Editorial – Fears and Hopes

Patrick O’Sullivan

One year after taking over from Rosie Miles as editor, and the world is in a very different state from that of August last year. The prolonged economic growth and ‘prosperity’ of the years 1992–2006 appear over, and current economic prospects, according to a certain source which ought to be well-informed, are ‘at their lowest for sixty years’. The optimism of the boom years has been replaced by doom and gloom, falling house prices and repossessions triggered by the collapse of the ‘sub-prime’ housing market in the United States. Once again, as in the early 1990s, capitalism and the prospect of short term wealth have over-reached themselves. Once more, as in previous economic crises, it is the victims who are suffering most, and not the beneficiaries of the years of ‘get rich quick’, greed and arrogance, many of whom are now being bailed out with public money by governments who for a generation have sworn by competition, the free market, and ‘standing on your own feet’. Meanwhile, under a so-called Labour government, inequality in UK society is greater even than some twenty years ago, during one of the most divisive administrations of the twentieth century.

In the light of the above problems, how should we proceed? It seems that the world is being pulled along two quite different pathways, both of which our leaders claim to be following. One is the apparently inexorable march of globalisation, with, as indicated earlier in these pages, the increasing production of most of the world’s goods and services in Asia, and their consumption in North America and Europe. The other is the desperate need to reduce our impact on our planet, before, or so it is said, our climate system slips into irreversible change. And yet it seems impossible that both of these things can be accomplished at the same time, for surely one is directly opposed to the other?

At present, the impact of the global human economy on the Earth – its ‘ecological footprint’ – is calculated to be the equivalent of the use of ca 2.2 hectares (ca 5.5 acres) of land annually for every person on the planet.1 If correct, this figure is unfortunate to say the least, because, in fact, the amount of productive land actually available for our support is only ca 1.7 hectares (ca 4.2 acres). In other words, we are currently exceeding the human carrying capacity of the Earth by a factor of ca 1.3. Or, if you like, we are each of us presently using up the products of an extra 0.5 hectares (1.2 acres) of land we do not possess.

And yet such global figures mask something potentially even more unsettling
that whilst the average global footprint is equal to 2.2 ha, that of the G8 countries (Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia, United Kingdom, United States) is 5.7, whilst that of the G33 poorest nations is only 1.36. Even weighting these values for numbers of people only gives us a ‘coefficient of impact’ of ca 49 for the G8 economies, and 45 for the G33. In other words, the 850 million people of the G8 countries exert a greater ecological impact upon the Earth than all of the 3.3 billion members of the thirty three poorest nations together – a result which also neatly gives the lie to old shibboleth so beloved of authoritarian environmentalists that it is ‘population’ which is the problem, and not consumption. Therefore, if we were to raise the living-standard of everyone on Earth to that of the average citizen of a G8 country (to say nothing of the United States), whereas at present we are consuming the equivalent of 1.3 planets, in order to support everyone in the manner to which we in the richest countries have grown accustomed, we would need a total of 4.4 Earths. And as we all know, there is only one.

At the same time, it was recently announced that, as a result of ‘anthropogenic forcing’, global climate may be nearing a tipping point, where it will shift irreversibly into a new, and therefore unpredictable state. Sadly, the response of the official scientific community has been to suggest ‘more of the same’, in the form of ‘geoengineering’ of the Earth’s climate, in order to try to alleviate the problem. But such simplistic, linear approaches to the workings of a complex system are not only naive – because they stand almost no chance of working without causing another set of problems – and irresponsible – because they suggest to the unwary that such solutions are even possible – but also fail to address the root cause of the problem – the global overproduction of goods and services beyond what is required for local need.

The purpose of the World Trade Organisation, the main institutional agent of globalisation, is to promote economic growth ‘for all’ by removing ‘obstacles’ to the liberalisation of world trade. But how can this policy – of the majority of the world’s goods being made in one continent, and sold in two others – continue, when one of the fastest growing components of global carbon emissions is transport? How can we possibly meet such targets as an 80% reduction in global carbon dioxide emissions by 2050, when globalisation of production, management and leisure, involves increasing movement of goods and people from one continent to another? Someone, somewhere, will need to square the circle of how to achieve ecological stability in an economic system founded on limitless expansion on a finite planet.

