

Edward Bellamy's Review of *News from Nowhere*

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Many readers of this journal will be familiar with William Morris's review of Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward: 2000–1887*, that spectacularly successful American socialist utopia which spawned the political movement of Nationalism on its publication in Boston in 1888. Morris's review first appeared in *Commonweal* on 22 June 1889, and was reprinted by May Morris in 1934.¹ It appears in full in some recent collections of Morris's writings (for example, Clive Wilmer's volume in the Penguin Classics series) and is regularly discussed in essays and books devoted to *News from Nowhere*.

The case Morris makes against Bellamy's utopia in his review is an important intellectual and political staging post on the way to *News from Nowhere*, which began to be serialised in *Commonweal* on 11 January 1890. Many critics have asserted that Morris's utopia is a riposte to *Looking Backward*, a book which it in fact never mentions. Though we have no direct statement to that effect in Morris's own writings, his close political comrade Andreas Scheu in a letter of 1909 recalled Morris as saying: 'I must surely write something as a counterblast to this'.² Whether that twenty-year-old memory can be fully trusted I am not sure. Did Scheu actually hear this, or is it something he would have wanted Morris to say and then began to believe that he actually *had* said? Either way, Morris's critical review of Bellamy's book, which he sees as too urban, too modern, too centralist, too technological, clearly does lay the groundwork for his own venture into utopian writing, which is famously the very reverse of all these things.

All this is relatively well-known. What is less familiar is the fact that Edward Bellamy himself wrote a brief review of *News from Nowhere* when it appeared in book form in 1890 in an unauthorised edition by the American publisher Robert Brothers of Boston. Believing that this text ought to be better known to Morris enthusiasts than it currently is, we reprint it below, from *The New Nation*, 14

February 1891, p. 47. Robert Brothers had reproduced the text of Morris's utopia directly from *Commonweal*, without the emendations which the author would make for the Reeves & Turner book version of 1891; and this fact accounts for Bellamy's assertion that it is 'the England of the 20th century' that William Guest wakes up to in *News from Nowhere*. For in the *Commonweal* text, the socialist revolution takes place in the early twentieth century, whereas in the Reeves & Turner version the civil war is pushed back to 1952–54, and Guest's arrival in Nowhere is a good deal later even than that.

The great political issue between Bellamy and Morris comes out in the latter's statement at the beginning of his second paragraph that 'Mr Morris appears to belong to the school of anarchistic rather than to the state socialists', a claim which anticipates Peter Kropotkin's more flamboyant assertion of 1896 that *News from Nowhere* is 'perhaps the most thoroughly and deeply Anarchistic conception of future society that has ever been written'.³ For Bellamy, the sheer lack of system or administration in Morris's utopia renders it implausible from the very start: no society, he contends, could possibly function purely on neighbourly or communistic good will alone, as Nowhere appears to. Various defences of Morris on this point have been offered over the years. We might say that he protects his back in advance against such accusations by describing his book (in its subtitle) as merely 'Some Chapters' from a utopian romance, which implies that additional sections describing other aspects of Nowhere, including its administrative dimensions, are in principle possible, though not here provided. Alternatively, one could emphasise, as Paul Meier has notably done, the crucial distinction *News from Nowhere* makes in its very first sentence between the immediate Morrow of the Revolution and the latter's fully-developed long-term future, a temporal distinction which can be politically reformulated as one between socialism and communism.⁴ In the first phase, a strong centralised Bellamyian state might still be necessary in order to push through key socialist reforms, and to deal with residual political opposition, with any 'old grumblers' or 'Obstinate Refusers' who might still prove a significant problem; but in the latter phase, one hundred and fifty or two hundred years later, communist patterns of behaviour will have bedded down so deeply into the collective psyche that such institutions will indeed, in the famous Marxist formulation, have simply withered away. Or third, we could argue, as Miguel Abensour has done, that Morris is writing an entirely new kind of utopia, in which the kind of 'politico-juridical model-building' beloved of Bellamy has given way to an exploratory 'education of desire'.⁵ From this viewpoint, Bellamy's criticism of the institutional vagueness of Morris's utopian arrangements is not so much politically wrong as generically misguided, a matter of applying an old set of reading expectations (which might do perfectly well for Thomas More's *Utopia* or Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis*) to a radically new kind of utopian text.

