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PETER LANG

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Phillippa Bennett and Rosie Miles (eds)

William Morris in the Twenty-First Century



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future on that of the elderly and reclusive Tom Barnard in *Pacific Edge*, who must come out of his depressive retirement and re-fight old battles, and Ellen's on that of Shevek and his socially challenging Syndicate of Initiative in *The Dispossessed*. Utopias have always spoken to and developed each other in this kind of way, and I am simply radicalizing this inherent generic process here. And if we can extend *News from Nowhere* in this way, if we can inject back into it those missing values of modernity, of political and technological experiment, we might end up with something like the world depicted in Callenbach's *Ecotopia*, an environmental utopia which achieves its goals not simply by regressing backwards behind modern science, but rather also by going forwards and deploying all the complex resources of technology in its quest for a sustainable steady-state economy. In a post-modern, twenty-first-century world we shall surely want our ecotopias to be post-industrial rather than pre-industrial, to have emerged on the other side of scientific modernity rather than just regressing back behind it to some long-lost happy Hobbitland; and I would suggest, then, finally, that within the largely pre-industrial ecotopia of Morris's *News from Nowhere* there is a more adequate, more modernist, more fiery ecotopia struggling to get out, through the extraordinary figure of Ellen above all.

PIERS J. HALE

William Morris, Human Nature and the Biology of Utopia

Given such low conventional expectations about what human behaviour is like, it is of little wonder that some readers have regarded with incredulity the people described in *News from Nowhere*. Students, asked to comment on Morris's vision, will often praise it as an appealing utopia, but dismiss its characters as being incompatible with conceivable reality.

— STEPHEN COLEMAN, 1990¹

In *News from Nowhere* (1891) William Morris presented his most extensive, and what was to become his most enduring, portrayal of life under socialism. The artificial struggle for existence necessitated by capitalism is no more and the relationship between humanity and nature no longer antagonistic.² The world has truly entered the 'epoch of rest' that Morris so desired. Significantly in *News from Nowhere* not only had Morris dared to imagine a totally different environment to that which dominated nineteenth-century England, but he had imagined a brave new humanity to people his dream as well. Well-formed and vigorous, courteous, selfless, healthy and beautiful, the people of Nowhere stand in stark contrast to the humanity not only of Morris's time, but to our own, and in this respect

- 1 Stephen Coleman, 'How Matters Are Managed: Human Nature and Nowhere', in *William Morris and News from Nowhere: A Vision for Our Time*, ed. Stephen Coleman and Paddy O'Sullivan (Bideford: Green Books, 1990), pp. 75–89 (p. 75).
- 2 Piers J. Hale, 'Labour and the Human Relationship with Nature: The Naturalization of Politics in the Work of Thomas Henry Huxley, Herbert George Wells, and William Morris', *Journal of the History of Biology*, 36 (2003), pp. 249–84.

in particular, as Stephen Coleman points out in the quotation introducing this essay, *News from Nowhere* is truly utopian in that it is at once an appealing as well as an impossible vision to many readers.

Coleman's students are not unique in their ambivalent reception of *News from Nowhere*. One of Morris's contemporaries, the science journalist and aspiring science-fiction writer Herbert George Wells voiced similar scepticism. Originally an enthusiastic admirer of Morris in the mid-1880s, Wells was later to dismiss his vision of the future as impossible – however desirable it might at first appear.³ Less than a decade after Morris's death Wells penned his *Modern Utopia* (1905), a work that he explicitly juxtaposed to *News from Nowhere*. Wells acknowledged the attractiveness of Morris's vision, but also the impossibility of humanity ever attaining to such perfection. He wrote:

Were we free to have our untrammelled desire, I suppose we should follow Morris to his *Nowhere*, we should change the nature of man and the nature of things together; we should make the whole race wise, tolerant, perfect – wave our hands to a splendid anarchy, every man doing as it pleases him, and none pleased to do evil, in a world as good in its essential nature, as ripe and sunny, as the world before the Fall.

However, he continued, 'Our proposal here is upon a more practical plane at least than that. We are to restrict ourselves first to the limitations of human possibility as we know them in the men and women of this world today, and then to all the inhumanity, all the insubordination of nature.'⁴

At the time of his conversion to socialism Wells was a student at what was to become the Royal College of Science in South Kensington. Although initially more intent on reading up on socialism in the British Library and attending the meetings in the coach house at Morris's Hammersmith residence, Wells became enthralled with the new science of biology and the lectures of the eminent comparative anatomist, evolutionist, and 'Darwin's Bulldog' Thomas Henry Huxley.⁵ And it was Wells's admiration

³ For Wells's initial enthusiasm for Morris see Herbert George Wells, *An Experiment in Autobiography* (Boston & Toronto: Little, Brown and Co., 1934), p. 216.

⁴ H. G. Wells, *Modern Utopia* (Thirsk: House of Stratus, 2002 [1905]), p. 7.

