Editorial

In his political journalism, Morris was sometimes given to using estrangement devices: at one point, he imagines what a 'dispassionate observer from another planet' might say about the various ructions at a socialist conference; at another, he imagines himself having 'dropped down from the moon into a London reading-room', which makes the newspaper reports about urban poverty and the inadequacy of philanthropic responses appear all the more absurd and inhumane.[1] The figure of an imagined extraterrestrial visitor is also ubiquitous in *News from Nowhere*, where William Guest's invocations of this being constitute an instance of cognitive estrangement, insofar as they help to consolidate the text's 'imaginative framework alternative to the author's empirical environment' (to quote Darko Suvin's well-known formulation).[2]

Over the past few months, the routines of everyday life have not required the shock of utopian estrangement in order to become defamiliarised, or to feel strange. Instead, an unprecedented and ongoing global pandemic has upended everything, bringing all kinds of economic, social and other activities to a mandatory halt because of the overriding concern to protect public health, at least insofar as that is possible in the face of a novel virus with no known cure. That this has happened on a global scale – or an almost global scale – has also irrevocably altered the horizon of the possible. In responding to the emergency with unprecedented levels of state intervention, a large number of national governments (with some notable and catastrophic exceptions) have demonstrated that emergencies *can* be met with decisive and swift action.

That which was, until recently, perceived as impossible has been shown to be possible, while the world as we knew it simply stopped turning. Slavoj Žižek has put it in the following terms:

> As the world-wide epidemic develops, we need to be aware that market mechanisms will not be enough to prevent chaos and hunger. Measures that appear to most of us today as "Communist" will have to be considered on a global level: coordination of production and distribution will have to take place outside the coordinates of the market.[3]

He is more forthright later in the book: '[f]ull unconditional solidarity and a globally coordinated response are needed, a new form of what was once called Communism', and he identifies the World Health Organisation (recently defunded by the megalomaniac in the White House) as a 'first vague model of such […] global coordination'.[4] The very logic of the virus dictates such coordination: unconditional global solidarity is currently a matter of

rational self-interest and egoistic calculation; in the search for a vaccine, cooperation necessarily trumps competition.

The communism that Žižek envisages here is a kind of plaintive war communism caught within the trap of necessity, and is thus quite unlike the plentiful, utopian version that Morris imagined might flourish in a condition of substantive freedom. But if one were to borrow Morris's conceit about the being from another planet, and combine it with a Wellsian exercise in speculative time-travelling, one might wonder what an extraterritorial visitor, arriving to the planet a few hundred years hence, would be able to glean about the current moment in history. Our species is, after all, the first to inhabit this particular planet that has developed the technological capacity to monitor its own extinction, so the visitor may well arrive into the midst of a vast solitude, finding only the ruins and broken arches of a dead world.

If any credence can be given to the Argentine revolutionary J. Posadas's delightfully whimsical hypothesis that only a fully communist civilisation could ever be capable of achieving intergalactic space travel, then the afore-mentioned visitor would not take too long to connect the visible signs of epochal social collapse to the unsustainability of the regime of extraction capitalism that held sway during what sections of the perished species, with their parochially linear conception of historical time, referred to as the nineteenth to twenty-third centuries.[5] Calling up the relevant datasets at a computer terminal long fallen into disuse, the visitor would notice that 2020 saw the largest-ever annual diminution in carbon emissions, and may begin to speculate about whether the latterly extinct species of homo sapiens had begun, albeit belatedly, to take remedial, rapid and coordinated action to stave off the worst effects of the climate emergency that had eventually engulfed them.[6] Looking across the graph, however, the visitor would then notice that the precipitous drop was (as in all likelihood it will turn out to be) a blip, and so will be obliged to seek other potential causes for the momentary reduction in carbon emissions, which, had it only been sustained, would have meant that some kind of life might have clung on tenaciously to offer a greeting.

Setting aside this speculative projection, it remains to be seen whether the macro-interventionist logic that has so far governed the global public health emergency will be mobilised to meet the similarly global climate emergency. That is, in any case, a political question, and as Žižek warns: '[t]here is no return to normal, the new "normal" will have to be constructed on the ruins of our old lives, or we will find ourselves in a new barbarism whose signs are already clearly discernible'.[7] Of more immediate concern to many is the way in which the pandemic has exacerbated and exposed the very inequities that the regime of extraction capitalism relies upon to reproduce itself. Most visible, perhaps, is the way in which Black Lives Matter activists have forced the pace of a reckoning with the violent legacies of slavery and imperialism. As Tony Pinkney writes,

> Such moments of uprising, messy, confused and violent though they always will be, are also moments of political self-definition and choice: either you take a stand with the oppressed, however modest that gesture may be, or, through silence, you allow State repression to run its ugly course.[8]

During the 1880s, Morris took his stand in defence of revolutionary socialism, and he

presciently linked his critique of imperialism with a commitment to do away with the metropolitan 'great centres breeding race hatred and commercial jealousy'.[9]

