

¡Homenaje a Aragón!: *News from Nowhere*, collectivisation, and the sustainable future

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Perhaps we were dreamers. Utopians. Yes, all of us; but remember that even liberalism was a utopia until it was realised, and then socialism appeared the utopia. We were (and remain) convinced that one day the utopia of ours – the most utopian of all perhaps – will be realised; for if it isn't, (humanity) will not be content ...¹

What kind of document is *News from Nowhere*? Most authors label it a 'utopian romance', a vision, or a dream, but it has also been described as 'England reborn', 'a summing-up of ... Morris's life's work', 'a vision of the future as Morris would have liked to see it', and 'a world we are meant to help bring about'.² Clearly it is also a utopia of some kind – 'a constructive utopia', a 'kinetic utopia', an 'Arcadian utopia', 'an actualised utopia', 'the first utopia which is not utopian'.³ It also possesses, at least for some, a 'green' dimension – 'our first ecotopia', 'the best ecotopia so far imagined'; 'an eco-socialist future rather than a romantic utopian past'; 'in many ways an ecotopia before the name'.⁴

Reactions to it were not always positive. J.W. Mackail, who apparently did not much approve of Morris's political ideas, termed it a 'slightly constructed and essentially insular romance': contemporary reviewer Maurice Hewlett thought it 'not an earthly, but an earthy paradise'. More recently, Barbara Gribble described it as 'a vision impaired', and 'an inquiry into self-deception and *stasis*', a term used by several writers.⁵ One point upon which some of the most distinguished Morris scholars agree is that it is 'in no sense ... a literal picture of the future', 'must not be ... read as a literal picture of a communist society' or 'of a socialist utopia', and was 'never intended as a blueprint from

which people could plan a working social system'.⁶ Or as G.D.H. Cole wrote

... *News from Nowhere* was neither a prophecy nor a promise, but the expression of a personal preference. Morris was saying, 'Here is the sort of society I feel I should like to live in. Now tell me yours!' ... We must (therefore) judge *News from Nowhere* not as a complete picture of a possible society, but as ... something that a decent society will have to include, and to foster.⁷

Perhaps one of the best descriptions, with its allusions to 'human nature', is by Stephen Coleman – 'a vision of how humans could be'.⁸

News from Nowhere has also been difficult for some to accept on account of its supposed 'medievalism', or, the reverse, its lack of modernity – an issue recently revived by Tony Pinkney,⁹ and comprehensively discussed by Ruth Kinna. For example, both H.G. Wells and Raymond Williams described it as 'impractical', G.D.H. Cole 'outmoded', and A.L. Morton 'an allegory'. Philip Henderson maintained that it was 'an insult to Morris's intelligence to suppose (that) he really believed in the possibility of such a society', while Paul Thompson insisted (in what seems to me a revealing phrase) that it was 'really quite modern'. Even Kinna herself, having first suggested that 'Morris understood *Nowhere* as a literal idea of what the future could be', concludes that 'Treating *News from Nowhere* as a literal picture of socialism suggests (that) Morris's vision cannot be realised'.¹⁰

I have decided here to go against *all* of these writers, however distinguished or perceptive, and begin my argument with the premise that while *News from Nowhere* may or may not be an accurate description of a socialist or a communist society, it undoubtedly is, for me, and by many criteria, a just about perfect description of an *ecological* society. Therefore while it may or may not conform particularly well to the laws of history, it is, as far as I can tell, entirely consistent with the laws of physics. For me, *News from Nowhere* is not just an example of what an ideal society *might* look like – and therefore an expression of what E.P. Thompson termed 'desire' – but also of what such a society must eventually *be* like; the expression of (ecological) 'necessity'.¹¹

In an attempt to resolve these somewhat abstract arguments, perhaps what we need is a concrete example. And here we run across the old problem that, in the words of countless bar-room pundits over the decades, 'Like Christianity, Socialism/Communism is a good idea which has never been tried'. However, I can offer one example which I hope readers will find helpful – the collectivisation which took place in parts of Republican Spain, during the years 1936-1939.¹² While this episode is not, again, a perfect mirror of *News*

from *Nowhere*, it does share a number of characteristics which may help me explore further why Morris's 'vision' is, for me, and for many greens, still the best description of the kind of world we will *all* soon need to construct.

II

There is no space here to venture very far into what Gerald Brenan described as *The Spanish Labyrinth*.¹³ During the early hours of 19 July 1936, rebel elements of the Spanish military (not yet exclusively led by General Francisco Franco) staged a military coup – a *pronunciamiento* – against the democratically elected Republican government. This event soon led to division of the country into two zones – Nationalist or rebel territory mainly to the north and west, and Republican or Loyalist Spain to the south and east. In many parts of the latter, the resulting 'power vacuum' either made it necessary, or provided an opportunity, for various organisations, especially the anarcho-syndicalist *Confederación Nacional de Trabajo* (National Federation of Labour; *CNT*), to implement their revolutionary ideals. As a result, the *CNT*, often with cooperation from the socialist *Unión General de Trabajadores* (*UGT*; General Union of Workers), implemented widespread collectivisation of agriculture in the countryside, and, in a few cities, of industry.

