliminate the need for social organization and order, but anarchists believe noncoercive order is better on almost any measure than coercive order. “Given a common need, a collection of people, by trial and error, by improvisation and experiment, evolve order out of chaos—this order being more durable than any kind of externally imposed order.”⁷ A communally evolved order will be “(1) voluntary, (2) functional, (3) temporary, and (4) small.”⁸

In communist anarchism, the commune or collective is a fundamental social unit. These collectives would be small and membership voluntary, as would participation in the commune's daily affairs. One of the underlying assumptions of communist anarchism, however, is that there are some subjects on which only the community can make decisions. This assumption is combined with the belief that such subjects are very limited and that no coercion will be needed.⁹

The central problem of anarchism is how to balance individual liberty, particularly the right to withhold cooperation, with the daily needs of the society. This balancing act requires that there be an understanding of what areas of life are to be solely under personal control and which areas require collective decision making. A basic premise of anarchists is that many areas of life now under community control can be shifted easily to personal decision making. Such areas of personal control would include, for example, marriage, the family, and education.

Decisions are reached by consensual agreement with an emphasis on reasoned argument; this distinction is a key to the similarities and differences between Morris and anarchism. The same approach is used within both an institution like the workplace and the community as a whole. If there is a disagreement on any

6. Alexander Berkman, *ABC of Anarchism*, 3d ed. (London: Freedom Press, 1964), 10.

7. Colin Ward, “Anarchism as a Theory of Organization,” *Anarchy* 62 6 (April 1966): 103.

8. *Ibid.*, 101. See also Terry Phillips, “Organization—The Way Forward,” *Freedom* 31 (22 August 1972): 3.

9. This section is based on Lyman Tower Sargent, “Social Decision Making in Anarchism and Minimalism,” *The Personalist* 59, no. 4 (October 1978): 358–69.

issue, consensus would be achieved through informal discussion followed by a meeting in which a solution would be proposed and debated. Discussion would continue in and out of meetings, with participation dependent on interest in the specific issue, until a consensus is reached or it is clear that no consensus can be reached.

If consensus cannot be reached, the established practice continues. At the same time, minorities would be expected to give way to the majority unless the minority felt very strongly about the issue. And the majority would be expected to accommodate the concerns of the minority. Consensus means agreement reached through the acceptance of and adjustment to the positions of others in the community.

Such a decision-making process would mean many meetings and much debate. This is one of the implicit reasons for limiting areas of social decision making. If all possible questions had to be discussed in such a way, everyone would be in meetings all the time.

Collectivist anarchists are federalists. While stressing the small community, they propose a federal structure for issues that extend outside these small communities.¹⁰ As George Woodcock wrote, "The village would appoint delegates to the regional federations, which in their turn would appoint delegates to the national federations. No delegate would have the power to speak for anything but the decisions of the workers who elected him, and would be subject to recall at any time."¹¹ Woodcock goes on to say that the delegates would be chosen for a short period of time, and although their expenses might be paid, they would receive exactly the same wage as in their regular jobs.¹²

An alternative model is to have delegates or administrators with more authority to make decisions. Still, such decisions would have to be confirmed by the community. The administrators would not have coercive authority. They would not govern; they would arrange the general scheme of production, distribution, and consumption. They would not regulate daily life in any detail because the people themselves do that. Administration is a political activity, however, and anarchists recognize that strict accountability to the collectivity is an essential component of anarchist administration.

Anarchism, then, can be characterized as a social theory opposing coercion and advocating a community-centered life with great amounts of personal liberty. Social decision making is reduced and personal decision making expanded. Life in an anarchist society would be a free life within a community. Measured against this model, William Morris was an exponent of anarchism.

10. See, for example, C. Berneri, *Peter Kropotkin: His Federalist Ideas* (London: Freedom Press, 1942).

11. George Woodcock, *New Life to the Land* (London: Freedom Press, 1942), 26.

12. On this point, see also P. S., "Anarcho-Syndicalism—The Workers' Next Step," *Freedom* 26 (30 January 1965): 5.

William Morris

Morris is probably remembered today primarily for his printing, his wallpapers, and some of his romances reprinted in response to the popularity of fantasy fiction.¹³ During his lifetime he was probably best known for his poetry, though he also earned a reputation for a general advocacy of craftsmanship expressed through his printing, wallpapers, dyeing, and furniture. His role in the movement to preserve ancient buildings added to his reputation. And this many-faceted man was widely recognized for his political involvement.