By way of another thought-experiment, this time a counter-factual one, it might also be observed that had the miniscule Socialist League ever attained any kind of political power, it is unlikely that many of the statues commemorating imperialists and slave-holders that are now being torn down or removed would ever have been commissioned and erected in the first place – the vogue for such statues being a largely late-Victorian phenomenon. The pages of the League's *Commonweal* journal are replete with scathing condemnation of many of these figures. To take just one example, the Scottish socialist James Bain, writing from Cape Town in July 1890, fiercely castigated the 'ambition' and 'greed' of Cecil Rhodes, whose title Bains ironically enumerated as the 'Hon. Cecil, Lord of the (South African) Heavens and Earth, Premier of the Cape Colony, Amalgamator of the Diamond Mines, Paramount Chief of Mashono and Matabele lands, Commissioner of Crown Lands, and God only knows what else'.[10] In the wake of the toppling of the Colston statue in Bristol – an act which has given fresh impetus to the long-running Rhodes Must Fall campaign that began at the University of Cape Town – Oriel College, Oxford has only just belatedly (and hopefully definitively) agreed to remove its Rhodes statue after rowing back on an earlier commitment to do so in response to howls of anguish from outraged donors.[11]

Much of the present debate about public statuary and the legacies of imperialism is focused, for good reason, on issues of diversity and representation, and what new statues should be put up to fill the recently vacated pedestals. One question that Morris's utopian reimagining of Trafalgar Square in *News from Nowhere* might lead us to consider concerns what it would mean to move beyond an aesthetic of monumentality altogether. Such presentist redeployments of Morris's utopian imagination have long been a feature of Morris studies. In the present issue of this *Journal*, John Murphy superbly demonstrates this in his discussion of the British New Left's engagement with Morris and William Blake during the 1950s, ranging across several New Left journals, including the *New Reasoner* and *Universities and Left Review*. As Murphy persuasively shows, several writers aligned with the New Left, from E.P. Thompson to Kenneth Muir, emphasised the way in which Morris and Blake both 'augured what a romantic poetics married to radical politics might conjure – not just a culture of critique, but the "fullness of life" itself – a visionary "city of art" to which all citizens would contribute as co-creators and collaborators' (p. 25). Elsewhere in this issue, Peter Faulkner reassesses Morris's time as a student at Exeter College, Oxford.

Unfortunately, the Covid library closures have prevented David and Sheila Latham from completing the next instalment of their biannual bibliography, which would otherwise have appeared in this issue. It is to be hoped that it will appear in the subsequent issue, if circumstances allow. Peter Faulkner's obituary of Fiona MacCarthy and Jan Marsh's tribute to her follow this editorial. I must also inform readers that it is possible that the next issue will be delayed, or that it may take the form of a double-issue which would appear a year from now during the summer of 2021. The Society is considering these options in order carefully to guard its finances in view of the ongoing pandemic.

In happier news, Ingrid Hanson has kindly agreed to join the editorial board. Ingrid's work will be known to many readers of the *Journal*, not least because of her excellent monograph

William Morris and the Uses of Violence, 1856-1890 (2013). The board will benefit greatly from her input and expertise in the years ahead.

Owen Holland
Editor

NOTES

1. William Morris, *Journalism: Contributions to 'Commonweal', 1885–1890*, ed. by Nicholas Salmon (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1996), pp. 593, 631.
2. Darko Suvin, *Positions and Presuppositions in Science Fiction* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), p. 66. For a helpful elaboration of Suvin's concept of cognitive estrangement, see Patrick Parrinder, 'Revisiting Suvin's Poetics of Science Fiction', in *Learning from Other Worlds: Estrangement, Cognition and the Politics of Science Fiction and Utopia*, ed. by Patrick Parrinder (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000), pp. 36-50.
3. Slavoj Žižek, *Pandemic!: COVID-19 Shakes the World* (New York: OR Books, 2020), p. 12.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 56, 41. For a related argument in defence of 'ecological Leninism', see Andreas Malm's forthcoming book, *Corona, Climate, Chronic Emergency: War Communism in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Verso, 2020).
5. For a recent account of Posadas's thought, see A.M. Gittlitz, *I Want to Believe: Posadism, UFOs and Apocalypse Communism* (London: Pluto Press, 2020). For a very illuminating discussion of Morris's political thought in the context of extraction capitalism, see Elizabeth Carolyn Miller, 'William Morris, Extraction Capitalism, and the Aesthetics of Surface', *Victorian Studies*, 57: 3 (2015), 395-404.
6. Simon Evans, 'Coronavirus set to cause largest ever annual fall in CO_2 emissions', *CarbonBrief: Clear on Climate* [website], 9 April 2020, available online: <https://www.carbonbrief.org/analysis-coronavirus-set-to-cause-largest-ever-annual-fall-in-co2-emissions> [last accessed 12 July 2020].
7. Žižek, p. 3. As he adds later in the book: '[i]n the larger order of things, we are just a species with no special importance'. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
8. Tony Pinkney, '"I Can't Breathe": In Solidarity', *William Morris Unbound* [blog], 2 June 2020, available online: <http://williammorrisunbound.blogspot.com/2020/06/i-cant-breathe-in-solidarity.html> [last accessed 12 July 2020].
9. Morris, *Journalism*, p. 570.
10. J. Bain, 'In Southern Africa', *Commonweal*, 6: 241 (23 August 1890), 270-71.
11. See Natalya Din-Kariuki, 'After Rhodes Falls', *LRB blog* [blog], 29 June 2020, available online: <https://www.lrb.co.uk/blog/2020/june/after-rhodes-falls> [last accessed 12 July 2020].