



# Editorial

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In a letter addressed to his wife Jane, dated 18 March 1884, Morris records that:

On Sunday I performed a religious function: I was loth to go, but did not dislike it when I did go: [...] I trudged all the way from Tottenham Court Road up to Highgate Cemetery (with a red ribbon in my button-hole) at the tale of various banners [...] to do honour to the memory of Karl Marx and the Commune.<sup>1</sup>

The mangled syntax of the double negative – ‘did not dislike it’ – goes some way towards capturing the ambivalence of Morris’s attitude towards the routine of political agitation, in this instance taking the form of a symbolically commemorative procession. Yet he nonetheless understood such a routine to be an important part of the process of socialist education. It is not necessarily a coincidence that a certain mood of double negativity seems to define the present conjuncture as well. In his introduction to *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (2005), Fredric Jameson offers the following formulation, again a double negative, by way of an attempt to redeem the utopian impulse from its pejorative identification with Stalinism:

For those only too wary of the motives of its critics, yet no less conscious of Utopia’s structural ambiguities, those mindful of the very real political function of the idea and the program of Utopia in our time, the slogan of anti-anti-Utopianism might well offer the best working strategy.<sup>2</sup>

Writing against Jean-François Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition* (1979), Matthew Beaumont has similarly noted that ‘[t]he dramatic rise, since the Seattle demonstration in 1999, of the anti-capitalist movement [...] betrays what might be called an incredulity towards incredulity towards metanarratives’.<sup>3</sup> In seeking to find a vocabulary with which to articulate the persistence of various forms of political commitment in the so-called ‘postmodern’ age, Beaumont, too, reaches for a twofold negation which he suggests is characteristic of the ‘contradictory and ambiguous theoretical conjuncture’ that we inhabit.<sup>4</sup> This working strategy – a pessimism of the intellect which is still, if only just, coupled to a wilful, as opposed to merely wishful, optimism – was already familiar to Morris as long ago as the 1880s.

2016 has been quite a year for utopia. The quincentennial anniversary celebrations of Thomas More’s *Utopia* (1516) have seen numerous kinds of commemorative, critical,

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curatorial and creative activity, not all of which can be recorded here. It might be noted, in passing, that Morris attracted some attention in this regard as part of the Radio 4 *Dangerous Visions* series, which included an adaptation of *News from Nowhere* by Sarah Wood. This dramatisation was described on Tony Pinkney's *William Morris Unbound* blog as 'vigorous and ingenious and, in terms of our own political struggles, inspiring too'.<sup>5</sup> The connection between utopianism and contemporary politics was a keynote of Morris's own response to More. In his Foreword to the 1893 Kelmscott Press edition of *Utopia*, Morris wrote that the text 'has been considered by the moderns as nothing more serious than a charming literary exercise, spiced with the interest given to it by the allusions to the history of the time, and by our knowledge of the career of its author'. He went on to add that, latterly, it had become just as widely known as 'a Socialist tract familiar to the meetings and debating rooms of the political party which was but lately like the "cloud as big as a man's hand"'. For the avoidance of doubt, he added that 'we Socialists should look upon it as a link between the surviving Communism of the Middle Ages [...] and the hopeful and practical progressive movement of to-day'.<sup>6</sup>

In this special issue of the *Journal*, Ruth Levitas elaborates on Morris's engagement with More in order to emphasise the contemporary relevance of some of the programmatic documents to which Morris put his name, including the *Manifesto of the Socialist League* and the *Statement of Principles of the Hammersmith Socialist Society*. She focuses, in particular, on the important principle of substantive equality, and the way in which Morris's commitment to propagating this idea rings true in the contemporary neoliberal era (which began to appear especially fragile during 2016). David Leopold offers an extended close reading of six different functions of utopia in *News from Nowhere*, expertly specifying the text's role in the domains of construction, criticism, clarification, context-revelation, consolation and cheer. Françoise Kunka examines the heretofore overlooked presence of two French socialists, Cécile Desroches and Jeanne Deroin, in Morris's political network, and elucidates their connections to the utopian socialist and feminist movements of the 1830s and 1840s. The utopian impulse is also very much at work in David Mabb's *A Provisional Memorial to Nuclear Disarmament*, an installation that has been exhibited in both the UK and Sweden. In juxtaposing Morris's pattern designs with the slogans and symbols of the anti-nuclear movement, Mabb reminds us that the issue of nuclear disarmament, and the struggle for a nuclear-free world, remains of the utmost importance for the 'hopeful and practical progressive movement' of our own day.

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#### NOTES

1. *The Collected Letters of William Morris*, ed. by Norman Kelvin, 4 vols in 5 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984-1996), II, p. 270.
2. Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*, 2nd edn (London: Verso, 2007), p. xvi.
3. Matthew Beaumont, 'Preface', *As Radical as Reality Itself: Essays on Marxism and Art for the 21st Century*, ed. by Matthew Beaumont, Andrew Hemingway, Esther Leslie and John Roberts (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007), p. 14.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Makiko Minow-Pinkney, 'Radio 4 updates Utopia', *William Morris Unbound* (blog), 25 May 2016, available online: <<http://williammorrisunbound.blogspot.co.uk/2016/05/radio-4-updates-utopia.html>> [accessed 16/11/2016].
6. *William Morris: Artist, Writer, Socialist*, ed. by May Morris, 2 vols (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1936), I, p. 289.