So much for an outline of 'How the Change came'. As for the detail, one account does indeed read as if extracted from the pages of *News from Nowhere*.

At the corner of his street stood an insurgent artillery detachment of two guns, dominating the ... road upon which his house is situated. On this ... road a detachment of armed workers, under the command of a non-commissioned *asalto* officer, approached the insurgent cannon, which could have blown them up with one shell. But they succeeded in a surprise. They ran towards the guns, their rifles with the muzzle upwards, so that it was impossible to use them. The artillery men, baffled by this inoffensive behaviour, waited to see what would happen next. Before any command could be given, the workers had reached the soldiers, and with passionate words began to exhort them not to shoot upon the people, not to participate in an insurrection against the republic and against their own fathers and mothers, to turn round and arrest their officers. And thus it happened. The soldiers immediately turned round. The whole Barcelona garrison had been told that they were under orders from the Government to put down an anarchist rising. When they saw that they had been misled they dropped their arms, or turned them against their officers who had driven them into the fight. In this particular case ... some of the officers just escaped, others were killed on the

spot by their men; the guns were immediately turned round and now dominated the street in the opposite direction. Things did not happen everywhere ... in this relatively peaceful manner. At many points fierce fighting was needed before the soldiers left their officers; but that was always the end of the story.¹⁴

As for the countryside

(On 19 July, a)fter supper I and my neighbours went out to the street for some fresh air. At about 11 o'clock ... a rumour reached us that the army had risen against the Republic ... The following day ... *CNT* members gathered at the Union's cafe and exchanged information and impressions as we followed the news on the radio. At 10 o'clock, Radio Barcelona announced that the army had risen ... At one o'clock (the) radio ... confirmed the news and gave details of the resistance of the workers in ... the rest of Spain, especially ... in Barcelona. ... There was no doubt now.

The Civil Guard (*Guardia Civil*) must have received orders to remain in the barracks. ... The *CNT* members met at the headquarters of the Agricultural Union with the Left Republicans who had the majority of members in the Union. The creation of a Revolutionary Committee was suggested with four members, two from each organisation.

The local fascists came out (on)to the streets without noticing that the ... Guards were not there with them. They probably felt that they were masters of the situation and that the Guards would come to their aid if necessary. Our lights went out at midnight. Someone had broken the transformer and the town was in darkness. ... (However, next day, the Civil Guard withdrew to a nearby town and abandoned the village).

On (27 July) ... members of the *CNT* decided to try to create something new and humane, to organise an agricultural collective ... We held a meeting to determine how the idea should be presented to the people. ... We agreed to call a public assembly ... through the ... Labour Union at 9 (pm) in the Plaza Mayor. ... At the appointed hour, the Plaza was filled with people. ... I was chosen to be chairman of this historic assembly. ... I explained the goals we had in mind, an Agricultural Collective where all would have the same obligations and the same rights and benefits. ... After I finished we made it clear that what we want to do is not the idea or programme of one man or group. Everyone is invited to offer their suggestions and opinions. ...

When the agenda was completed I stated: All citizens who ... wish to join the new organisation can do so freely today, tomorrow or when they wish. The doors will be open to all who wish to join. The Administrative Council will be elected by majority vote at the first General Assembly. All members will participate in drawing up the rules ... under which the Collective will function.

Although ... members of the *CNT* have an outline of what can be done, the collaboration of all members is essential. ...

Two hundred and fifty families joined the collective, about half the population of the Municipality.¹⁵

Three kinds of collective were established. In Barcelona, many of the activities needed to run a modern industrial city were collectivised, including mass transport (railways, buses and trams), public utilities (gas, water, electricity), bakeries, slaughter houses, construction, textiles, mechanical engineering and the health service, but also theatres, cinemas, hotels and guesthouses, hairdressers, and even beauty parlours. First priority was to organise the acquisition and distribution of food for 1.2 million people. Market gardens in the districts around the city were therefore integrated into the food industry collective.

Collectives were run by technical and administrative committees elected from among the relevant workforce, for a fixed term and on rotation, and for no extra reward. Committee business was transacted outside working hours. Private urban transport companies were integrated, and fares lowered by 50%. Working hours were reduced (though probably not as far as they could have been in peacetime), and wages equalised by raising lower rates, and reducing higher. Children, the sick, retired people and wounded militia travelled free.

Similar changes were introduced in the utilities, and the docks. In the textile industry, employing 250,000 workers, hours were reduced from 60 to 40 per week, and wages raised and 'equalised'. Some industries were redirected to the war effort, so that engineering factories produced armaments, and car plants and railway workshops ambulances and armoured cars. In the health service, 8,000 workers, including doctors, nurses, midwives, dentists, pharmacists and radiologists joined the collectives. Doctors received higher pay, and worked shorter hours, but many carried on 'overtime' for no wages. Treatment was free, and paid for by the collective, or the *Generalidad* (the Catalan Government).

In an echo of the 'banded workshops' of *News from Nowhere*, the woodworkers' union of Barcelona integrated all of the small workshops in the city into Confederated Workshops (*Talleres Confederales*), but in this case not so much in order to save energy as better to maximise production and technical development, and to 'obtain maximum benefits from machines and efficient hard work'.¹⁶ They also incorporated the entire process of production into their collective, from forestry in the countryside to timber treatment and milling, to manufacture and distribution of finished goods.

