

Editorial – Looking Forward

Patrick O’Sullivan

Most followers of Morris surely know by now the story of how and why he came to write *News from Nowhere* – that during May and June 1889, he was reading another utopia (Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward*), and was incensed by what he soon came to describe as a ‘cockney paradise’.¹ For me, *Looking Backward* describes a regimented, centralised, coercive society, in which the modernist project of replacing human labour by the machine is rapidly coming to pass. But what surely distressed Morris most about Bellamy’s depiction of a ‘progressive’ society is that it was meant to serve as a *positive* example of what the future might hold, whereas for Morris it was surely much more of a nightmare than a dream.

Most scientists, I suppose, still subscribe to the modernist project, but it was still disappointing recently to be reminded just how powerful that particular vision of utopia (i.e. the Morrisian’s nightmare) – in the form of the Royal Society of London’s report on *The Future of the Global Food System*² – remains. The report begins ‘For the last few decades, food has been cheaper in real terms, and more readily available, than probably at any time in history’;³ rather an ironic statement, in that almost simultaneously, other media items began to appear regarding ‘food riots’ in Egypt, India, Pakistan, Serbia and notably Mozambique, and the possible onset of another ‘food spike’ echoing that of 2008, when widespread rioting took place.⁴ Factors said to be responsible include climate change, the unusual weather of 2010, poor harvests in Australia, Canada, Russia and Ukraine, a consequent ban on Russian wheat exports, the ‘nutrition transition’ currently experienced by several fast-growing Asian countries (most notably China), increased diversion of land from food production to biofuels, volatility in food prices, and (perhaps related) speculation in food price futures in world commodity markets, principally by hedge funds and investment banks such as Goldman Sachs.⁵

Unusual weather patterns for 2010 included a prolonged summer heat wave over Northern and Eastern Europe and adjacent Central Asia, but also floods in Australia, Canada, West Africa and (most tragically) Pakistan. Most of these anomalies occurred because 2010 was an El Niño year, during which, typically, glo-

bal weather patterns are reversed; dry regions (California, Peru) experience unusual wet conditions, and humid areas (Indonesia, northern Australia), drought. Seasonal weather anomalies do not amount to long-term climatic trends, but evidence of a change in El Niño has recently been reported which might be associated with global warming.⁶ So there may be more of this kind of weather to come.

Poor harvests in Canada, Eastern Europe, Central Asia and West Africa were therefore at least in part a result of El Niño. But other factors also contributed to the rising price of food, not least the decision by Russia, the third largest exporter of this cereal, to impose a twelve month ban on exports of wheat.⁷ Meanwhile, the 'nutrition transition', and the diversion of cropland into production of biofuels, are part of globalisation, and still seem to many to be a bad idea – maybe not for the people involved, but for the Earth. For, as mentioned in previous editorials, to support nine billion people at the same level of prosperity as the citizens of the world's eight richest countries will require not one Earth, but at least four, probably five.⁸

Beyond all this, as if it were not disturbing enough, is the news that at least part of the reason for the current 'food spike' may be speculation on world commodity markets by investment banks and hedge funds. Apparently these agencies are buying up foodstuffs on commodity markets, in the hope that as values rise further, they will be able to sell at a higher price. Of course the banks in question deny any culpability – but as someone once did not quite say, 'Well, they would, wouldn't they?' – and food is not the only commodity whose price has risen, but there is enough evidence of a 'food bubble' taking place for the United Nations to lay the blame firmly at the door of institutional investors.⁹

Does it not occur to such people that in speculating in the price of other people's food, they have plumbed new depths, even for capitalism? The world, apparently, is not so badly off as it was in 2008 – food stocks are more extensive, fuel prices lower; Congress has passed a law which attempts to discourage such speculation – but food price inflation to the consumer is set to rise globally next year by 5–10%. And even if the banks are not the *cause* of the increases in food prices, they seem perfectly prepared to *profit* from them.

