



More, Morris, Utopia ... and us

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The occasion of this special issue of the *JWMS* is, like many other utopia-themed events this year, the quincentenary of Thomas More's book *Utopia* (1516). Suddenly, and no doubt briefly, the topic of utopia, which has for so long been marginal and somewhat disreputable, has a wider public presence. My own view is that More's book is not, in fact, all that important. It did not invent the process of imagining the world otherwise, which occurs in different forms and with different contents in many cultures before and since More. Nor did More invent, as some argue, the form of utopia, inaugurating the literary genre of the utopian novel, for More's *Utopia* is not a novel. More did, however, give us the word Utopia – that pun on 'good place' and 'no place' which is reproduced in contemporary culture in the dismissal of utopianism as, at best, perfect and impossible, and, at worst, the instigator of totalitarianism and violence. I have dealt with these attitudes to utopia more fully elsewhere, and add here merely that they have been tediously manifest throughout 2016, both in discussions of utopia and in the wider political culture.¹

In this article, I argue that Morris's utopianism is of far greater significance for the contemporary age than More's, partly because of its content, but more

particularly because of its connection to a transformative politics. However, it is useful to begin from Morris's own reflections on More. For More's *Utopia* was among the books produced by Morris at the Kelmscott Press, and he wrote a Foreword to it for that edition. Morris suggests that More's *Utopia* was the subject of discussion among socialists during the 1890s: it has 'become a Socialist tract familiar to the meetings and debating rooms of the political party', and this because the question of 'the best state of a publike weale' had become a central issue of the time.² Morris, however, argues that More's work is best seen as expressing the survival of the communism of the middle ages, and thus as the last of the old rather than the first of the new – a useful warning against reading Morris's own politics as essentially medievalist and backward-looking.

More's *Utopia* is divided into two books. The second book is a dialogue describing the imaginary island of Utopia and its social arrangements. Book One (written later) considers at length the advisability of accepting the role of adviser to a king. It also contains a vehement protest at the state of England, condemning, as Morris put it, 'the injustice and cruelty of the revolution which destroyed the peasant life of England, and turned it into a grazing farm for the moneyed gentry; creating withal at one stroke the propertyless wage-earner, and the master-less vagrant'.³ The political economist Ellen Meiksins Wood, who died earlier this year, argued consistently that this moment of enclosure is the founding moment of modern capitalism because it is this phenomenon which creates the class of landless labourers compelled to sell their labour power.⁴ Thus, for me, the most powerful passage from *Utopia* is that excoriating critique in which More rails against the extent of enclosures, protesting about the increasing numbers of sheep, reared for their valuable wool, which drive people off the land; and against a social organisation which drives people to poverty, starvation and crime, and then hangs paupers for theft:

Forsooth [...] your sheep that were wont to be so meek and tame and so small eaters, now become so great devourers and so wild, that they eat up and swallow down the very men themselves. They consume, destroy and devour whole fields, houses and cities. For look in what parts of the realm doth grow the finest and therefore dearest wool, there noblemen and gentlemen, yea and certain abbots [...] not contenting themselves with the yearly revenues and profits that were wont to grow to their forefathers and predecessors of their lands [...] leave no room for tillage. They enclose all into pastures; they throw down houses; they pluck down towns and leave nothing standing but only the church to be made a sheep-house [...]. The husbandmen be thrust out of their own [...]. [T]hey must needs depart away [...] men, women, husbands,

wives, fatherless children, widows, [...] their whole household small in substance and much in number. And when they have wandered abroad [...] what else can they do but steal, and then justly partly be hanged, or else go about a-begging?⁵

Morris claims that More saw the root causes of this injustice more clearly than any other man of his own day, and, in identifying this as the core of More's insight, so too does Morris.