If we are faced with finding a new pathway, two further questions often posed are ‘How will we possibly convince developing countries that they should not follow the same historical route towards “prosperity” we ourselves have followed? How can we ask them not to pollute when we have enriched ourselves by doing exactly that?’ Indeed, developing nations often use precisely this kind of argu-
ment when seeking relief from emissions targets and other environmental standards. I confess that I do not have an easy answer, and for once, maybe Morris does not either, in that the suggestion

‘... but look, suppose people lived in little communities among gardens
and green fields, so that you could be in the country in five minutes’ walk,
and had few wants, almost no furniture for instance, and no servants, and
studied the (difficult) arts of enjoying life, and finding out what they really
wanted: then I think one might hope civilization had really begun ...’9

does not seem to give much detailed guidance. What is more, attempting to
persuade developing countries not to make the same mistakes we ourselves have
made would not just be going against what appears currently to be the tide of
history – something which seems never to have worried Morris – but would also
involve a major shift in our own thinking – that what we have done to ourselves,
and our fellows, and the Earth, since the rise of the global merchant economy
some four hundred years ago, is not only economically unjust, but, in global
ecological terms, not merely unwise, but just plain wrong.

Underlying the forces for globalisation on the one hand, and sustainability
on the other, are two mindsets which possess diametrically opposing views of
nature – one of the Earth as placed here entirely for our own benefit, as ‘wealth’
with which to enrich ourselves, the other of the world as a home, to be lived in,
enjoyed and cherished, but not destroyed. Of course, it is clear from every part
of Morris’s life and work which of those two mindsets he shared, and what he
thought should be done.

The first step ... is to get the means of making labour fruitful, the Capital,
including the land, machinery, factories, etc., into the hands of the com-
community, to be used for the good of all alike ...9

And as ever, even in the darkest of times, Morris does offer hope

Meanwhile, if these hours be dark, as, indeed, in many ways they are, at
least do not let us sit deedless, like fools and fine gentlemen, thinking the
common toil not good enough for us, and beaten by the muddle; but
rather let us work like good fellows trying by some dim candle-light to
set our workshop ready against to-morrow’s daylight—that to-morrow,
when the civilised world, no longer greedy, strifeful, and destructive, shall
have a new art, a glorious art, made by the people and for the people, as a
happiness to the maker and the user.10

In this issue Terence Hoagwood discusses the relationship between Morris’s
social vision, and his artistic theory and practise – ‘the ideas and the ideal’ –
and Michael Bloor recalls a first hand account by James Leatham – a life-long
socialist whose biography of Morris contains one of the best known accounts of
him speaking in the open air – of a visit by Morris to Aberdeen. Peter Faulkner
presents an account of Rossetti at Kelmscott which complements his article in the
last issue on Morris’s relationship with that village and its environs, and Emma
Ferry puts forward a well-documented theory that at least some of the work
attributed to the designer Kate Faulkner, who contributed much to the early
years of Morris & Co., is actually that of her elder sister Lucy, who, like so many
women, ‘disappeared’ from history as a result of marriage, and a change of name.
Richard Frith examines the influence of Morris’s poetic ideas, and his passion
for medieval literature, especially the Arthurian legend, on the young Algernon
Charles Swinburne, and we also print reviews of books on ‘Epic and Empire’ in
Victorian Britain, on Aestheticism in Victorian painting, and three books on the
meaning and significance of contemporary craft.

With this issue, we also welcome Tony Pinkney of Lancaster University to
the editorial board, who, like his fellow initiates from the last issue, has already
been at work on behalf of the Journal. I look forward to working further with
Tony, who is not only a noted Morris scholar, but who also offers another ‘green’
perspective on matters such as those examined above.

NOTES

   php?content=global_footprint [last accessed 11 September 2008]. Calcu-
   late your own footprint at http://www.footprintnetwork.org/gfn_sub.
   php?content=myfootprint
2. G8 Gleneagles 2005, http://www.g8.gov.uk/; OECD member countries,
   http://www.oecd.org/document/58/0,2340,en_2649_201185_1889402_1-
   1,1_1,00.html; About the G24, http://www.g24.org/aboutg24.htm; Third
   World Network (G33) http://www.twnside.org.sg/; [All last accessed 11 Sep-
   tember 2008].
   reconstruction cannot tell us, but anthropology can’, The Holocene 18 (1),
4. T. Lenton et al., ‘Tipping elements in the Earth’s system’, Proceedings of the
   National Academy of Sciences 106 (6), 2008, pp. 1786–1793; http://research-
   pages.net/ESMG/publications/357/ [last accessed 29 October 2008].
5. B. Launder & M. Thompson, eds, ‘Geoscale engineering to avert dangerous
   366, October 2008; http://publishing.roysociety.org/index.cfm?page=1814
   [last accessed 12 September 2008]


8. As recommended by the UK Climate Change Committee and adopted by the UK government 16 October 2008; http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2008/oct/16/greenpolitics-edmiliband [last accessed 29 October 2008].