Just when you think the Hydra has drawn its last breath, another set of heads springs up. William Godwin, that most optimistic of Enlightenment 'philosophes', believed that the means of subsistence are part of the common stock, and therefore should not be privatised, but he clearly underestimated his adversary.¹⁰ Morris shared no such illusions

Is money to be gathered? Cut down the pleasant trees among the houses, pull down ancient and venerable buildings for the money that a few square yards of London dirt will fetch; blacken rivers, hide the sun and

poison the air with smoke and worse, and it's nobody's business to see to it or mend it: that is all that modern commerce ... will do for us herein.¹¹

Media reactions to the Royal Society report, even among sober outlets, focused almost exclusively on its advocacy (but only by one article out of twenty) of feeding the world by 2050 on 'artificial' (or more correctly, 'cultured') meat.¹² Apologists for this idea are quick to point out its perceived advantages,¹³ but generally ignore the point that it would replace a range of 'natural' systems by a single one which completely bypasses nature (and the human communities in which food is produced), to say nothing of transferring strategic responsibility for production of a major component of the world's food supply to a few trans-national corporations. And does not advocacy of artificial meat production on an industrial scale imply a manipulative attitude to nature which might surprise even Francis Bacon?¹⁴

One step beyond is the recommendation, by no less a person than James Lovelock, that in order to release vital land 'back to Gaia', the majority of the world's population (but not, I note, the 'custodians') be consigned to live in tower blocks, where they will be required to subsist on a diet synthesised completely from inorganic matter (a *truly* artificial food).¹⁵ Couple these suggestions to those of Dickson Despommier – that the inhabitants of cities should forsake soil-based agriculture, and grow their food in 'vertical farms' – tower blocks dotted around the city landscape – and we begin to arrive not only at *Looking Backward*, but even (with its vats of pre-programmed embryos) *Brave New World*.¹⁶

Faced with seemingly insuperable problems,¹⁷ even some parts of the Green movement are beginning to panic, and to advocate solutions which, rather than working with nature, seek to separate us from it, and to replace it with a totally artificial environment. As usual, Morris knows better.

... looking upon everything, ... animate and inanimate – 'nature', as people used to call it – as one thing, and (humankind) as another ... it was natural to people thinking ... this way, that they should try to make 'nature' their slave, since they thought 'nature' was something outside them.

Instead, in the London of Nowhere, between Piccadilly and Trafalgar Square,

Each house stood in a garden carefully cultivated and running over with flowers. ... the garden-trees, ... except for a bay here and there, and occasional groups of limes, seemed to be all fruit-trees: there were a great many cherry-trees, now all laden with fruit ...

and in the countryside, on the Upper Thames

One change I noticed amidst the quiet beauty of the fields ... (was) that they were planted with trees here and there, often fruit-trees, ... To be short, the fields were everywhere treated as a garden made for the pleasure as well as the livelihood of all.¹⁸

In other words, along with that other great nineteenth century precursor of 'ecosocialism', Peter Kropotkin,¹⁹ Morris invented 'permaculture' about a century before it became fashionable amongst greens. Now they need to take on board his other ideas.

In this issue we are very pleased to publish Florence Boos's edition of two previously unpublished lectures by Morris – 'Socialism' (1885), and 'What we have to look for' (1895). In the first, Morris spends some time discussing inequality, an issue which, it is hoped, now that the kind of remuneration which can be 'earned' by financial speculation has been widely recorded, may be gaining prominence. In the second, he describes precisely why, two years after the collapse of Lehman Brothers, politicians seem to have done very little about the root causes of the current financial crisis. We also include Alex Wong's analysis of Morris's early *Defence of Guenevere* poems (a subject also considered in recent issues by Richard Frith, and Florence Boos), and Peter Faulkner's comparison of print settings of Chaucer by Morris, and Eric Gill – a very different artist from Morris, and even more different character. These are followed by reviews of books on Morris himself, on Ruskin, and on Richard Norman Shaw, as well as a further volume of Rossetti's letters. Morris's impact on nineteenth century design, including the Aesthetic Movement, and on twentieth and twenty-first century architectural conservation, and production of stained glass, are explored in further reviews.

Laurence Davis & Ruth Kinna's new collection of anarchist and utopian writings, in which Morris's role in the development of such thought is discussed – even though Morris himself was not an anarchist – is also reviewed by David Goodway, who reiterates the key point that a crucial property of utopia is to provide a model of 'How we might live'; something we 'soixante-huitards', however incoherent, always possessed, but which, it seems to me, our young people – since the fall of the Berlin Wall, the 'death of socialism', and 'victory of the free market' (so popular even amongst 'left-wing' commentators) – sadly lack. As Morris would no doubt agree, there is still much work to be done.

NOTES

1. Nicholas Salmon with Derek Baker, *The William Morris Chronology*, Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1996, pp.216–217; E.P. Thompson, *William Morris. Romantic to Revolutionary*, London: Pantheon, 1976, p. 693.