Morris also argues that *Utopia* combines aspects of More's own temperament: his sympathy with the communistic elements of medieval society; his protest against the ugly brutality of commercialism; his enthusiasm for the Renaissance; and his personal asceticism. These moods, says Morris, are combined with a clarity and beauty of style that renders *Utopia* a 'living work of art'.⁶ This is an important passage because it recalls Morris's cautionary observations about utopian speculation in his review of Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1888): '[t]he only safe way of reading a utopia is to consider it as the expression of the temperament of its author'.⁷ Morris's own utopianism is often regarded as coterminous with his utopian romance *News from Nowhere* (1890), partly because of a false identification of utopia with a distinct literary genre. And *News from Nowhere* does occupy a special place in Morris's writing, and in utopian literature. It initially appeared serialised in the political journal *Commonweal*, and thus was directed at an already politically-engaged audience. As is widely known, it was a specific response to Bellamy's vision of a highly organised and regimented society put forward in *Looking Backward*. Yet Morris was ambivalent about the utopian mode itself. In conventional Marxist terms he recognised the impossibility of defining the needs and wants of the future, and the historical limits placed on the process of imagining itself. He wrote that 'it is impossible to build up a scheme for the society of the future, for no man can really think himself out of his own days; his palace of days to come can only be constructed by the aspirations forced on him by his present surroundings, and from his dreams of the life of the past, which themselves cannot fail to be more or less unsubstantial imaginings'.⁸ His strictures about the dangers of taking Bellamy's vision as a plan for the future apply equally to his own:

there is a certain danger in books such as this: a twofold danger; for there will be some temperaments to whom the answer given to the question 'How shall we live then?' will be pleasing and satisfactory, others to whom it will be displeasing and unsatisfactory. The danger to the first is that they will accept it with all its necessary errors and fallacies (which such a book *must* abound in) as conclusive statements of facts and rules of action, which will warp their

efforts into futile directions. The danger to the second [...] is that they also accepting its speculations as facts, will be inclined to say, 'If *that* is Socialism, we won't help its advent, as it holds out no hope to us'.⁹

It was, he said, 'essential that the ideal of the new society should be always kept before the eyes of the mass of the working-classes, lest the *continuity* of the demands of the people should be broken, or lest they should be misdirected'; and yet there was a real danger that such speculation might become detached from political struggle altogether, and 'be left adrift on the barren shore of Utopianism'.¹⁰

There has been much ink spilt in the interpretation of *News from Nowhere* and Morris's utopianism. Morris's own comments suggest that it is both a direct political statement and an excursion into a non-literal imaginary. It is clearly intended to illustrate his objections to Bellamy and to set out the basis of his own socialism:

there are some Socialists who do not think that that the problem of the organization of life and necessary labour can be dealt with by a huge national centralization, working by a kind of magic for which no one feels himself responsible; that on the contrary it will be necessary for the unit of administration to be small enough for every citizen to feel himself responsible for its details, and be interested in them; that individual men cannot shuffle off the business of life on to the shoulders of an abstraction called the State, but must deal with it in conscious association with each other. That variety of life is as much an aim of true Communism as equality of condition, and that nothing but an union of these two will bring about real freedom. That modern nationalities are mere artificial devices for the commercial war that we seek to put an end to, and will disappear with it. And, finally, that art, using that word in its widest and due signification, is not a mere adjunct of life which free and happy men can do without, but the necessary expression and indispensable instrument of human happiness.¹¹

Yet given Morris's own warnings about literalism, it is hard to disagree with Miguel Abensour that the purpose of the text is not to offer a plan, but to 'embody in the forms of fantasy alternative values sketched as an alternative way of life', and therefore to disrupt – at an existential level – the taken-for-granted nature of the present.¹²

Morris's imaginative reach is greater than More's. Fredric Jameson argues that More's most important contribution was to imagine the abolition of private property.¹³ Morris, of course, does this too, and more thoroughly than More. For in More's

Utopia, heads of household (who are all male) are gatekeepers of consumption, controlling the nature and quantity of goods that the household can draw from the common store – in practice a limitation on equality, and one which does not occur in *News from Nowhere*. The issue of access to land is more significant. Both More and Morris identify that moment of enclosure as critical to the development of modern capitalism. Yet More does not imaginatively reverse the process of enclosure and dispossession: in *Utopia* the land is cultivated collectively through the compulsory rotation of labour, and there are restrictions on travel. Morris, in contrast, does imagine such a reversal: after the revolution – or as part of it – people flocked into the depopulated country villages and ‘flung themselves upon the freed land like a wild beast upon his prey’, a process which he conceded was ‘awkward to deal with’.¹⁴