For some time after his death Morris's politics were deliberately forgotten. For example, the twenty-four volumes of his collected works excluded most of

13. The literature on Morris is simply enormous. For a few examples, see R. Page Arnot, *William Morris: The Man and the Myth* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1964); Florence Boos and William Boos, "The Utopian Communism of William Morris," *History of Political Thought* 7, no. 3 (Winter 1986): 489–510; Ian Bradley, *William Morris and His World* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978); Patrick Brantlinger, "News from Nowhere: Morris's Socialist Anti-novel," *Victorian Studies* 19, no. 1 (September 1975): 35–49; Robert Currie, "Had Morris Gone Soft in the Head?" *Essays in Criticism* 129, no. 4 (October 1979): 341–56; Peter Faulkner, *Against the Age: An Introduction to William Morris* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1980); Gustav Fritzsche, *William Morris' Sozialismus und anarchistischer Kommunismus: Darstellung des Systems und Untersuchung der Quellen*, vol. 3 of *Kölner Anglistische Arbeiten* (Leipzig: Bernard Tauchnitz, 1927); John Goode, "William Morris and the Dream of Revolution," in *Literature and Politics in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. John Lucas (London: Methuen, 1971), 221–80; Philip Henderson, *William Morris: His Life Work and Friends* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1967); Jack Lindsay, *William Morris: His Life and Work* (London: Constable, 1975); Robert E. Lougy, "The Politics of William Morris's *News from Nowhere*: The Novel as Psychology of Art," *English Literature in Transition* 13, no. 1 (1970): 1–8; J. W. Mackail, *The Life of William Morris*, 1–vol. ed. (1899; New York: Benjamin Blom, 1968); Nancy D. Mann, "Eros and Community in the Fiction of William Morris," *Nineteenth-Century Fiction* 34, no. 3 (December 1979): 302–25; R. D. Mathews, *An Introductory Guide to the Utopian and Fantasy Writing of William Morris* ([London:] William Morris Centre, 1976); Paul Meier, *La Pensée utopique de William Morris* (Paris: Editions sociales, 1972); Meier, "L'Utopie de William Morris—aboutissement ou étape," *Journal of the William Morris Society* 1, no. 3 (Spring 1963): 10–13; Meier, *William Morris: The Marxist Dreamer* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1978); Lionel M. Munby, "William Morris' Romances and the Society of the Future," *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 10, no. 1 (1962): 56–70; John Middleton Murray, "The Return to Fundamentals: Marx and Morris," *Adelphi* 3 (October–November 1932): 19–29, 97–109; Michael Naslas, "The Concept of the Town in the Writings of William Morris," *Architectural Association Quarterly* 11, no. 3 (1979): 21–31; T. M. Parssinen, "Bellamy, Morris and the Image of the Industrial City in Victorian Social Criticism," *Midwest Quarterly* 14 (Spring 1973): 257–66; Graham Stanhope Rawson, "William Morris's political romance 'News from Nowhere'. Its sources and its relationship to 'John Ball' and Edward Bellamy's political romance 'Looking Backward'" (Ph.D. diss., Jena, 1914); Silvia Rota Chibaudi, "Utopia e propaganda: il caso William Morris," *Il Pensiero Politico* 9, nos. 2–3 (1976): 519–20; Angele Botros Samaan, "'A Poet's Vision of the Socialist Millennium.' *News from Nowhere* and Its Critics," *Bulletin of the Faculty of Arts*, (Cairo University) 24, no. 2 (December 1962); E. P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (New York: Pantheon, 1977); Paul Thompson, *The Work of William Morris* (New York: Viking, 1967); Geoffrey Tillotson, "Morris and Machines," *Fortnightly Review* 141 (April 1934), 464–71; Anna A. Von Helmholtz-Phelan, *The Social Philosophy of William Morris* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1927); and *William Morris: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Peter Faulkner (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973).

the political essays, apparently at the publisher's behest. (The essays were published later and provide the basis for part of the argument in this essay.) People chose to ignore the fact that Morris called himself a Marxist and a communist; he saw himself working for a revolution that would almost certainly be violent. Morris's greatest contribution to political thought, as seen from 1989, is in the literary pictures he drew of the society developing after—probably long after—that revolution. It is these pictures that I shall now examine.