Other urban collectives were established in Alcoy (the second city of

Alicante province). As well as the same services as in Barcelona, a textile industry employing 6,500 people was collectivised, as was making of paper and cardboard. In the north of Spain, in the ports of Gijón (Asturias) and Laredo (Santander province), the entire fishing industry, from catching at sea to canning, drying and marketing of fish, was also run by collectives.

In the Levante,¹⁷ a regional federation of five provinces containing 1.65 million people established 340 rural collectives, rising to 900 by 1938. The region contains 78% of the most fertile land in Spain, much of which was used for rice cultivation, and growing oranges, both on a commercial basis. Fifty per cent of the Spanish orange crop was produced, 70% of which was sold abroad at collectivised agencies, mainly in France. Agricultural collectives also grew other fruit, vegetables, vines, olives, rice and raised livestock, while industrial sections produced wine, spirits, preserves, olive oil and sugar. Administrative commissions acquired machinery, fertilisers, insecticides and seeds.¹⁸

Most urban collectives, and the rural collectives of the Levante, took over the running of industries and commercial agriculture already well integrated into the world market. Further south (in Andalucía), and in the dry interior (Castile and especially Aragón), collectives were established in which subsistence agriculture was more important (although in many cases a substantial surplus was produced). As these much more closely resemble the kind of self-reliant community advocated by many ecocentric environmentalists,¹⁹ I intend to devote more space to discussing this third type of collective.

The separation into conflicting zones which took place in July 1936 reflects a much older division of the country into 'leftist Spain' of small tenant farmers and sharecroppers (the north and east), and 'rightist' Spain (the centre and south); a region of medium sized farms and large landed estates (*latifundia*). Over a few weeks during the summer of 1936, ca 5.5 million hectares of land, mainly in the interior parts of 'leftist Spain', but also the south, worked by more than three million people, were organised into between 1200 and 2000 collectives, by the people who worked them. Land was confiscated, along with livestock, buildings, equipment, fertilisers and stored harvests, all of which became the property of the collective. All rents, debts and mortgages were abolished, and in some cases money.²⁰

In many collectives, everyone was apparently free to join, or not; no formalities were required. In others, peasants joined out of self-preservation, or were forced to do so.²¹ Those who joined brought their land and assets, but those who had nothing to contribute were also admitted, with the same rights and duties. Collectivisation was therefore perhaps more popular with landless labourers than with small land-holders. Those who refused to join

(‘individualists’) were often respected, but allowed to retain only that amount of land which they and their family could work without the use of wage labour, which was strictly forbidden.²² As in the cities, the first priority was food, in this case the harvest, which was imminent.

Work was organised in groups of 10-15. Each elected its own delegate to the local Administration Commission, which met after hours to schedule work for the following day. Delegates had no special work or other privileges: everyone worked according to their physical capacity. Days lost to illness were counted as work days. Working age was 14-60 years, but some older people chose to continue. Working hours were long – 12-14 hours per day, or basically ‘dawn to dusk’, six days per week: labour was short because many young men were at the Front. Morrisians may be interested to read that the 40% of the workforce formerly engaged ‘socially useless activity’ – e.g. servants, shopkeepers – was ‘now directed to useful projects for the benefit of all’, and that there was never any shortage of volunteers for unpleasant tasks such as ‘nighttime irrigation’. Such duties, along with more agreeable work, were rotated around work groups.²³

Collectives were organised into Districts, whose committees collected data on consumption and production which were reported to the Regional Federation. The idea was that shortages in one locality could be alleviated by transfer of goods, services, or even labour, from other collectives. Decision making in this federal polity was ‘fiercely democratic’,²⁴ however, and the General Assembly of each Collective, made up of all its members, regarded itself as the sovereign body.

Goods produced locally were distributed free when in surplus, but rationed when scarce. Pregnant women, children, disabled and retired people and the sick were given priority. Olive oil, potatoes, wheat, wine and green vegetables were thus often freely available, depending on locality. Milk was generally in short supply, as dairy cattle were scarce. Each family also possessed a plot of its own which it used to rear pigs, chickens or rabbits. Committees collected data on whether a surplus or a deficit existed, in order to estimate local need.²⁵ All production and consumption was very carefully recorded.

Goods were stored on local warehouses, often the now redundant church. Surpluses were taken to District or Regional distribution centres. Commodities not produced locally were acquired either by barter, both with other collectives or with non-collectivised communities, or paid for with money earned either via previous transactions, or obtained when local banks were ‘closed’ after 19 July. For external transactions, state currency (the *peseta*) was still needed, but the Peasant Federations of the Levante, and of Aragón, established their own banks for trade with the towns. In Catalonia, the finances of all collectivised industrial plants and industries were deposited with the Central Labour Bank

in Barcelona. However, these were not capitalist banks, and charged no interest except a 1% administration fee. Credit was given, but not in cash.²⁶

Some collectives attempted to abolish money altogether, and at first ran a free system for supplying essential goods. Others abolished *the use of state currency*, and issued their own money for internal use. Many employed an alternative system, involving coupons, vouchers, workers' cards, consumer cards or account booklets, points systems, but these were used in order to calculate need, not 'work done' (i.e. goods were not 'earned' but supplied as to need). Clothing was allocated via a voucher system, but housing was often free.