But Morris’s utopianism was not confined to *News from Nowhere*. If we think of utopia more broadly, as the expression of the desire for a better way of being or a better way of living, we can see that utopianism is diffused throughout Morris’s more political writings as well. We can, indeed, usefully think of utopia as a method, a means of exploring and interrogating potential alternative futures rather than developing and implementing political plans. As method, utopia must be provisional and dialogical, rather than rigid and exhortatory. And while *News from Nowhere* clearly deploys such a method, Morris also uses it repeatedly in his lectures and essays. Time and again, he contrasts prevailing conditions with an imagined alternative. This is the method of such pieces as, for example, ‘Useful Work *versus* Useless Toil’ (1884), ‘How We Live and How We Might Live’ (1885) and ‘What Socialists Want’ (1887). His journalism for *Justice* and *Commonweal* fills two fat volumes edited by Nick Salmon. Moreover, Morris’s political writing, both fictional and non-fictional, was embedded in his practical political activity; he was an indefatigable campaigner, and his *Socialist Diary*, edited by Florence Boos, documents a punishing schedule of meetings, street corner agitation and lectures.¹⁵ Morris joined the Democratic Federation, later the Social Democratic Federation (SDF), in 1883, aged forty-nine. Morris, with others including Eleanor Marx and Ernest Belfort Bax, seceded from the SDF at the end of 1884 to form the Socialist League. This group also split in 1890, when the Hammersmith Branch of the Socialist League was reconstituted as the Hammersmith Socialist Society.

As part of his political activity for the Democratic Federation, Morris, along with Henry Mayers Hyndman, wrote the sixty-two-page *Summary of the Principles of Socialism* (1884). In 1885, Morris wrote the five or six pages of the *Manifesto of the Socialist League*, and, five years later, the equally succinct *Statement of Principles of the Hammersmith Socialist Society* (1890). Notwithstanding the anti-statist character of Morris’s 1889 review of Bellamy’s *Looking Backward*, there is a strong emphasis on state action in these

documents, especially in the programmes of the Democratic Federation and the League. The Democratic Federation document is a long and rather tedious rehearsal of changes in the forces and relations of production from pre-history onwards, setting out the myriad ways in which the fruits of the labour of ordinary people have been extracted by social elites. Only in the last few pages do late-nineteenth-century society and the alternative of socialism come to the forefront. And here we have proposals that are, perhaps, rather like Clause Four of the Labour Party constitution which stood until 1995: '[t]o secure for the workers by hand or by brain the full fruits of their industry, and the most equitable distribution thereof that may be possible, upon the basis of the common ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange'.¹⁶ The Democratic Federation's *Summary of the Principles of Socialism* demands the universal franchise, 'not that the vote will free [people] from economical oppression, but because in this way alone is a peaceable issue possible for the possessing classes'. If there is a claim that running of mines, factories and workshops requires a degree of workers' control, its prescriptions are largely statist. It calls for the collective ownership of land; the 'immediate management and ownership of the railways by the State', together with shipping, national banks, national credit establishments, state and communal centres of distribution. While some may see this as confiscation, it is presented as being rightly understood as restitution – restitution to the people of what has been stolen from them. And while there is a call for 'equality' which is not elaborated, the document says that 'our first principle as Socialists is that all should be well-fed, well-housed, well-educated'; and that '[g]ood housing for all cannot be got if greed is to organise the new arrangements: good food and physical, mental and moral education for all classes cannot be obtained if factitious superiority and harmful social distinctions are to be kept up'.¹⁷

The *Manifesto of the Socialist League* is much briefer. It opens with an assertion of the fundamental difference and essential antagonism between the interests of the owning class and everyone else; people are treated merely as instruments of profit. The proposed solution to this unjust situation is that 'the land, the capital, the machinery, factories, workshops, stores, means of transit, mines, banking, all means of production and distribution of wealth, must be declared and treated as the common property of all'; and Morris suggests that the necessary labour of the world will be reduced to two or three hours daily, while enabling 'every one to live decently'. There is some very careful positioning – not surprisingly given the recent split between the SDF and the League. State Socialism, says Morris, would merely make concessions to the working class while leaving the system of capital and wages in place. The League aims at the realisation of 'complete Revolutionary Socialism', impossible in one country alone. The strategy of the League is to educate and

organise, and Morris also insists that the League's members must be the change they wish to see. There must be no distinctions of dignity or rank in the movement: '[w]e are working *for* equality and brotherhood for all the world, and it is only *through* equality and brotherhood that we can make our work effective'.¹⁸