A Dream of John Ball. John Ball probably led peasant uprisings in 1381 against landlords, and most of Morris's work is taken up with a presentation of contemporary conditions and the successful uprising; there are some passages, however, in which Morris describes through Ball a future society without masters. For example, at one point Ball observes,

Ye shall not lack for the fields ye have tilled, nor the houses ye have built, nor the cloth ye have woven; all these shall be yours, and what so ye will have that all the earth beareth; then shall no man mow the deep grass for another, while his own kine lack cow-meat; and he that soweth shall reap, and the reaper shall eat in fellowship the harvest that in fellowship he hath won; and he that buildeth a house shall dwell in it with those that he bideth of his free will; and the tithe barn shall garner the wheat for all men to eat of when the seasons are untoward, and the raindrift hideth the sheaths in August; and all shall be without money and without price.¹⁴

Here Morris presents an idealized peasant society with a touch of the golden age or the arcadia. *A Dream of John Ball* is an agrarian utopia of peace and plenty where work is easy and all humankind is part of a single fellowship. But such felicity will only come about through violence. The likelihood of a violent transition to the better society is always part of Morris's vision even though it is sometimes easy to miss in his pictures of a peaceful future. For example, violence is present in the background of the utopia in *News from Nowhere*, where a long, bloody revolution was necessary to bring about the good society.

Morris once said that what was needed to improve society was action, not prophecy,¹⁵ thereby indicating that he followed Marx in the notion that the point of the revolution was to change the world. Still, we remember Morris mostly for his visions of the future.

14. William Morris, *A Dream of John Ball*, in *The Collected Works of William Morris*, ed. May Morris, 24 vols. (London: Longmans, 1910-1915), 16:47, hereafter cited as *CW*; parenthetical in-text page references are to this edition. It was first published serially in *Commonweal* 2-3, nos. 44-54 (November 1886-January 1887) and in book form in London (Reeves and Turner, 1888).

15. Morris, "The Society of the Future," in May Morris, *William Morris: Artist, Writer, Socialist*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1936), 2:453, hereafter cited as *AWS*. Subsequent parenthetical in-text references are to this edition.

The Tables Turned. *The Tables Turned*, one of Morris's earliest such pictures, is a didactic play with the first act set before the revolution and the second after. Before the revolution, Mr. Justice Nupkins is a standard tool of the dominant class meting out injustice with a free hand. The rich get off even if guilty; the poor are jailed even if innocent. The revolution comes because, as one of the characters—described as a Socialist Ensign—says, "The Revolution we were all looking forward to had been going on all along, and now the last act has begun. The reactionists are fighting, and pretty badly too, for the soldiers are beginning to remember that they too belong to the 'lower classes.'" ¹⁶

This revolution removes Justice Nupkins from the bench and, after the revolution, Citizen Nupkins is shown fleeing for his life—as he sees it—and from the new regime. As he worries to himself, "and then they will find out who I am, and then I shall be hanged—I shall be hanged—I, Justice Nupkins! Ah, the happy days when I used to sentence people to be hanged! How easy life was then, and now how hard" (*AWS*, 2:556). Nupkins's penchant for self-dramatization is evident.

Enter Mary Pinch, a typical laborer's wife (played by May Morris in the original; William Morris had a walk-on part as the Archbishop of Canterbury). The world she inhabits and represents is the world of *News from Nowhere*, and she is still marveling over the transformation that has been made in her life. Her new life reminds her of the joys of childhood. "Yes," she says, "I am my old self come to life again; it's all like a pretty picture of the past days" (*AWS*, 2:556-57).

Having discovered Citizen Nupkins (who had sentenced her to prison in the old days) cowering in the beeches, she invites him home, saying, "I'm like a child with a new toy, these days, and want to show new-comers all that's going on" (*AWS*, 2:558). Nupkins assumes that she plans to murder him. In fact, Nupkins is so obtuse that the audience was probably ready to murder him.