Later, the 'family wage' assigned according to family size was widely introduced. Even under a voucher system, it had been difficult to calculate precise need except using *pesetas*. The exact wage 'paid' to each family was set by individual collectives, however, according to local 'prices', and so varied widely. In some collectives the 'family wage' was paid (or vouchers allocated) equally to 'all workers' both men and women; in others it was paid 'per couple', or women were paid less than men. Children were paid smaller amounts according to age. In a few collectives, delegates (already expected to conduct committee business 'after hours') were paid *less* than the norm, in case they 'got above themselves'.

Women appear to have been treated as economic equals in about half of the agrarian collectives, but not in the rest, on the principle that they rarely lived alone. But they still were not social equals; in many collectives 'respectable' women did not go to the communal café. Married women – 'detained by household chores' – were not generally obliged to work in the fields, except at harvest time, when everyone was needed. There were no more servants or house maids, as such work had been abolished. Single women worked in collective workshops, or in distribution cooperatives. In some collectives, certain women did the washing (for everyone), and cooked for the single men. Pregnant women were given 'special consideration'.²⁷ Two perhaps isolated observations may indicate that for some women at least, roles had not changed substantially.

'It is eleven o'clock in the morning. The gong sounds ... It is to remind the women to prepare the midday meal'.

'When needed, as for urgent agricultural work, ... women may be required to work, and do the work assigned to them. Rigorous control shall be applied to (ensure) that they contribute their productive efforts to the Community'.²⁸

Martha Ackelsberg reports that in some Aragón collectives, those who kept the villages going day-to-day, and were the first village delegates, were the

women, because many men were away with the flocks. Although these were the exception, Ackelsberg concludes that, generally, although the 'double duty' of work and home continued, at the same time, the lives of many women were changed markedly as a result of extraordinary new opportunities. Degrees of freedom increased dramatically, and Spanish working class women began to act autonomously for the first time. This effect was much more pronounced in the cities than in the countryside, however.²⁹

III

Whatever kind of society the Collectives may or may not have been, they were not 'static'. As soon as collectivisation took place, all kinds of initiatives were embarked upon, including radical improvements in health care and education, both of which became free to all. Some doctors and pharmacists joined the collective as ordinary members; others held rightist ideas. Medicines were obtained by purchase from 'outside', or by exchange of goods with urban populations. Now that treatment was free, people visited the doctor or the hospital much more than before.

All collectives either vastly improved, or in most cases established schools. Illiteracy rates in the Spanish countryside before July 1936 were apparently 70%. Teachers were sought by appeals to urban collectives, or by return of those who had managed to acquire a college education. They received food, clothes etc from the collective; salaries were sometimes paid by the Republican government. Many parents wished to establish 'Ferrer Schools' (*Escuelas Modernas*), named after Francisco Ferrer y Guardia (1859-1909), a pioneer of modern coeducation free of religious dogma and 'moral or material punishment'.³⁰ There were also evening classes for adults, kindergartens, and especially schools of arts and crafts, often in located abandoned churches, convents or barracks. Such buildings were also used as libraries – often the special responsibility of the Libertarian Youth (*Federación Iberica de Juventudes Libertarias*) – museums, theatres, and cinemas, often the first ones ever to operate in these communities. There were also numerous communal cafés, cultural centres and even public baths. New roads were built, and the telephone network expanded.

Beyond these very important initiatives were many others in agriculture and industry, including new communal pastures and arable fields, flour mills, irrigation projects, water purification plants, an aluminium smelter, chemical works, coal mines, metal works and foundries, and factories producing noodles and spaghetti, sausages, and shoes. Several collectives set up experimental farms in order to breed and raise crops and livestock according

to modern methods, using synthetic fertilisers, modern equipment and machinery. The Regional Federation of the Levante established the University of Moncada which ran courses in animal husbandry, agronomy and arboriculture, and which was open to all members of the National Federation of Peasants. At Muniesa (Aragón), Saturnino Carod, leader of a *CNT* militia column but by birth an Aragóense peasant, developed an 'agro-town' whose purpose was to reverse rural depopulation, providing schools, theatres, cinemas and libraries, but also housing for livestock, a meat-cannery, and a sweet factory based on local honey production. The local flour mill was renovated, and its waste products used as livestock fodder.

IV

It is probably unwise to draw too many firm conclusions about the collectives of the Spanish revolution on the basis of such a limited survey. Instead, I will make some tentative comparisons with *News from Nowhere*, in order to judge whether there are any significant parallels between the two societies – one fictional, one real, of course – or not (Table 1). In terms of economy, there are indeed some similarities, both being based on 'local production for local need', with any surplus exchanged by collectives for goods and services they themselves could not produce. They were also obliged to operate during war time, however, so that it was also necessary to send supplies to the cities, and to the Front.³¹ In *Nowhere*, war has been abolished, and much food is grown in the cities themselves, but there must surely also have been some brought in from the countryside, although not by 'country people'.