The *Statement of Principles of the Hammersmith Socialist Society* also spends some time on political positioning – this time as neither State Socialists (Fabians) or Anarchists. But it is more positive than the Socialist League manifesto about its aims. It opens with an assertion of the need for socialism as the condition of 'true society': the present basis is privilege, servitude and exclusion; the further basis must be equality of condition. This document also makes one of the earliest references to social exclusion, but rightly understands it as intrinsic to the nature of the prevailing economic system. Capitalist society is 'an exclusive society, a combination of privileged persons united for the purpose of excluding the majority of the population from participation in the wealth they (the workers) make'; and the 'workers [...] are not a part of capitalist society, [...] they are but its machinery'. Again, the strategy is to agitate and organise: the 'special work of the Hammersmith Socialist Society and others who are neither State Socialists nor Anarchists [is] to make Socialists'.¹⁹

By this stage, having read Bellamy's *Looking Backward* in 1888, reviewed it in 1889, and written *News from Nowhere* in 1890, Morris is concerned to distinguish the 'machinery' of socialism from 'true and complete Socialism [...] what I should call Communism', as he put it in 1893.²⁰ The importance of the manifestos is two-fold. They are a significant public face of the organisations Morris supported. All three documents unequivocally distinguish between the interests of a small owning class and everyone else; all use the term socialism for the alternative; and equality of condition is identified as the defining characteristic of socialism itself. Morris reiterates this in his Foreword to More's *Utopia*:

But lastly we Socialists cannot forget that [*Utopia's*] qualities and excellencies meet to produce a steady expression of the longing for a society of equality of condition; a society in which the individual man can scarcely conceive of his existence apart from the Commonwealth of which he forms a portion. This, which is the essence of [More's] book, is the essence also of the struggle in which we are engaged.²¹

The claim for equality of condition cuts across the later and current anti-socialist opposition between 'equality of opportunity' and the imputed uniformity of 'equality of outcome'. For Morris, equality of condition is the prerequisite for the development of true difference based on people's different capacities and desires. It is a concern

that runs through Morris's political lectures and essays, which are a more extensive political resource than the manifestos, as well as a recurrent deployment of the utopian method. In 'What Socialists Want', a lecture delivered at least seven times, Morris addresses the questions of equality, difference and collective provision free at the point of need:

Socialists no more than other people believe that persons are naturally equal: there are amongst men all varieties of disposition, and desires, and degrees of capacity; nevertheless these differences and inequalities are very much increased by the circumstances amongst which a man lives and by those that surrounded the lives of his parents: and these circumstances are more or less under the control of society, that is of the ordered arrangement of persons among which we live [...].

I have admitted that men are not naturally equal, yet all persons must admit that there are certain things which we all need; in that respect we are equal: we all need food, clothes, and shelter, and clearly if we need these things we need them in sufficiency, and of good quality, or else we have not really got them. Since then these needs are common to all, it follows that if anyone is not able to satisfy his needs in these respects there is something wrong somewhere, either with nature, or the man himself, or with the society of which he forms a part and which therefore dictates to him how he shall live [...]. Again then I say that if a person has not leisure, pleasure, and education they fall short of human necessities and there is something wrong somewhere.

So you see whatever inequality I admit among people, I claim this equality that everybody should have full enough food, clothes, and housing, and full enough leisure, pleasure, and education; and that everybody should have a certainty of these necessities: in this case we should be equal as Socialists use the word [...].²²

Morris argues (as does Marx in the 'Critique of the Gotha Programme') that to consider a person's right to a share in the social product in relation to their capacities and contribution is to regard them not as a full member of society, not as a whole human being. He talks of goods and services being free at the point of use:

I have been speaking as if there would still be some social inequalities, as if one man would earn more money than another, though none would earn less than enough to keep him comfortably; but I do not think that this would last long: we should find that when we ceased to fight with each other for livelihood

and to rob each other that all ordinary necessities and comforts would be so abundant and so cheap that they would be free for everybody to take as he needed: of course we should pay for them, but in the lump [...].²³

He proposes the nationalisation of the means of production, land and the railways, adding, again, '[o]f course we should between us have to pay for the maintenance and renewal of these things, but we should find it more convenient to pay for them in the lump, and everybody to use them freely just as we do for our bridges and highways and our postal service'.²⁴