The community, meeting in traditional fashion under a tree, discusses important community business before getting around to dealing with Nupkins. The important business includes the repair of the town hall, trade with other communes, improvements in the silk mill, the wheat harvest, and a dog that is killing sheep. We are presented with a simple, agrarian and craft community making decisions by consensus and rotating any unpleasant job among themselves.

The problem of Nupkins, who remains unaware to the end, is dealt with by telling him that since he has no skills that might be useful to the community, he will be taught to dig potatoes. The play ends with the people dancing and singing and Nupkins in tears bemoaning the fact that he must live in a world without lawyers, having "to dig potatoes, and see everybody happy" (*AWS*, 2:567). He will probably end his days being miserable because everyone else is happy.

The Tables Turned is a minor work in the Morris canon, but it illustrates

16. Morris, "The Tables Turned; or Nupkins Awakened," *AWS*, 2:555.

aspects of Morris's thought, including a slighting reference to Auberon Herbert, a contemporary individualist. In addition to the emphasis placed on the revolution, the collective nature of Morris's imagined better society is important, and the way it appears to function fits the analysis of anarchist society presented here. *The Tables Turned* serves best as an introduction to *News from Nowhere*, because that is where Morris most thoroughly describes his future utopia.

News from Nowhere.¹⁷ *News from Nowhere* was written in part because Morris heartily disliked the best-selling American utopia, *Looking Backward* (1888) by Edward Bellamy. Bellamy's picture of a centralized socialist (Bellamy called his system nationalism) regime focusing on an industrial army and the reduction of labor appalled Morris. In a review of the book originally published in *Commonweal*, Morris wrote that the aim should not be to reduce labor as such but to reduce the "pain of labor to a minimum, so small that it will cease to be a pain."¹⁸ He went on to argue that "the true incentive to useful and happy labour is and must be pleasure in the work itself" (*CW*, 16:506).

For Bellamy work was a burden to be reduced and life was to be lived during the enlarged hours of leisure, although there is little made of that leisure in *Looking Backward*. Bellamy did better at presenting a more rounded life in the sequel, *Equality* (1897). For Morris art was to weld leisure and work into an undivided whole: "Art, using that word in its widest and due signification, is not a mere adjunct of life which free and happy men can do without, but the necessary expression and indispensable instrument of human happiness" (*CW*, 16:507). Thus, Morris attacks Bellamy for presenting a truncated life shorn of meaning and the possibility of wholeness.

Morris makes this same point in his central political criticism of *Looking Backward*.

It will be necessary for the unit of administration to be small enough for every citizen to feel himself responsible for its details, and be interested in them; that individual men cannot shuffle off the business of life on to the shoulders of an abstraction called the State, but must deal with it in conscious association with each other: that variety of life is as much an aim of a true Communism as equality of condition, and that nothing but an union of these two will bring about real freedom. (*CW*, 16:506-7)

17. William Morris, *News from Nowhere: or, An Epoch of Rest. Being Some Chapters from a Utopian Romance* (Boston: Roberts Bros., 1890). The novel was first published serially in *Commonweal* 6, nos. 209-47 (January-October 1890). Parenthetical in-text page references are to *CW*, vol. 16. On the textual problems, see Michael Raymond Liberman, "William Morris's *News from Nowhere*: A Critical and Annotated Edition" (Ph.D. diss., University of Nebraska, 1971).

18. Morris, "Looking Backward," *AWS*, 2:506. Originally published in *Commonweal* 5, no. 180 (22 June 1889): 194-95.

In this passage Morris makes two crucial points. First, he argues for the radical decentralization of social decision making stressing the need for individuals to control their own lives collectively. Second, he emphasizes variety or diversity as an absolutely essential concomitant of equality; this combination is the only guarantee of freedom. Both these points are developed in *News from Nowhere*.

In that book probably the best-known symbol of change in the governmental system is the use of the Houses of Parliament as a storehouse for manure, since Nowherians, it is noted, "have no longer anything which you . . . would call a government" (*CW*, 16:75).