⁵ H. G. Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography*, p. 193.

for Huxley and the potential social implications of evolutionary biology that led him to reject Morris's hopes for the future. Wells came to believe Morris ignorant of the realities of 'scientific philosophy'; it was no longer possible to construct the 'Nowheres and Utopias men planned before Darwin quickened the thought of the world'.⁶

Indeed, it might initially appear that Morris acquiesced in this appraisal of the depth and accuracy of his scientific knowledge. In 'How I Became a Socialist' written in the July of 1894 for *Justice*, the paper of the Social Democratic Federation, Morris had openly confessed himself 'careless of metaphysics and religion, as well as of scientific analysis'.⁷ However, and in apparent contrast to this, another of Morris's contemporaries and colleagues, John Bruce Glasier, recalled that Morris 'was continually surprising his friends with an unexpected acquaintance with modern science and industrial processes which he sometimes affected to despise'.⁸ We might more accurately (and certainly more productively) interpret Morris's confession of his carelessness of scientific analysis as an admission of his ambivalence towards late nineteenth-century science – and Darwinism in particular – rather than an acknowledgement of ignorance, or a rejection of science *per se*. Indeed, despite his concern that contemporary science was 'in the main an appendage to the commercial system', Morris suggested that science 'seems to need no more than a little humility to temper the insolence of her triumph'.⁹

Contrary to the common opinion that Morris was opposed to science *per se* we should also recall that he had been well acquainted with the Russian-born anarchist and geographer Peter Kropotkin since 1886. Morris sympathized with Kropotkin's work and the latter became an occasional

⁶ Wells, *Autobiography*, p. 192; *Modern Utopia*, p. 19.

⁷ William Morris, 'How I Became a Socialist', reprinted in *News from Nowhere and Other Writings*, ed. Clive Wilmer (London: Penguin, 1993), pp. 379–83 (p. 382); hereafter cited as *Nowhere*.

⁸ John Bruce Glasier, *William Morris and the Early Days of the Socialist Movement* (London: Longmans, 1921), p. 3.

⁹ Morris, *Nowhere*, p. 158; William Morris, 'On the Nature of Gothic', *Nowhere*, p. 368.

guest in the Morris household.¹⁰ This appreciation was clearly mutual. In a favourable review of *News from Nowhere*, for instance, Kropotkin described the work as 'perhaps the most thoroughly and deeply Anarchistic conception of future society that has ever been written.'¹¹ Significantly, Kropotkin was also enthusiastic about Darwin's theory of evolution, even though he remained critical of the emphasis that both Darwin and Huxley gave to Malthusian individualism and competition. Darwin had famously described his theory of Natural Selection as 'the doctrine of Malthus applied with manifold force to the whole animal and vegetable kingdoms.'¹² In his *Essay on the Principles of Population* (1798) Thomas Robert Malthus had suggested that under natural conditions the populations of all species rapidly outstripped the resources available to them, and that as a result, struggle, conflict and suffering were inevitable conditions of existence. Darwin concluded that in such a struggle the fittest would survive whilst the weak perished – a model of self-interested competition that worked to naturalize the same characteristics in human behaviour.

However, in the context of the vast spaces of Siberia, where Kropotkin had undertaken much of his own fieldwork, he found little evidence to support such a thesis. Speaking of himself and his colleague Poliakoff, Kropotkin noted that: 'We were both under the fresh impression of the *Origin of Species*, but we vainly looked for the keen competition between

10 Morris had first met Kropotkin on 18 March 1886 at a meeting to commemorate the Paris Commune shortly after Kropotkin's release from Clairvaux prison. They met again a few days later at a meeting of the Social Democratic Federation and thereafter they remained in close contact. Kropotkin also spoke at the coach house at Kelmscott and was an occasional visitor to the Morris household. When Kropotkin and Charlotte Wilson began the publication of *Freedom* in October they were given use of the *Commonweal* press facilities. See J. W. Hulse, *Revolutionists in London: A Study of Five Unorthodox Socialists* (London: Clarendon Press, 1970), pp. 90–9. For more on Morris and Kropotkin see Ruth Kinna, 'Morris, Anti-Statism and Anarchy', in *William Morris Centenary Essays*, ed. Peter Faulkner and Peter Preston (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1999) pp. 215–28.

11 Hulse, *Revolutionists*, p. 91; *Freedom*, X (November 1896), p. 109.

12 Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species By Means of Natural Selection* [1859] (Ontario: Broadview, 2003), p. 134.

animals which the reading of Darwin's work had led us to expect.'¹³ As Daniel Todes, an historian of Russian biology has noted, Kropotkin was not alone in viewing the emphasis upon individualism and competition in Darwinian Natural Selection as stemming from a particularly distasteful ideological bias on the part of English bourgeois men of science.¹⁴ Indeed, Karl Marx shared this perspective, who shortly after reading the *Origin* had written to Friedrich Engels: 'It is remarkable how Darwin rediscovered, among the beasts and plants, the society of England with its division of labour, competition, opening up of new markets, "inventions" and Malthusian "struggle for existence". It is Hobbes' *bellum omnium contra omnes* – or war of each against all.'¹⁵ Neither was the ideological importance of Darwin's theory lost on its greatest advocate. Huxley, in a review of the *Origin*, welcomed Darwin's theory as 'a veritable Whitworth gun in the armoury of liberalism.'¹⁶ Huxley was still writing controversial articles that served to naturalize inequality and competition and vindicate liberal capitalism some thirty years later, most notably, 'The Struggle for Existence in Human Society' (1888) and 'The Natural Inequality of Man' (1890), both of which were published in the *Nineteenth Century*. Kropotkin responded to the former, which he thought an 'atrocious article', in a series of articles published in the same journal, which were later brought together as *Mutual*

13 Peter Kropotkin, quoted in John Hewetson, 'Mutual Aid and the Social Significance of Darwinism', Introduction to *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* (London: Freedom Press, 1993), p. xii.