These political statements, that are now about one hundred and thirty years old, can be given both historical and presentist readings – that is, they can be looked at historically in terms of the situations they grew out of and spoke to, or, alternatively, they can be looked at in terms of their current and immediate relevance. One of the astonishing – and terrifying – things about Morris's writing is how relevant so much of it still sounds. Yet one correspondent, Mercia MacDermott, writing in the *Morning Star* weeks after the 2015 Conservative election victory, on the day of a large anti-austerity demonstration organised by the People's Assembly, complained that the movement does not make enough use of Morris, and especially his rich legacy of political writing.²⁵ By 'the Movement', she meant, I think, the whole gamut of organisations and non-affiliated individuals that challenge capitalist orthodoxy in different ways and to different degrees. Some might call it the labour movement, but it includes trades unions, parts of the Labour Party, the Green Party, other socialist, communist and anarchist groups, as well as others, identifiable by their banners and placards, along with the People's Assembly itself. 'The Movement' may be roughly identified with what Morris called 'the Cause', by which he meant socialism, or 'the struggle'.

Morris is not entirely absent from the Movement. There were occasional references to Morris on the march, as in the banner of the Waltham Forest branch of the new Left Unity party, which bears the quotation 'to give hope to the many oppressed and fear to the few oppressors, that is our business'. There are occasional portraits of Morris on older-style Labour or trade union banners. There are echoes in the Strawberry Thieves, one of many socialist choirs up and down the land, continuing the tradition of the socialist choir at Kelmscott House, conducted by Gustav Holst and then May Morris. There are echoes, too, of the Arts and Crafts legacy of Morris in the crafting of some of the more individual, personal banners. One such banner was embroidered with the phrase: 'hearts starve as well as bodies: give us bread, but give us roses', invoking James Oppenheim's poem 'Bread and Roses', associated with the 1912 textile workers' strike in the United States. Yet

Morris's appearances are few, alongside occasional references to Shelley or Tom Paine, and his profile is not particularly high.

The William Morris Society's own replica of the banner of the Hammersmith Branch of the Socialist League has had at least two outings on Trades Union Congress and anti-austerity demonstrations since 2010, and has provided something of a talking point. Some people said: 'who are you, I've never heard of you'; others: 'you haven't existed for a hundred years'. A handful immediately recognised the reference and said: 'you must be the William Morris Society'. For Morris does remain a resource for a wider culture of dissent. The contemporary visual artist Jeremy Deller makes use of Morris, both as image and as author. Deller's mural at the 2012 Venice biennale featured Morris as a colossus hurling Roman Abramovich's yacht into the lagoon, while Deller, along with Scott King, has also produced posters for the Save the Arts campaign, emblazoned with Morris's statement: 'I do not want art for a few any more than I want education for a few, or freedom for a few'. Bracket Press produced a poster for Queen Elizabeth's Diamond Jubilee in 2012, using Morris's response to Queen Victoria's jubilee in 1887 printed over a delicate Morris design: 'Hideous, revolting and vulgar tomfoolery. One's indignation swells pretty much to the bursting point'. Morris has also become a resource for the green movement because of his early and intense concern with environmental issues.

MacDermott was arguing, however, that more use should be made of Morris's political writing, especially such essays as 'How We Live and How We Might Live', 'Useful Work *versus* Useless Toil' and 'A Factory as it Might be' – and that such essays need to be made more easily available as pamphlets, and be routinely on sale at Morris's houses. 'How We Live and How We Might Live' was actually republished by the Socialist Society in both 1990 and 2000; 'Useful Work *versus* Useless Toil' was reprinted (with some other matter) in 2008. It cost £4.99, whereas the original was a penny pamphlet, equivalent to thirty-eight pence in today's money. So MacDermott may have a point, although thanks to the work of Nick Salmon, they are all available freely – together with virtually all of Morris's writing discussed here – on the internet at: <www.marxists.org>.