It is true that we have to make some arrangements about our affairs; and it is also true that everybody does not always agree with the details of these arrangements; but it is true that a man no more needs an elaborate system of government, with its army, navy and police, to force him to give way to the will of the majority of his equals, than he wants a similar machinery to make him understand that his head and a stone wall cannot occupy the same space at the same moment. (*CW*, 16:64; emphasis in original)

The point is reasserted later on: "We are very well off as to politics—because we have none" (*CW*, 16:85). Still, some social decisions which are made by a form of majority rule:

In matters which are merely personal which do not affect the welfare of the community—how a man shall dress, what he shall eat and drink, what he shall write and read, and so forth—there can be no difference of opinion and everybody does as he pleases. But when the matter is of common interest of the whole community, and the doing or not doing something affects everybody, the majority must have their way; unless the minority were to take up arms and show by force that they were the effective or real majority; which, however, in a society of men who are free and equal is little likely to happen; because in such a community the apparent majority is the real majority, and the others know that too well to obstruct from mere pigheadedness; especially as they have had plenty of opportunity of putting forward their side of the question. (*CW*, 16:87; emphasis in original)

The first part of this description could have been used earlier in this essay to illustrate what is meant in anarchist theory by reducing the areas of social decision making and expanding the areas of personal decision making. The second part of this description poses a fundamental question regarding my argument: Can an anarchist theorist advocate majority rule? This is one basis on which Morris separated himself from the anarchists of his time. But when we look at his description of the exact procedure used in making decisions, Morris advocates majority rule only as a last resort:

"Some neighbours think that something ought to be done or undone: a new town-hall built; a clearance of inconvenient houses; or say a stone bridge substituted for some ugly old iron one—there you have undoing and doing in one. Well, at the next ordinary meeting of the neighbours, or Mote, . . . a neighbour proposes the change, and of course, if everybody agrees, there is an end of discussion, except about details. Equally, if no one backs the proposer—"seconds him," it used to be called—the matter drops for the time being; a thing not likely to happen amongst reasonable men, however, as the proposer is sure to have talked it over with others before the Mote. But supposing the affair proposed and seconded, if a few of the neighbours disagree to it, if they think that the beastly iron bridge will serve a little longer and they don't want to be bothered with building a new one just then, they don't count heads that time, but put off the formal discussion to the next Mote; and meantime arguments *pro* and *con* are flying about; and some get printed, so that everybody knows what is going on; and when the Mote comes together again there is a regular discussion and at last a vote by show of hands. If the division is a close one, the question is again put off for further discussion; if the division is a wide one, the minority are asked if they will yield to the more general opinion, which they often, nay, most commonly do. If they refuse, the question is debated a third time, when, if the minority has not perceptibly grown, they always give way; though I believe there is some half-forgotten rule by which they might still carry it on further; but I say, what always happens is that they are convinced, not perhaps that their view is the wrong one, but they cannot persuade or force the community to adopt it."

"Very good," said I; "but what happens if the divisions are still narrow?"

Said he: "As a matter of principle and according to the rule of such cases, the question must then lapse, and the majority, if so narrow, has to submit to sitting down under the *status quo*. But I must tell you that in point of fact the minority very seldom enforces this rule, but generally yields in a friendly manner." (*CW*, 16:88-89)

It would be hard to produce a better description of consensual decision making in an anarchist society; such evidence is strong basis upon which to build the point that Morris was, in at least some senses, an anarchist theorist. A comparison with the description of anarchism provided at the beginning of this chapter shows Morris presenting almost precisely the same means of decision making.

Thus, the fundamental means of making social decisions is anarchist, but, as with any utopia, Morris's society possesses other aspects as well; these are anarchist also, in that they reject coercion. For example, education is mostly an apprenticeship system with little book learning. In addition, people choose freely where and with whom to live and are free to work at what they wish.¹⁹

News from Nowhere also reflects Morris's concern with individuality or

19. All these same arguments are made in Morris's "How Shall We Live Then?" ed. Paul Meier, *International Review of Social History* 16 (1971): 222-40.

diversity. It presents a society of diverse people—perhaps not greatly different but differing nonetheless—leading their lives in a community in which they are accepted and in which they can express themselves. In a way they are artists, at least in the sense of what Morris calls the "Democracy of Art, the ennobling of daily and common work."²⁰

The Society of the Future. In "The Society of the Future" Morris reiterates the same points, writing that his "ideal is first unconstrained life, and next simple and natural life. First you must be free; and next you must learn to take pleasure in all the details of life."²¹ Freedom, individuality, creativity, and simplicity are the keys to Morris's future world. Private property will be abolished, many machines will disappear, cities will be broken up, manufacturing will be decentralized, and some occupations will be abolished to improve the life of the workers. As Morris summarized his position in "The Society of the Future,"

It is a society which does not know the meaning of the words rich and poor, or the rights of property, or law or legality, or nationality: a society which has no consciousness of being governed; in which equality of condition is a matter of course, and in which no man is rewarded for having served the community by having the power given him to injure it.