14 Daniel Todes, *Darwin without Malthus: The Struggle for Existence in Russian Evolutionary Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

15 Karl Marx to Friedrich Engels, 18 June 1862, in *Collected Works of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels*, 50 vols. (London: Victor Gollancz, 1985), XLI, p. 381.

16 Thomas Henry Huxley, 'The Origin of Species', *Westminster Review*, n.s. 17 (1860), pp. 541–70 (p. 541). The Whitworth gun was the recent invention of Sir Joseph Whitworth of Manchester (1854). Whitworth rifling was characterized by a hexagonal bore with a rapid twist. Firing an elongated shot, Whitworths had a much greater range than their more conventional contemporary ordnance.

Aid, A Factor of Evolution (1902).¹⁷ In contrast to Huxley, Kropotkin emphasized the role of co-operation in survival and speciation.

It is in this context that we should make sense of the fact that in the same essay in which he acknowledged himself 'careless' of scientific analysis, Morris also singled out Huxley as the *bette noire* of nineteenth-century society: 'Was it all to end in a counting house on top of a cinder heap ... and the place of Homer [Morris's hero] to be taken by Huxley?' he asked.¹⁸ In defence of Darwinism Huxley had portrayed nature as red in tooth and claw and the natural state of humanity as governed by the same ethics as the gladiatorial arena. It is little wonder that Morris singled him out for attack. However, in doing so, Morris rejected not Darwinism *per se*, but like Kropotkin, only the Malthusian version of it that Huxley expounded. In *A Summary of the Principles of Socialism* (1884), for example, both Morris and his co-author Henry Hyndman rejected what they referred to as 'this foolish Malthusian craze' of explaining poverty in terms of 'surplus population'.¹⁹ Rather, people starved because capitalist economics demanded it, and not because of any iron laws of nature. This reading of 'Darwin without Malthus', to borrow Dan Todes' phrase, was common across the socialist movement as socialists of various shades sought to marshal Darwin's scientific authority in defence of their own politics, and to prevent what they perceived to be the appropriation of natural science to the service of capitalism. Another contributor to *Justice* echoed this sentiment, arguing that

every discovery of Science, every invention of mankind, has been seized upon by the bourgeoisie to delude and exploit the proletariat ... In a like manner the bourgeoisie accept the teachings of Malthus and pervert those of Darwin to bolster up the tottering fabric of society today, and they steal from the armoury of the evolutionist weapons which they use in their own defence.²⁰

17 Peter Kropotkin, *Memoirs of A Revolutionist* [1899], (New York: Grove, 1970), p. 499.

18 Morris, 'How I Became a Socialist', *Nowhere*, p. 382.

19 William Morris and Henry Myers Hyndman, *A Summary of the Principles of Socialism* (London: Modern Press, 1884), p. 46.

20 H. Willis-Harris, 'The Survival of the Fittest', *Justice* (28 April 1888), p. 2.

Significantly, and my main contention in this essay, Morris also held to a non-Malthusian conception of Darwinian evolution – a view of evolution that not only shaped his conception of socialism, but how he hoped to bring it about.

At stake in this crucial ideological debate over the meaning of evolution was not only the legitimacy and naturalization of competing worldviews, but also debate about the limits to what might be possible for future humanity. The natural condition of man (and of his natural relationship to woman, other species, and the rest of nature), was clearly central to any consideration of the social and political questions of the day. However, whilst capitalists merely had to point to the world around them to make the case that the human species was naturally competitive and individualistic, instead of appealing to any essentially benign conception of human nature, the majority of socialists looked to evolution to argue for the historical development of an ever more socialistic humanity which would reach fruition once society had thrown off the alienating yoke of capital.²¹

Emphasizing the evolutionary importance of co-operation over competition, and the changing influence of the environment over appeals to a timeless 'natural' condition of man, Morris, like Kropotkin, downplayed the role of natural selection – the one decidedly Malthusian element of Darwin's theory. Rather than being received as the last word in the debate over evolution, socialists were not alone in reading Darwin's work very much as a controversial contribution to an ongoing debate about the nature of humanity. Significantly, in light of criticism Darwin had modified his position across the six editions of the *Origin* that appeared before his death in 1882. This opened up a range of possible interpretations as to exactly what the authoritative canon of 'Darwinism' entailed, as well as what social

21 Morgan's *Ancient Society* (1877) was particularly important in this regard, as was Engels's *Origins of the Family* (1884), and *The Part Played by Labour in the Transition from Ape to Man* (1876). The exact narrative of this development varied for different socialists. See Greta Jones, *Social Darwinism and English Thought* (Brighton: Harvester, 1980), and Piers J. Hale, 'For Eco-Socialism: Re-Reading William Morris, Robert Blatchford and Edward Carpenter on Labour, Nature and Embodiment' (Lancaster: unpublished PhD dissertation, 2003).

implications could be drawn from it. Locating Morris in this debate is important in as much as it sheds light on Morris's thinking, but doing so has broader implications too. Neo-Lamarckian ideas remained influential in British socialist politics for quite some time after they had been largely discredited within the scientific community, not simply because of the inevitable time lag between scientific discovery and its permeation into the public domain, but because the Malthusian elements of Darwinism were received as being ideologically biased. Further to this, and although the eagerness with which socialists attempted to don the mantle of science in their own defence was certainly an act of political opportunism, it also suggests something about socialist understandings of the nature and practice of science. To the minds of many socialists, the laissez-faire attitude of those who advocated Malthusianism in both their biology and their economics were practising bad science – if indeed they were practising science at all.