In terms of polity, in *Nowhere* the local *folk mote* is the sovereign arena for decision making, and Morris describes a complex process whereby the consent of the minority is obtained, in order to avoid 'the tyranny of the majority'. In the Spanish collectives, the local General Assembly was also sovereign, and approved all decisions made by its Administrative and Technical Committees, but on the basis of simple majority voting. Local collectives were federated to District and Regional Committees, which arranged for coordination of exchange of supplies and even labour. In outline, this structure might seem to resemble the over-bureaucratic 'Divlab' of Ursula Le Guin's *The Dispossessed*, – for example in their role in introduction of the 'family wage' – against which it was eventually necessary to rebel.³² However, even in this matter, local collectives remained free to set their own wage levels and prices, so some degree of autonomy was retained.

According to Martin Delveaux, a 'Federation of Independent Communities' – 'a system of free communities living in harmonious federation with each

Table 1 – Tentative Comparison between *News from Nowhere* and Spanish Collectivisation

| | News from Nowhere | Spanish Collectives |
|---------------------|---|---|
| Timescale | 150–200 years | 1936–1939 |
| Economy | ‘Local production for local need’ Egalitarian exchange Surplus brought into cities | ‘Local production for local need’ Egalitarian exchange Surplus (if any) exchanged Supplies sent to war effort |
| Polity | Federation of Independent Communities Local <i>folk mote</i> Decisions by consent of the minority | Federal structure of Local, Dis- trict and Regional Committees General assembly of local collective sovereign Majority voting |
| Society | Egalitarian, unstratified Women still largely con- fined to traditional roles? | Nominally egalitarian, unstratified Women often still con- fined to traditional roles |
| Work | ‘Useful’, i.e. pleasurable Emphasis on self-expression Incentive to work the pleasure of creation | ‘Useful’, i.e. ‘useless’ work abolished Incentive to work the pros- perity of the collective |
| Money | None | Abolition attempted, but eventually replaced only for internal purposes |
| Formal education | None Learning based on practical experience | Widespread expansion of all kinds of education |
| Science | None? | Strong emphasis on applied scienc- es in order to increase efficiency of production especially in agriculture |

| | | |
|------------|--|---|
| Technology | Widespread revival of 'sustainable' medieval production techniques | New technologies seen as liberating from drudgery and poverty |
| Innovation | Invention or adoption of techniques in order to meet 'local need', and also promote increased self-expression? | New agricultural and industrial techniques favoured and sought after Also techniques of management and accounting in devolved structures |
| Modernity | Rejected | Embraced, but 'adapted for purpose' |

other, managing their own affairs by the free consent of their members' – also exists in Nowhere, 'operating production for local use, supplemented as necessary by transfers of essential materials and products not available everywhere between regions'. It may also have been a mechanism for identifying local shortages of labour, for as Old Hammond tells Guest, 'we have helped to populate other countries - where we were wanted and *were called for*'. What was also in operation was a 'Federation of Combined Workmen' which like the *CNT* (and *UGT*) played a significant part in 'How the Change came'.³³

Both Nowhere and the collectives are nominally unstratified, egalitarian societies. In Aragón, professionals such as doctors and teachers possessed the same rights and duties as other members of the collective, and received the same rations, although not in Barcelona, where doctors were given special conditions. Having referred to the question of women's role in Nowhere elsewhere in this volume,³⁴ and above in the collectives, it does seem that in both societies, and by modern standards, that more than a vestige of their traditional roles remained. However, as Murray Bookchin also suggests, men were also transformed by what many collectivists referred to as *la idea*.

From the age of thirteen, when I first joined the CNT, I held the belief that ... to live healthily, ... a man must live soberly ... I'd gone to work hardly knowing how to read or write, I'd rebelled when I saw the injustices done to the workers, especially the women. I'd joined the dyers union, as it then was, and made friends with anarcho-syndicalists, vegetarians, nudists. ... I never smoked, I never touched alcohol, I spent my life working and studying with my *compañera*;

I had the opportunity of becoming a ... foreman, but I always refused. I lived by my work ... I was an anarchist, but for all that, I abhor violence. I was always opposed to ... pre-war attempts ... to make the revolution by violent means. ... I believed that the revolution had to spring from the proletariat as a whole ...³⁵

As we know, in Nowhere, work has become pleasurable, and a vehicle for self-expression – a condition on which Morris insisted, and which, as I have written elsewhere, contributes greatly to the ‘green’ dimension of his thought.³⁶ Opportunities for self-expression via pleasurable tasks has replaced the prospect of starvation as the main incentive to labour. In the Spanish collectives, there was still much laborious work to be done, but, as explained, strenuous efforts were made to eliminate ‘useless’ work, and there was no shortage of volunteers for unpleasant tasks, which were rotated. The incentive to work therefore lay in promoting the coherence and prosperity of the collective, and the satisfaction of a job well done in the interests of all.

Perhaps one of the greatest differences between Nowhere and the Spanish collectives is in the matter of education. In Nowhere there are no schools, and only a few universities, promoting the art of knowledge, and not the art of commerce. Instead there is a great emphasis on practical learning, which Morris was confident would allow children to learn reading and mathematics, and even become multi-lingual. But in the collectives, there was great emphasis upon formal schooling, not only for children, but for adults, in the form of evening classes, guest lectures and other cultural sessions. As mentioned, for the collectivists, reducing illiteracy was a major project.