2. Theme issue 'Food security: feeding the world in 2050', compiled and edited by Charles Godfray *et al.* *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society Series B* vol. 365 (no. 1554), September 27 2010, pp. 2769–3097; <http://rstb.royalsocietypublishing.org/content/365/1554/2769.full> (Afterwards *Royal Society*)
3. *Royal Society*, p. 2769 (although it does then immediately point out that today one in seven people are still short of food).
4. 'Commodity prices soar as spectre of food inflation is back', <http://www.guardian.co.uk/business/2010/aug/06/commodity-prices-food-inflation> (Accessed 23 September 2010).
5. 'Hedge funds accused of gambling with lives of the poorest as food prices soar', <http://www.guardian.co.uk/business/2010/jul/19/speculators-commodities-food-price-rises/print> (Accessed 23 September 2010).
6. Sang-Wook Yeh *et al.*, 'El Niño in a changing climate', *Nature* 461, 2009, pp. 511–514. doi:10.1038/nature08316; <http://www.nature.com/nature/journal/461/n7263/abs/nature08316.html> (Accessed 15 October 2010).
7. 'Fears grow over global food supply'; http://www.ft.com/cms/s/5f6f94ac-b6bc-11df-b3dd-00144feabdco.Authorised=false.html?_i_location=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.ft.com%2Fcms%2Fs%2Fo%2F5f6f94ac-b6bc-11df-b3dd-00144feabdco.html&_i_referer= (Accessed 28 September 2010).
8. Patrick O'Sullivan, 'Editorial', *Journal of William Morris Studies* XVII, 3, Winter 2007, pp. 3–9; <http://www.morrissociety.org/JWMS/17.3.OSullivanEditorial.pdf> (Afterwards 'Editorial', Winter 2007); 'Editorial – Fears and Hopes', *Journal of William Morris Studies* XVIII, 1, Winter 2008, pp. 3–7.
9. 'UN warned of major new food crisis at emergency meeting in Rome'; <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2010/sep/24/food-crisis-un-emergency-meeting-rome/print> (Accessed 1 October 2010)
10. William Godwin, *Enquiry concerning Political Justice*, Book VIII, 'Of Property'. As in Peter Marshall, *William Godwin*, London: Yale University Press, pp. 110–111, 162–163.
11. 'The Lesser Arts', in A.L. Morton, ed, *The Political Writings of William Morris*, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1973, pp. 31–56 (p. 53).
12. 'Artificial meat "made in a giant vat" could solve global food shortage', <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/earth/earthnews/7947613/Artificial-meat-made-in-a-giant-vat-could-solve-global-food-shortage.html> (Accessed 23 September 2010).
13. 'Radical changes needed to feed the world'; <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2010/aug/21/radical-changes-needed-to-feed-world> (Accessed 28 September 2010).
14. We have also parks, and enclosures of ... beasts and birds; which we use ...

- for dissections and trials, ... Wherein we find many strange effects: as continuing life in them, though divers parts, which you account vital, be perished and taken forth; resuscitating of some that seem dead in appearance, and the like. ... We make a number of kinds of serpents, worms, flies, fishes of putrefaction, whereof some are advanced ... to be perfect creatures, ... and .. do propagate. Neither do we this by chance, but ... know beforehand of what ... kind of those creatures will arise. (*The Advancement of Learning and New Atlantis*, London: Oxford University Press, pp. 290–291).
15. James Lovelock, *The Revenge of Gaia. Why the Earth is fighting back – and how we can still save humanity*. Allen Lane, 2006, pp. 13, 133.
16. Dickson Despommier, *The Vertical Farm*, Essays 1 & 2; <http://www.vertical-farm.com/essays.html>. See also George Monbiot's critique of Despommier's ideas ('Greens living in ivory towers now want to farm them too'; <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2010/aug/16/green-ivory-towers-farm-skyscrapers>), (both accessed 29 September 2010)
17. Mainly because they assume 'scarcity'; see 'Editorial', Winter 2007, pp. 6–7.
18. James Redmond, ed, William Morris: *News from Nowhere*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970, Chapter XXVII, p. 154; VII, p. 34, XXIX, p. 164.
19. Peter Kropotkin, *Fields, Factories, Workshops: or Industry Combined with Agriculture and Brain Work with Manual Work*, 1899. Revised edition, London: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1912, 484 pp.