The Development of Darwinism

In the first edition of *Origin* Darwin had suggested that speciation occurred through a Malthusian struggle for existence between individuals in the face of scarce resources. Given that even the slightest advantageous or disadvantageous variations would make a difference, over many thousands of generations these slight differences could be magnified to the point that descendants of the original organism would eventually constitute different species. 'This preservation of favourable variations and the rejection of injurious variations,' Darwin famously wrote, 'I call Natural Selection.'²²

Eager to emphasize the role of natural selection, Darwin had rejected the earlier theory of evolutionary development proposed by the French invertebrate zoologist Jean Baptiste Lamarck. In his *Zoological Philosophie* (1809), Lamarck had proposed that new species were formed as a result of

22 Darwin, *Origin*, p. 144.

an inevitable progressive development he believed ran throughout all life, which was further shaped by the heritable nature of those characteristics that an organism acquired in its own lifetime as a result of its adaptation to a changing environment. Those organs or characters which aided an animal and thus which it would use repeatedly would gradually be enhanced just as those that remained unused would atrophy. Lamarck suggested that these adaptations, or 'acquired characters', would then be inherited in their developed or atrophied state by any offspring. Supposing that the environment persisted, and thus that the utility of the already emphasized or diminished character remained, it would then be further exaggerated or diminished by its use or disuse across subsequent generations accordingly. Importantly, this mechanism of evolutionary change could effect significant change in an organism over a relatively few generations compared to natural selection which invoked only very small chance variations. It is significant that Lamarckism was also generally interpreted as suggesting that organisms willed their own development in the sense that the repeated conscious effort in utilizing a faculty would lead to its development. It was this suggestion of agency and intentionality in evolution that many who sought social analogies in biology – Morris amongst them – found attractive.

Following a number of criticisms of the sufficiency of natural selection alone to effect all the changes that Darwin had claimed for it, Darwin increasingly acknowledged Lamarckian mechanisms of the inheritance of acquired characters. This 'Neo-Lamarckian' resurrection of such ideas as a supplement to selection was the state of Darwinian belief throughout the late nineteenth century. Indeed, many observers concluded that the re-admittance of the inheritance of acquired characters left little work for natural selection to do, and that certainly with reference to the human world, there was no need to allow the Malthusian struggle of capitalism to go on at all. Thus it was common for socialists like Morris to emphasize the Lamarckian mechanisms of use and disuse, the inheritance of acquired characters and the role of agency in the developmental process at the expense of the Malthusianism that they perceived to be, at least where

human evolution was concerned, little more than an ideological add-on to Darwinism proper.²³

Indeed, looking at Morris's concern with 'making socialists' as a strategy for social change in light of contemporary debates about evolution, it is clear that Morris whole-heartedly subscribed to a number of evolutionary assumptions and aspirations. Morris believed that 'making socialists' was an essential prerequisite to the creation of a truly democratic socialist society, and that without it socialism could only be imposed upon the population resulting in a 'slavery ... far more hopeless than the older class-slavery' of capitalism.²⁴ As Stephen Yeo has long since pointed out, the strategy was widespread across the British socialist movement throughout the 1880s and 1890s, and sought to change both the physical as well as the mental character of humanity.²⁵ Bringing about this change clearly involved much more than simply convincing people of the economic arguments for socialism, however compelling these might be. Morris voiced common opinion when he asserted that socialism was 'emphatically not merely a "system of property-holding", but a complete theory of human life ... including a distinct system of religion, ethics and conduct.'²⁶ Those who had been degraded, demoralized and disfigured by capitalism needed to be made anew: in mind, in spirit and in body. Nineteenth-century society – in its embrace of laissez-faire and refusal to insist upon better lives and conditions for the people – acquiesced in the unmediated inheritance by subsequent generations of the worst characteristics acquired under the degrading conditions of capitalism. As old Hammond recalled: 'In times

23 This ambivalence towards Darwin's theory led to the proliferation of a number of alternative theories of evolution. However, for the most part, as far as British socialists were concerned, throughout the 1890s claiming the authority of Darwin was of paramount ideological importance. See Peter J. Bowler, *The Eclipse of Darwinism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1992).

24 Morris, *Nowhere*, p. 135.

25 Stephen Yeo, 'A New Life: The Religion of Socialism in Britain 1883–1896', *History Workshop Journal*, 4 (1977), pp. 5–56.