For some, one aspect of Nowhere which renders it ‘static’ is that there is no science.³⁷ In contrast, collectivisation led to establishment of a number of experimental stations designed to improve agriculture using modern methods, Saturnino Carod’s ‘agro-town’, the technical University of Moncada, and similar innovations in industry and management. Thus there was science in the collectives, but somewhat ironically, the activity it most resembled was the kind of highly applied science advocated by that old enemy of Nature, Francis Bacon – intended for the improvement of ‘the Mechanical Arts’.³⁸

New technologies were embraced not in order to make work pleasurable – which they may have, of course – but mainly to improve efficiency and productivity, and because they were seen as liberating from drudgery and poverty. Collectivisation therefore involved widespread innovation in a number of fields, and the collectives, although short lived, were not ‘static’. Neither, in my opinion, is Nowhere, where there has not only been great revival of craft skills and the decorative arts, but also of more ‘sustainable’ techniques of land management such as coppicing, pollarding, and multi-

cropping (fruit trees growing amongst the corn). Similar techniques were applied in one of the Levante collectives.³⁹ Beyond revival of past practises, however, there surely must have been innovation, in order to meet the principle of ‘local production for local need’, and to promote increased individual self-expression.

V

While the ‘leading passion’ of William Morris’s life was ‘hatred of modern civilisation’,⁴⁰ the Spanish collectivists were undoubtedly modernisers, and modernists in their outlook, and wished only to obtain what they saw as the benefits of modern civilisation – telephones, tractors, schools, health care – for themselves, and especially for their children. In this sense, there would appear to be few, if any similarities between *News from Nowhere* and the agrarian collectives of Aragón, and yet intuitively I feel that there are lessons of great value to be learned from both.

Over the next decades, we will be faced with a choice – between continued but unsustainable growth and ‘progress’ on a finite planet, or finding ways of living on it sustainably, but without resorting to the kind of *dystopia* which far too many greens still envisage; hence the importance of the ideas whose implications Morris explored so exquisitely in *News from Nowhere*. In contrast, the collectives of the Spanish Republic serve as a *practical* model of how a well-nigh sustainable society was organised at short notice, and by ordinary people themselves, and in the temporary absence of much in the way of a central authority (although they did possess the benefit of fossil fuel oil, which we may not). Thus although there are important differences of *practise* between Nowhere and Republican Spain – some of which might have disappeared given sufficient passage of time – there are sufficient similarities of *principle* to make the latter a highly valuable practical example.

If he did not believe in the model he set out in *News from Nowhere* – a work whose strength ‘rests on the totality and perfection of its vision’⁴¹ – why did William Morris, probably one of the busiest people who ever lived, spend about a year of his life writing it; first as a serial for *Commonweal*, and then turning it into a book? And did not Jane Morris describe it to Scawen Blunt as ‘a picture of what he (Morris) considers *likely to take place* later on, when Socialism shall have taken deeper roots’?⁴²

As already indicated, *News from Nowhere* is, for me, both an example of what earlier writers, notably E.P. Thompson, regarded as socialist aspiration (‘desire’) and of what a truly sustainable society must eventually be like; the expression of (ecological) ‘necessity’. Therefore, the kind of utopia it must be,

for me, is a ‘thermodynamic’ utopia – one which obeys the laws of physics (which as we all know, ‘canna be denied’),⁴³ and which is therefore emphatically not static. Although William Morris did not ‘predict’ collectivisation, his pre-figuring of the likely ecological future was extremely accurate. What he did set out to explore was what might happen if we made one simple but devastating change – devastating for capitalism, that is – the abolition of the profit motive. And what he found was that the salvation of the world does not lie solely, as Henry David Thoreau thought, in ‘Wildness’, but in ‘local production for local need’.

NOTES

1. Saturnino Carod, anarchist militia column leader, as quoted in Ronald Fraser, *Blood of Spain. The experience of Civil War, 1936-1939*, London: Penguin, p. 366.
2. Peter Faulkner, *Against the Age: an Introduction to William Morris*, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1980, p. 134; Roger Coleman, ‘Design and Technology in Nowhere’, *Journal of the William Morris Society*, IX, 1991, pp. 28-39 (p. 28). Afterwards *JWMS*; Ashton Nichols, ‘The Legacy of Blake and Shelley in Morris’s *News from Nowhere*’, *JWMS*, X, 1994, pp. 20-27 (p. 20); James Redmond, ed, *William Morris, News from Nowhere*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970, p. xviii (Afterwards *NfN*).
3. Northrop Frye in Ady Mineo, ‘Beyond the Law of the Father: the “New Woman” in *News from Nowhere*’, in Peter Faulkner & Peter Preston, *William Morris. Centenary Essays*, Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1996, pp. 200-206 (p. 200); Tony Pinkney, ‘Kinetic Utopias. H.G. Wells’s *A Modern Utopia* and *News from Nowhere*’, *JWMS*, XVI, 2005, pp. 49-55; Ady Mineo, ‘Eros unbound: sexual identities in *News from Nowhere*’, *JWMS*, IX, 1992, pp. 8-14 (p. 8); Christopher Hampton, ‘The Feast’s beginning: *News from Nowhere* and the utopian tradition’, in Stephen Coleman & Patrick O’Sullivan, *William Morris & News from Nowhere. A vision for our time*, Hartland, Devon, UK: Green Books, p. 44; A. L. Morton, *The English Utopia*, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1952, p. 164.
4. Krishnan Kumar, ‘*News from Nowhere*: the renewal of utopia’, *History of Political Thought*, 14, 1993, p. 143; Peter Marshall, *Nature’s Web. Rethinking our place on Earth*, London: Cassell, p. 314; David Pepper, *Modern Environmentalism. An introduction*, London: Routledge, 1996, p. 215; Krishnan Kumar, in Martin Delveaux, ‘From Pastoral Arcadia to Stable-State Mini-Cities: Morris’s *News from Nowhere* and Callenbach’s *Ecotopia*’, *JWMS*, XIV, 2000, pp. 75-81 (p. 76). For yet more characterisations of *News from Nowhere*