Morris's political writing has substantive relevance when given presentist readings. Take that line from 'What Socialists Want': 'I claim this equality that everybody should have full enough food, clothes, and housing, and full enough leisure, pleasure, and education; and that everybody should have a certainty of these necessities: in this case we should be equal as Socialists use the word'.²⁶ Housing, food and education have never been more central to contemporary political agitation, as house prices and rents spiral, housing benefit cuts produce a process of class cleansing (in London especially), food bank use increases and university fees escalate. Meanwhile, Morris's

insistence on making goods and services free at the point of use ('of course we would pay for them, but in the lump') was fundamental to the welfare state. Even to the limited extent that a welfare state was achieved, it is now being systematically dismantled.

Since the financial crash of 2008, questions of equality and inequality have become much more salient. Until then, many people would have argued that concepts such as class war were completely passé. The Blair-led Labour governments between 1997 and 2008 were supremely relaxed about the very rich, and did nothing to reverse the huge rise in inequality that took place during the Thatcher years from 1979 to 1990. Equality, in so far as it figured in political discourse, was about equality of opportunity, not substantive equality. Notably, the equalities legislation in the European Union prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, religion, gender, sex, sexual orientation, disability or age, but makes no such stipulation about class or economic inequality. Those of us writing about substantive inequality had, after the late 1980s, a very small audience.

It is useful to remind ourselves of the change in inequality since Thatcher's election in 1979. Britain was less unequal during 1976-77 than at any time before or since. The share of national income taken by the top 10 per cent of the population rose from about 20 per cent to about 30 per cent between 1977 and 1990, and has then remained more or less constant. But there has been a continuing increase in the share going to the top 1 per cent. That share, according to the Institute for Fiscal Studies, rose from 5.7 per cent in 1990 to 8.3 per cent in 2013-14. Wealth is even more concentrated. According to the annual *Sunday Times Rich List*, the top 1 per cent doubled their collective wealth during the ten years leading up to 2015. The total wealth of the top one thousand individuals resident in Britain (most of whom are not British) rose by 5.4 per cent or £29.5bn in the period from 2014 to 2015, to a total of over £547bn. The threshold for inclusion in the *Rich List* became £100m, and there were 117 billionaires. Far from wealth trickling down, it floods up. Britain, indeed, is pretty well as unequal as it was in Morris's own day. Morris's claim for equality of condition is a radical challenge to this state of affairs. Indeed, it is a radical challenge to the ideas of 'fairness' bandied about by the likes of Will Hutton, and proponents of meritocratic differences in reward.²⁷

Inequality – even rapidly growing inequality – can pass relatively unnoticed when 'economic growth' – a disturbing and muddy concept that I don't have space to explore here – means that most people's real incomes are rising. When growth stops, and incomes fall, as happened after the crash, the distribution becomes more apparent and more salient. The bail-out of the banks following the 2008 crash is the largest hand-out to the owning class since 1834, when slave-owners were 'compensated' for

the value of their alienated property. The costs of this bail-out were similarly born by the general population through consumption taxes, which may have some relevance to the unrest of the 1830s and the development of the labour movement at that time. But the bank bail-out, and the related imposition of austerity policies, put inequality back on the political agenda. There has since been a veritable tsunami of books on the subject, not least Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* (2013), but also books like Danny Dorling's *Inequality and the 1%* (2014) and Andrew Sayer's *Why We Can't Afford the Rich* (2014).²⁸ In 2011, the Occupy movement, beginning as Occupy Wall Street, and spreading to cities across the world, including London, used the slogan 'We are the 99 per cent' – mobilised against the bankers, the global elite and the 1 per cent. Suddenly the relational distinction Morris and Marx made between the owning class and the working class was reinstated, and the working class were no longer equated simply with blue-collar manual workers, but included again 'the workers by hand or by brain'. Although Occupy has come and gone, the theme of the 1 per cent remains current and urgent.

These concerns are more noticeable in extra-parliamentary action – in the anti-austerity movement, and in the movement in which Jeremy Corbyn has been positioned as a figurehead within and beyond the Labour Party. Now all this may evaporate into perennial protest as Corbyn's opponents claim and, indeed, hope. But what it shows is that there *is* still a movement and a cause, along with a wide constituency of people looking for some means of articulating their dissent. The failure of political elites to engage with the problems of de-industrialisation, reductions in availability of social housing, lack of decent and secure employment, cuts in benefits and the underfunding (and hence disempowering) of local authorities bears much of the blame for the rage that resulted in the vote for Brexit. The question of how to organise politically under such adverse circumstances was something that occupied Morris a great deal. While Morris was largely anti-parliamentarian (although he was of course writing at a time when there was not universal suffrage), he struggled with this position. Six months before he died, Morris suggested the need for a new socialist party, even for a parliamentary presence, despite the risks of such an organisation being co-opted to sustain the present system:

We have recently gone through a general election in Great Britain, the results of which have made the grossest reactionists (the Tories) jubilant, and I suspect have given some pleasure, even amidst their defeat, to the ordinary Liberal politicians [...].