26 William Morris, Review of *Fabian Essays* (1889), *Commonweal* (25 January 1890), quoted in Yeo, 'A New Life', p. 19.

past, it is clear that the "Society" of the day helped its Judaic god, and the "Man of Science" of the time, in visiting the sins of the father upon the children. How to reverse this process, how to take the sting out of heredity, has for long been one of the most constant cares of the thoughtful men amongst us.'²⁷

Morris and Neo-Lamarckian Strategies for Change

Paying close attention to *News from Nowhere* we can see that Morris's conception of 'making socialists' echoed Lamarckian conceptions of development. Adaptation to the environment as well as the physiological, mental and spiritual effects of use and disuse were central to Morris's beliefs about how socialism might be achieved. Of fundamental import, however, was Morris's insistence upon agency in the transformation from capitalist wage slave into socialist citizen. After all, as Morris clearly stated in the important chapter 'How the Change Came', 'the great motive power for change was the longing for freedom and equality.'²⁸

The altered environment and its effects upon the inhabitants of *Nowhere* is one of the most notable differences between the England of 2102 – the year in which *Nowhere* is set – and the England of Morris's own time. Hammond notes the potential of even a relatively subtle difference in climate and environment to effect a significant adaptive change upon its inhabitants. Pointing out the differences between the neighbours of the Thames valley and those who live further north, he observed that 'there are

27 Morris, *Nowhere*, p. 95. Patrick Parrinder suggests that this passage is indicative of Morris's acceptance of prevailing eugenic ideas. I intend this essay, in part, to be a detailed exploration of the mechanism by which Morris hoped to bring about the evolution of a socialist humanity. See Patrick Parrinder, 'Eugenics and Utopia: Sexual Selection from Galton to Morris', *Utopian Studies*, 8 (1997), pp. 1–12. I am grateful to Martin Delveaux for bringing this article to my attention.

28 Morris, *Nowhere*, p. 134.

parts of these islands which are rougher and rainier than we are here, and there people are rougher in their dress; and they themselves are tougher and more hard-bitten than we are to look at'. The fact that these adaptive differences are of hereditary significance is emphasised by Hammond's rejoinder that for all their differences 'the cross between us and them generally turns out well.'²⁹ Morris made it clear that he believed that human nature was not to be limited by contemporary notions of the war of each against all, but could be moulded by circumstance: 'I have been told that political strife was a necessary result of human nature', Guest remarks to Hammond. "Human nature!" cried the old boy, impetuously: "What human nature? The human nature of paupers, of slaves, of slave-holders, or the human nature of wealthy freemen? Which? Come, tell me that!"³⁰

Of equal importance for Morris's strategy for making socialists was the Lamarckian emphasis upon the inheritance of acquired characters, and it is significant, if unsurprising, that of paramount importance in this regard, for Morris, was labour. Morris believed that the divided and alienating practices of commercial labour under capital forced the workers into a position of 'real inferiority ... involving a degradation both of mind and body' and thus, far from being a pleasure, labour under capitalism was actually the means by which the working class was oppressed and alienated.³¹ Indeed, in this respect Morris brought his evolutionary aspirations to bear on the concerns of his mentor John Ruskin. Ruskin had taught Morris more about labour and art than any man, but arguably of greatest significance for Morris was Ruskin's contention that for all its productive powers capitalism did nothing to better the most important source of wealth – the human labourer:

The great cry that rises from all our manufacturing cities, louder than the furnace blast, is all in very deed for this – that we manufacture everything there except men; we blanch cotton, and strengthen steel and refine sugar, and shape pottery; but to brighten, to strengthen, to refine or to form a single living spirit never enters into our estimate of advantages.³²

29 Morris, *Nowhere*, p. 63.

30 Morris, *Nowhere*, p. 118.

31 Morris, *Nowhere*, p. 291.

32 John Ruskin, 'The Nature of Gothic', in *The Victorian Prophets: A Reader from Carlyle to Wells*, ed. Peter Keating (London: Fontana, 1981), p. 163.

Morris was concerned not only about the negative effects of capitalist labour, but believed that a lack of labour was detrimental to physical and mental vitality, the resulting maladies of which not only affected the unemployed, but the idle-rich middle class as well. Not only was the typical bourgeois male parasitic, effeminate and weak, but the idleness that was habitual to his class had, over time, become so culturally engrained as to have become biologically heritable. As Hammond recalled:

It is said that in the early days of our epoch there were a good many people who were hereditarily afflicted with a disease called Idleness, because they were the direct descendants of those who in the bad times used to force others to work for them – the people, you know, who are called slave-holders or employers of labour in the history books.³³

However, the most disconcerting effects of the disease of idleness were those thus inflicted upon the females of that class, who, bound by Victorian social convention, were kept from labouring and thus from exercising their bodies, minds and their creative spirit. As a result, they were typically ugly, pinched, and susceptible to the 'mully-grubs, mental weakness and hypochondria'.³⁴ Subject to such middle-class ailments, only bourgeois men could find these women attractive, an element of Darwinian sexual selection that only served to compound these symptoms in their offspring:

They were as little like young women as might be, they had hands like bunches of skewers, and wretched little arms like sticks; and waists like hour glasses, and thin lips and peaked noses and pale cheeks ... no wonder they bore such ugly children for no-one except men like them could be in love with them – poor things!³⁵

In line with Morris's conception of the restorative potential of unalienated labour, and the central place it had in his reconception of society, it is unsurprising that labour also played a central role in his hopes to redeem

33 Morris, *Nowhere*, p. 75.

34 Whereas Parrinder speculates that the mullygrubs might be a mild form of leprosy (as indeed Hammond speculates in *Nowhere*), Wilmer traces the term to a contemporary colloquialism for depression or hypochondria. Given the context, Wilmer's explanation is the more convincing. See *Nowhere*, p. 411, n.18.