- (if any are still needed) see Ruth Kinna, 'The relevance of Morris's utopia', *The European Legacy*, 9, 2004, pp. 739-750; an article I found immensely enlightening. (Afterwards Kinna)
5. J. W Mackail, *The Life of William Morris*, 2 vols, London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1899, vol. 2, p. 256; Maurice Hewlett, review, *National Review*, August 1891, xvii, pp. 818-827 (In Peter Faulkner, *William Morris: the critical heritage*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973, pp. 343-353 (p. 345); Barbara Gribble, 'William Morris's *News from Nowhere*. A vision impaired', *JWMS*, VI, 3, 1985, pp. 16-22 (p. 16, my emphasis).
 6. Asa Briggs, ed, *William Morris. Selected writings and designs*, London: Pelican, 309 pp (p. 18); E.P. Thompson, *William Morris. Romantic to Revolutionary*, New York: Pantheon Books, 829 pp. (p. 693). (Afterwards E.P. Thompson); Paul Thompson, *The Work of William Morris*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (new edition), 1993, 318 pp. (p. 178); Fiona MacCarthy, *William Morris. A life for our time*, London: Faber & Faber, 1994, 780 pp. (p. 587).
 7. G.D.H. Cole, ed, *William Morris. Stories in Prose, Stories in Verse, Shorter Poems, Lectures and Essays*, New York: Random House, 1944 (first edition 1934), 671 pp. (pp. xvi-xvii)
 8. Stephen Coleman, 'How matters are managed: human nature and utopia', in Stephen Coleman & Patrick O'Sullivan, *William Morris & News from Nowhere. A vision for our time*, Hartland, Devon, UK: Green Books, pp. 75-89 (p. 77).
 9. Tony Pinkney, 'Versions of ecotopia in *News from Nowhere*', in Phillipa Bennett & Rosie Miles, eds, *William Morris in the Twentieth Century*, Oxford & Bern: Peter Lang AG, pp. 93-106. (Afterwards Pinkney, Ecotopia). See also Postscript to the second edition of E.P. Thompson (pp. 763-819).
 10. All as quoted by Kinna, pp. 739-742.
 11. Although not quite the sense in which Thompson used it; E.P. Thompson, pp. 717-730.
 12. In compiling this account, I have avoided secondary sources, and used only contemporary accounts, or later descriptions by people who experienced collectivisation first hand. As there is no space to give specific citations, all I can do is indicate that my sources were:- Agustín Souchy Bauer, *With the Peasants of Aragón. Libertarian Communism in the liberated areas*, Sanday, Orkney: Cienfuegos Press, 1982, 145 pp. (Afterwards Souchy); Sam Dolgoff, *Anarchist Collectives. Workers' Self-management in the Spanish revolution, 1936-1939*, New York: Free Line Editions, 1974, 195 pp. (Afterwards Dolgoff); Ronald Fraser, *The Blood of Spain. The experience of Civil war in Spain, 1936-1939*, London: Penguin, 1981, 628 pp. (Afterwards Fraser); Gaston Leval, *Collectives in the Spanish Revolution*, London: Freedom Press, 1975, 368 pp.;