For the rest it was clear that whenever the reactionaries chose to administer such a check to Socialism they could do so with certainty of success,

since there is no Socialist party in England [...]. And to my mind the answer to that attack should be to organize a real definite Socialist party, and, for the sake of the necessary gain, to accept the probable dangers of such a position [...].

This Socialist party must include the whole of the genuine labor movement, that is, whatever in it is founded on principle, and is not a mere temporary business squabble [...].²⁹

Here Morris speaks *directly* to our current dilemmas about political organisation and the struggle for livelihoods and for greater equality.

Having said that, both Morris and More are important primarily because they endorse a method of thinking that we sorely need in the present moment. Both are engaged in the imaginative prefiguration of a different, better society in which the needs of all trump the greed of private capital, which has indeed been abolished. This holistic thinking about social alternatives is utopian – not in the sense of unrealistic daydreaming, but as the most serious thought about the possibilities of a better world. We need utopia. But we should above all understand utopia as a method of exploring possible futures. It combines an architectural mode of imagining alternative social possibilities with a critical, archaeological mode that probes the gaps and weaknesses in such speculations. These are combined with the necessary question of what kinds of people are possible or desirable, and how (far) human nature may be shaped by social and historical circumstances – the ontological mode of utopian method.³⁰ Both More and Morris deploy all three of these modes, and we deploy all three when we explore and criticise the substance of their utopias. But Morris understands also that any utopian vision is the product of its time. Thus it needs to be understood as reflexive and related to the circumstances of its source. It needs to be understood as provisional, because no man or woman can think him- or herself out of his or her own time. It needs to be dialogic, because we must work out what we are going to do in conscious association with each other; and for the same reason, it needs to be embedded in political engagement. The movement should, indeed, make more use of Morris, both in substance and in method. Our own historical conjuncture challenges us to find a way of living within ecological limits while dealing effectively with the consequences of climate change, conflict and the increasing inequalities wreaked by global capitalism. We need all the help that we can get.

NOTES

1. See Ruth Levitas, *Utopia as Method: The Imaginary Reconstitution of Society* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). (Afterwards Levitas).
2. *William Morris: Artist, Writer, Socialist*, ed. by May Morris, 2 vols (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1936), I, p. 289. (Afterwards, AWS).
3. *Ibid.*, I, p. 290.
4. See Ellen Meiksins Wood, *The Origin of Capitalism: A Longer View* (London: Verso, 2002), pp. 108-9.
5. Thomas More, *Utopia* (London: Dent 1985), pp. 26-27.
6. AWS, I, p. 291.
7. William Morris, *Political Writings: Contributions to 'Justice' and 'Commonweal' 1883-1890*, ed. by Nicholas Salmon (Bristol: Thoemmes, 1994), p. 420. (Afterwards Morris, *Political Writings*).
8. William Morris and Ernest Belfort Bax, *Socialism: Its Growth and Outcome* (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1893), pp. 17-18. (Afterwards Morris and Bax).
9. Morris, *Political Writings*, p. 420.
10. Morris and Bax, pp. 278-79.
11. Morris, *Political Writings*, pp. 424-25.
12. Cited in E.P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (London: Merlin, 1977), pp. 790-91. (Afterwards Thompson). See also Miguel Abensour, 'William Morris: The Politics of Romance', in Max Blechman, ed., *Revolutionary Romanticism* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1999), pp. 125-161.
13. Fredric Jameson, *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire called Utopia and Other Science Fictions* (London: Verso, 2005), pp. 12, 20.
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29. Kelvin, IV, Appendix A, pp. 393-400 (398-400). Morris's article, 'The Present Outlook of Socialism in England' (1896), reprinted in Kelvin's edition of Morris's *Collected Letters*, first appeared in the US magazine, the *Forum*, hence the Americanised spelling of 'labor'.
30. Levitas, pp. 153-220.