35 Morris, *Nowhere*, p. 76.

the degenerate nineteenth-century individual and transform him or her into the healthy, vital and creative subject that might realize his imagined future society. Again Morris left it for Hammond to recall the stern, if paternal, measures that had to be taken in order to remedy the negative hereditary effects of disuse:

Indeed, I believe that at one time they were actually *compelled* to do some work, because they, especially the women, got so ugly and produced such ugly children if the disease was not treated sharply, that the neighbours couldn't stand it.³⁶

Morris believed that both labour and the art it produced could have a transformative effect upon the labourer. Labour 'exerciz[ed] the energies of his mind and soul as well as of his body', whilst, as Morris had long asserted, 'it helps the healthiness of both body and soul to live among beautiful things'; given the inheritance of acquired characters, and the importance of the physical environment, the benefits that accrued (both physiologically and culturally) to the labourer during his lifetime in these ways could be transmitted to and compounded across subsequent generations.³⁷ In this way, Morris could well imagine a substantial change from the degraded worker of the capitalist era of commerce to the 'well-knit' embodiment of socialism he portrayed in *Nowhere*.

Although labour was clearly Morris's primary concern in his strategy for change, there were others. Such rational recreations popular in the socialist movement as cycling, swimming, rambling and the like which were popularized by the Clarion movement, as well as the penchant for dress reform, vegetarianism, temperance and other experiments in alternative living also played their part.³⁸ The Clarion movement, inspired by the

³⁶ Morris, *Nowhere*, p. 75 (emphasis in the original).

³⁷ William Morris, 'The Art of the People', in *The Collected Works of William Morris*, ed. May Morris, 24 vols. (London: Longmans, Green and Co, 1910-15), vol. XXII, p. 38.

³⁸ Morris had no truck with either vegetarianism or temperance. In this context Morris echoes the call by Richard White to embrace a broader conception of labour than that commonly articulated by the traditional labour movement, which has alienated a large section of the environmental movement from socialism. See Richard White, 'Are You an Environmentalist Or Do You Work For A Living?: Work and Nature', in *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York: W. W. Norton & Co, 1996).

socialist newspaper of the same name which was edited by the Manchester socialist Robert Blatchford, drew thousands of socialists across Britain into healthful communal activities which frequently took them into the hills and dales that, at that time, lay only a short walk from most industrial urban centres. As Chris Waters has pointed out in *British Socialists and the Politics of Popular Culture* (1990), the aim of the Clarion socialists was to create a specifically socialist popular culture in opposition to that of the public house and the dance hall that was coming to dominate leisure within capitalist culture.³⁹ Given the predominance of Neo-Lamarckian ideas amongst many leading socialists we might also re-interpret this enthusiasm for what we would now call 'lifestylism' as a concerted effort to provide a cultural environment within which men and women could exercise their social(ist) faculties – mentally and spiritually – as well as engage in healthy and vigorous physical exercise – qualities that were slowly but surely being squeezed out of them by capitalist labour on the one hand and the commercialization of leisure on the other.

The significance of creating this different cultural space within which men and women could practise socialist living was that it took them away from the drudgery of life under capitalism, and in the case of the cycling and rambling clubs, quite literally took them away from the blighted urban environment so that they could experience the fact that there was nothing natural or inevitable about the squalor of the nineteenth-century city and the degraded life it imposed upon its inhabitants. E. P. Thompson long ago pointed out that Morris's politics were about the education of desire, and this is certainly true in the context of his strategy for making socialists. Originally too mentally and spiritually degraded to imagine that life might be different, it was left to 'those who worked for change because they could see further than other people' to show them that there might be more to life than their common experience taught them. As Hammond remarked – clearly on Morris's behalf – 'contrast is necessary for this explanation'.⁴⁰ Through actually experiencing how radically different life might be, and by being physically immersed in and subject to the influences of a more

³⁹ Chris Waters, *British Socialists and the Politics of Popular Culture* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1990).

⁴⁰ Morris, *Nowhere*, p. 123.

healthful, social and 'natural' environment, Morris sought to awaken in them the all important 'longing for freedom and equality' that was the 'great motive-power of the change'.⁴¹ Beyond the consideration of 'the education of desire' that has pre-occupied Thompson, Raymond Williams and Miguel Abensour, among others, the result of this immersion in socialist culture was to have physical and distinctly evolutionary implications.⁴² Not only would the physical as well as the mental transformation of the socialists effected by these activities make them literal embodiments of and living artefacts that advocated for socialism, but, and most importantly for the transformation of a degenerate capitalist humanity into a population that might make socialism a living and working reality, these socialist characteristics would – according to Neo-Lamarckian biology – be heritable across future generations, and thus a source for change.