- George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia. And Looking Back on the Spanish War*, London: Penguin, 1966, 247 pp.; José Peirats, *Anarchists in the Spanish Revolution*, London: Freedom Press, 1990, 388 pp. (afterwards Peirats); Vernon Richards, ed, *Spain 1936-1939. Social Revolution and Counter-Revolution. Selections from the anarchist fortnightly Spain and the World*, London: Freedom Press, 1990, 269 pp. Detailed citations below.
13. Gerald Brenan, *The Spanish Labyrinth: an account of the social and political background of the Civil War*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1943, 384 pp.
 14. Franz Borkenau, *The Spanish Cockpit. An eyewitness account of the political and social conflicts of the Spanish Civil War*, London: Faber & Faber, 1937, pp. 84-85. *Asalto* = member of the Assault Guard (*Guardia de Asalto*; Republican urban riot police). For a more graphic, and probably more typical account, see Ralph Bates, 'Compañero Sagasta burns a church', *Left Review*, 13 October 1936. As in Valentine Cunningham, ed, *Spanish Front. Writers on the Civil War*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986, pp. III-III2.
 15. Victor Blanco; Participant account of beginnings of collectivisation in Alcampel, Aragón, July 1936; Souchy, pp. 129-142.
 16. Souchy, 'Workers' self-management in industry', in Dolgoff, p. 82.
 17. The eastern part of Spain, including Valencia and Murcia provinces.
 18. Gaston Leval in Dolgoff, pp. 122-126.
 19. Tim O'Riordan, *Environmentalism*, London: Pion Press (second edition), 1981, pp. 7-11.
 20. Dolgoff, p. 71; Stanley Payne, *The Spanish Revolution*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1970, pp. 240-241; Peirats, pp. 131, 135, 139.
 21. As many readers probably already appreciate, few subjects are still more contentious in left-wing circles, even seventy five years on, than the events, or otherwise, of the Spanish Civil War: and a serious problem of writing about any aspect of the War is that so many accounts seek to justify a particular ideological position. Thus, some writers state that most collectivisation was 'forced', others that it was entirely voluntary, while others give more mixed accounts. Favourable reports of collectivisation are mostly by writers who are or were anarchists of some kind, whereas negative accounts are by non-anarchists, or those opposed to anarchist ideas. I have tried to avoid this kind of ideological infighting, but that may, of course, have undermined the value of my account.
 22. Fraser, pp. 370-371; Peirats, p. 139.
 23. Gaston Leval & Alardo Prats, 'The Collectivisation in Graus', in Dolgoff, p. 140; Peirats, p. 140; Gaston Leval, 'The Collective in Mas de las Matas', in Dolgoff, p. 161.
 24. Peirats, p. 146.

25. Souchy, pp. 139-140.
26. 'Money and Exchange'; in Dolgoff, pp. 70-76.
27. Gaston Leval, 'The characteristics of the libertarian collectives', in Dolgoff, p. 167; Peirats, p. 141; Peirats in Dolgoff, p. 114.
28. Souchy, p. 70; Gaston Leval, 'The Collective in Binefar', in Dolgoff, p. 147.
29. Martha Ackelsberg, *Free Women of Spain. Anarchism and the struggle for the emancipation of women*, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1991, pp. 97-109; Fraser, pp. 285-291.
30. Murray Bookchin, *The Spanish Anarchists. The heroic years, 1868-1936*, New York: Free Life Editions, 1977, pp. 129-131. (Afterwards Bookchin)
31. Opponents of collectivisation maintain that preoccupation with utopian schemes was one of the main causes of defeat of the Republic.
32. Ursula Le Guin, *The Dispossessed*, London: Panther, 1975, 319 pp; See also Pinkney, Ecotopia, p. 103.
33. 'The Dawn of a New Epoch', 1886, in *Signs of Change*, London: Reeves & Turner, 1888. As in <http://www.marxists.org/archive/morris/works/1888/signs/index.htm>; Martin Delveaux, '“O me! O me! How I love the earth”: William Morris's *News from Nowhere* and the birth of sustainable society', *Contemporary Justice Review*, 8, 2005, p. 141; Adam Buick, 'A market by the way – the economics of Nowhere', in Stephen Coleman & Patrick O'Sullivan, eds, *William Morris & News from Nowhere. A vision for our time*, Hartland, Devon: Green Books, pp. 151-168; *NfN*, p. 62, my italics, Chapter XVII, pp. 87-111.
34. Patrick O'Sullivan, 'Morris the Red, Morris the Green: a partial review', *JWMS*, this volume, pp. 22-38
35. Andreu Capdevila, CNT textile worker, later (reluctantly) member of the Economics Council of Catalonia; Fraser, p. 215. See also Bookchin, pp. 55-59, p. 91.
36. Patrick O'Sullivan, 'The ending of the journey: William Morris, News from Nowhere and ecology', in Stephen Coleman & Patrick O'Sullivan, eds, *William Morris & News from Nowhere. A vision for our time*, Hartland, Devon, UK: Green Books, 1990, pp. 169-182; *NfN*, pp. 77-84.
37. Pinkney, Ecotopia, p. 98.
38. Francis Bacon, *The Novum Organum*, 1620, (Peter Urbach & John Gibson, transl.), London: Open Court, 1994, 364 pp.
39. Gaston Leval, 'Collectivisation in Carcagente', in Dolgoff, p. 153.
40. 'How I became a socialist', *Justice*, 16 June, 1894. In Clive Wilmer, ed, *William Morris. News from Nowhere and other writings*, Penguin Classics, 1993, pp. 377-383.
41. Kinna, p. 740.
42. Longer (ca 20 months) if we believe the story about it being provoked by

Morris's reading Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*. Nicholas Salmon with Derek Wall, *The William Morris Chronology*, Bristol: Thoemmes Press, pp. 216-235; Jane Morris to Wilfred Scawen Blunt, 11 February 1890, *ibid.*, p. 225. (My emphasis).

43. Described many years ago by Barry Commoner (*The Closing Circle. Nature, Man and technology*, New York: Alfred Knopf, 1971, pp. 33-48) as

(1) Everything is connected to everything else

(2) You can never throw anything away

(3) Nature knows best

(4) There is no such thing as a free lunch

Of these, the first two are the Laws of Conservation of Energy and of Matter; the first also represents the First Law of Thermodynamics, and the fourth the Second Law. Only the third is in any way contentious.