It is a society conscious of a wish to keep life simple, to forgo some of the power over nature won by past ages in order to be more human and less mechanical, and willing to sacrifice something to this end. It would be divided into small communities varying much within the limits allowed by due social ethics, but without rivalry between each other, looking with abhorrence at the idea of a holy race. (*AWS*, 2:466)

In an essay entitled "Useful Work *versus* Useless Toil" (published in 1885 as *The Socialist Platform*),²² Morris presents his analysis of work and its place both in modern life and in the future. He argues that the first task is to eliminate waste, and, having achieved that goal, it will be easy to provide the necessities of life for all. Then people will be able, within limits, to choose the work they want to do and make that work more enjoyable. As he wrote,

We must begin to build up the ornamental part of life—its pleasures, bodily and mental, scientific and artistic, social and individual—on the basis of work undertaken willingly and cheerfully, with the consciousness of benefitting ourselves and our neighbours by it. Such absolutely necessary work as we should have to do would in the first place take up but a small part of each day, and so far would not be

20. Morris, "The Beauty of Life," *CW*, 22:79; originally entitled "Labour and Pleasure *versus* Labour and Sorrow" (1880).

21. Morris, "The Society of the Future," *AWS*, 2:459.

22. Morris, "Useful Work *versus* Useless Toil," *CW*, 23:98-120.

burdensome; but it would be a task of daily recurrence, and therefore would spoil our day's pleasure unless it were made at least endurable while it lasted. In other words, all labour, even the commonest, must be made attractive. (*CW*, 23:111)

Work, then, must be changed to become useful, interesting, varied, less time-consuming and undertaken in pleasant surroundings.²³ In order to achieve these ends, people must control their own lives rather than have them controlled by others.

As Morris wrote elsewhere, "The new order of things says . . . why have masters at all? Let us be *fellows* working in the harmony of associations for the common good, that is, for the greatest happiness and completest development of every human being in the community."²⁴ This "greatest happiness and completest development of every human being" has been the plea of every radical thinker of the past century-and-a-half. Communists and anarchists agree on this.

Conclusion

Since some areas of agreement do exist between communists and anarchists, there can be no certain conclusion to the quest to place Morris in one tradition rather than another, that is, Morris cannot be easily packaged. On the one hand, comparing Morris's views with communist anarchism would seem to be conclusive; Morris was a creative theorist of anarchism. Still, he vehemently denied it and called himself a communist. There is, as I indicated at the beginning, evidence to support this, though I am not accusing Morris of willful misrepresentation. He opposed some of the anarchists of his day and sided with the communists. But he also invited Kropotkin to contribute to *Commonweal*. In the day-to-day struggles of working for the revolution, Morris was a communist, but when he painted his picture of the future, he produced one with which no anarchist would disagree.

Marxists and anarchists tend to present very similar descriptions of revolution. They differ in their analyses of contemporary society and in the way they depict the society to come after the revolution. Morris used a class analysis of contemporary capitalism that might seem to place him with the communists, but so did anarchists like Kropotkin.

Further evidence is needed to support certain points. First, while we know Morris met Kropotkin, we do not know how close they were. We do know that they corresponded with some regularity, met fairly often, and apparently found each other's company congenial. Second, more evidence is needed regarding the

communist reception of *News from Nowhere* and Morris's utopia in general. It is possible that his futuristic society was acceptable as a picture of the final stage of communism—irrelevant to the current struggle but a valid long-term goal. Until such evidence is produced, Morris fits very nicely into the anarchist tradition, despite what he may have called himself.

23. He makes the same point in "Art and Socialism: A Lecture Delivered Before the Secular Society of Leicester, 23rd January, 1884," *CW*, 23:192-214.

24. Morris, "The Dawn of a New Epoch," *CW*, 23:123; emphasis is in the original.