H. G. Wells and the Demise of Neo-Lamarckian Socialism

As a student of Huxley, and in contrast to Morris, Hyndman and Kropotkin, H. G. Wells embraced the Malthusianism of his tutor as scientific fact. Indeed, like Huxley, Wells feared that such an 'epoch of rest' as that envisaged by Morris – a world beyond competitive selection – would inevitably suffer relapse and degeneration rather than allow for the fruition of human kindness and socialism.⁴³ Wells's scepticism was cemented by further developments in evolutionary biology. Although belief in the inheritance of acquired characters persisted among social theorists well into the twentieth century (as indeed did scepticism over the explanatory

41 Morris, *Nowhere*, pp. 134.

42 For a brief commentary on the contributions of these and other authors to this debate see Waters, *British Socialists*, pp. 43–50.

43 Wells explored this degeneration of a society that had conquered selection in *The Time Machine*, a work that is filled with references to Morris and *News from Nowhere*. See Piers J. Hale, 'Of Mice and Men: Evolution and the Socialist Utopia', *Journal of the History of Biology*, 43.1 (2010), pp. 17–66.

power of natural selection) Lamarckism had been largely discredited in the eyes of natural scientists before the end of the 1890s. The German cytologist, August Weismann, had notoriously performed experiments in which he had cut the tails off succeeding generations of mice in order to show that the shortened tails thus 'acquired' were not heritable, and, as a science journalist, Wells had reviewed and been convinced by Weismann's work late in 1894.⁴⁴ This led him to reject as impossible the hopes that Morris had for the evolutionary future of humanity.

Without the Neo-Lamarckian mechanism of the inheritance of acquired characters, Wells, like Weismann, reverted to Darwin's initial hypothesis of evolution through natural selection alone. The political significance of this turn of events was that the hastening of evolutionary developments allowed by Lamarckism was expunged from Darwinian theory (a development referred to as 'Neo-Darwinism' to denote the return to Darwin's 1859 position). Wells conceded that:

Assuming the truth of Natural Selection and having regard to Professor Weismann's destructive criticisms of the evidence for the inheritance of acquired characters, there are satisfactory grounds for believing that man ... is still mentally, morally and physically, what he was during the later Paleolithic period.⁴⁵

Thus the new humanity that Morris had hypothesized might be possible in just a few generations in *Nowhere* was simply untenable.⁴⁶ 'Any future society must be based upon men and women with like passions, like uncertainties of mood and desire to our own,' and thus any conceptions of what may or not be possible for humanity under socialism must be limited to 'the world of here and now'.⁴⁷

44 Herbert George Wells, *Saturday Review* (1 March 1894), in *H. G. Wells: Early Writings in Science and Science Fiction*, eds. Robert Philmus and David Y. Hughes (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), pp. 123–7.

45 Wells, *Early Writings*, p. 211.

46 Lamarckism allowed for substantial change across a relatively few generations. Morris placed the socialist revolution in 1962; the Guest visits *Nowhere* in 2102. Supposing an age of reproduction of about twenty-five, this would allow five generations for the changes envisaged by Morris.

47 Wells, *Modern Utopia*, p. 19.

From a scientific (and increasingly a social) perspective the inheritance of acquired characters became ever more questionable, as did Morris's utopian aspirations. Similarly the strategies based upon 'making socialists' through the creation of an alternative culture based upon a peculiarly socialist lifestyle also ceased to make sense. Hyndman, for one, took this to heart, and eager to maintain the credibility and 'scientific' basis of British socialism, he wrote to George Bernard Shaw regarding what he perceived to be the dangerous influence of Morris and of revolutionary 'lifestylism'. Shaw, a valuable theorist and advocate for socialism on both sides of the Atlantic was also a vegetarian, teetotal advocate of dress reform. These concerns, previously part and parcel of socialist living and of socialist strategies for change, were quickly becoming portrayed as just so many 'single issue' distractions from the cause. Hyndman wrote 'I do not want the movement to be a depository of old cranks, humanitarians, vegetarians, anti-vivisectionists, arty-crafties and all the rest of them. We are scientific socialists and have no room for sentimentalists. They confuse the issue'.⁴⁸

Although Shaw persisted in his cycling, his vegetarianism, teetotalism, and penchant for rational dress, and remained an outspoken advocate of Lamarckism until his death, he did at least adhere to a more gradualist strategy of political reform under the auspices of the Fabian Society. However, from the perspective of 1931, and following the Russian Revolution and the Easter Rising in Ireland, it is evident that Shaw felt some regret regarding his compromise with political reformism compared to Morris's purist refusal to accept half-measures.⁴⁹

When the greatest Socialist of that day, the poet and craftsman, William Morris, told the workers that there was no hope for them save in revolution, we said that if that were true there was no hope at all for them, and urged them to save themselves

48 Henry Hyndman to George Bernard Shaw, quoted in Sheila Rowbotham, *Threads Through Time: Writings on History and Autobiography* (London: Penguin, 1999), p. 328.

49 On the politics of Shaw's evolutionary views see Piers J. Hale, "The Search for Purpose in a Post-Darwinian Universe: George Bernard Shaw, "Creative Evolution" and Shavian Eugenics: "The Dark Side of the Force"', *History and Philosophy of the Life Sciences*, 28.2 (2006), pp. 191-214.

through parliament, the municipalities and the franchise. Without, perhaps, quite convincing Morris, we convinced him that things would probably go our way. It is not so certain today as it seemed in the eighties that Morris was not right.⁵⁰

Conclusion

Far from being 'careless' of scientific analysis, Morris based both his strategy for socialism and his imagined vision of the future upon contemporary theories of evolution. Morris sought to reclaim the bodies, minds and spirits of the people for socialism through the creation of a distinctly socialist culture in which people could develop their socialistic potential. The socialist traits they thus acquired, Morris believed, would be heritable and could thus be further enhanced across subsequent generations. Despite the Malthusian reading of Darwin championed by Huxley, such a neo-Lamarckian view of evolution was – for a time at least – quite tenable within the context of debate over what was orthodox and what was heterodox in Darwinism. After all Darwin had himself been changeable on this very issue. However, as the inheritance of acquired characters lost credibility, so too did Morris's vision and, like Wells, a great many socialists increasingly looked to more 'practical' strategies for change such as the various parliamentary routes to change advocated by the Labour Representation Committee and the Fabian Society.

It might seem that the implications of the fact that Morris based his utopia upon what we would now perceive to be an erroneous biology are that we should give up on the possibilities for humanity that he imagined in *Nowhere*; and indeed the eminent ethicist Peter Singer has seemingly reached just this conclusion in his *A Darwinian Left* (1999). Singer suggests

50 George Bernard Shaw, *Fabian Essays Forty Years Later: What they Overlooked*, quoted in R. Page Arnot, *Bernard Shaw and William Morris* (Transactions of the William Morris Society), (Norwood, PA: Telegraph Books, 1980), pp. 23-4.

that those of us who care about socialism should acknowledge the limitations of nurture over the facts of human nature, and give up the utopian aspirations that he believes continue to undermine the credibility of the left today. We might ameliorate conditions, much as the Fabians sought to do, but ultimately, he concludes, hopes of a new humanity remain fantastic. Singer acknowledges that 'in some ways, this is a sharply deflated vision of the left, its Utopian ideas replaced by a coolly realistic view of what can be achieved. [But] That is, I think, the best we can do today'. Although he offers 'a much more positive view than that which many on the left have assumed to be implied in a Darwinian understanding of human nature', it seems that to go this far would be to give up on the relevance of Morris's utopia to our own time, just as Wells gave up on the relevance of Morris's vision for his own.⁵¹

Yet Morris's most popular work is clearly more than an enduring unworldly fantasy. And I would venture that it is ultimately unimportant that Morris – like many others of his time, both on the left and on the right – based his assumptions about social change on a biology that has since been rejected. Both human agency and significant cultural change, although historically linked with Lamarckism, are of course, not dependent upon it. Both, however, are necessary components of a truly democratic socialism. Morris realized that this was the case, and was unwilling to give it up, and it was to this end that Morris explored alternative ways of living and different cultural experience. In this respect *News from Nowhere* reminds us that there is a whole lot more to being human than can be determined – or indeed explained – within the narrow explanatory confines of biology alone. However, as I have shown here, our assumptions about what it means to be human, and the limitations that these assumptions impose upon our hopes for an alternative way of living to that of liberal capitalism, are always tied up with concurrent conceptions of evolutionary biology – even if this latter frequently remains implicit or unspoken. Further to this however, by exposing the ideological assumptions inherent to nineteenth-century

⁵¹ Peter Singer, *A Darwinian Left: Politics, Evolution and Co-operation* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1999), p. 63.

biology, Morris also reminds us that science – whether nineteenth-century or twenty-first-century – is in many ways contingent upon the conditions of its production, and thus charged with similarly contingent political implications and inferences. We should give this due consideration before following Singer and Wells in their rejection of Morris. After all, our own scepticism about the possibility of a radically different future is no less culturally contingent than was Morris's optimism.

Perhaps anticipating such cynicism, Morris left it to Dick, the youthful and pleasantly naive neighbour, to reflect upon nineteenth-century human nature (as well as forward to our own equally limited conception of the same). In doing so he finds the past individualistic and self-seeking social relations of nineteenth-century capitalism just as unbelievable as we find his present. He remarks: 'how strange to think that there have been men like ourselves and living in this beautiful and happy country, who I suppose had feelings and affections like ours, who could yet do such dreadful things [to each other]'.⁵² Morris's point here, of course, is precisely that the perpetrators were *not* men like Dick and other inhabitants of Nowhere and nor were they living in a 'beautiful and happy country', and as a result, they – for the most part – did not have similar feelings or affections to the inhabitants of Nowhere. Dick, in his own cultural myopia, can no more conceive of these things being any other than they are in his own time, than we can in ours. Morris, as one of those 'who could see further than other people' wrote *News from Nowhere* to awaken us to the fact that things have been and therefore can be different. In this respect it remains as important today as when it was first written.⁵³

⁵² Morris, *Nowhere*, p. 79.

⁵³ This essay, originally presented as a paper at the 2005 William Morris Society conference, 'William Morris in the Twenty-First Century', is adapted from a larger body of ongoing research. I am indebted to Barbara Dunlap and the William Morris Society of America for the award of the Joseph R. Dunlap memorial scholarship for 2005–6 in support of this project, and to Paolo Palladino, John Beatty and Mott Greene who have commented on various aspects of my work on Morris.