In one aspect at least, however, Bellamy approves of Nowhere's lack of institutions, since he accepts the case that, in a society of equals, police and courts will no longer be necessary in order to deal with such rare crimes of passion as may still take place: public disapprobation and the operation of conscience in the offender will do all that needs doing by way of punishment and atonement. I find Bellamy's formulations about the Nowherian men 'losing their wits' over the distractingly lovely women of the new age to be rather cavalier, but this perhaps indicates a problem in *News from Nowhere* itself, not just in its reviewer. That homicide or manslaughter arising from sexual jealousy takes place in Nowhere has often been taken as a sign of Morris's mature acknowledgement of human complexity: perhaps we can socially engineer a good economy, but we cannot rationalise away the illogic of sexual desire. But not only does this contradict old Hammond's early assertions to Guest about the stoical manner in which the Nowherians successfully overcome romantic and sexual disappointment, but it also contradicts the book's general emphasis on the radical reshaping of 'human nature' in a collective future. If communistic habits of thought and behaviour have now gone so deep that no economic institutions are necessary, why should the single area of male sexual possessiveness escape this transformation?

Bellamy's utopia, by way of reaction or 'counterblast', deeply shaped *News from Nowhere*, perhaps excessively so, arguably driving it to over-compensate for Bellamy's own industrialism and centralism. But it may also be the case that *News from Nowhere* in turn affected Bellamy's utopian thinking. For in 1897 he published a sequel to *Looking Backward* entitled *Equality*,⁶ which in part simply extends the social thinking of the earlier book, but in other ways reacts significantly against it. The focus of *Looking Backward* is indeed relentlessly urban, but in its successor the population is spread more evenly around the countryside – the undoing of the city-country opposition having been a key goal of *News from Nowhere* itself. In 1888 Bellamy's utopian transition to socialism was entirely peaceful, the gentlest of evolutions rather than revolution; but in *Equality* it is allowed that there had been considerable violence, even if that was presumably nowhere near the scale of Morris's bloody civil war of 1952–54. And while in *Looking Backward* the organisation of the industrial army is rigid indeed, there are certain limited moves towards more participatory democracy in its sequel, with officials subject to recall.

In these various ways, then, as Darko Suvin and Alex Macdonald have suggested, *Equality* has perhaps learned some lessons from Bellamy's attentive reading of *News from Nowhere*,⁷ and indeed we might even suggest that Bellamy's sequel actually makes a place for William Morris himself within it. Morris famously declared that, if he were dragooned into Bellamy's industrial army, he would just lie upon his back and kick, and in *Equality* there is a place where you can in effect go and do just that. For the book contains a Thoreau-like reservation

where, furnished with a collection of seeds and tools, Morrisian objectors to the regimentation of an industrial army can work out their own salvation.

Edward Bellamy's review of *News from Nowhere* is thus not just a necessary part of the reception history of Morris's own text, but may have had as significant an impact on its author's own subsequent utopian thinking as Morris's 1889 review of *Looking Backward* had earlier had upon his.

The review now follows.

NOTES

1. May Morris, *William Morris, Artist, Writer, Socialist. Vol. 2, Morris as a Socialist*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1936, (New York: Russell & Russell, 1966), pp. 501–507.
2. Cited in J. Alex Macdonald, 'The Revision of *News from Nowhere*', *Journal of the William Morris Society*, III, No. 2, Spring 1976, p. 9.
3. Denys P. Leighton, ed, *Lives of Victorian Political Figures IV: Volume 2 Thomas Hill Green and William Morris*, London: Pickering & Chatto, 2009, p. 389.
4. See Paul Meier, *William Morris: The Marxist Dreamer*, Brighton: Harvester Books (2 vols), 1978, especially Vol. 2, pp. 288–327.
5. Miguel Abensour, 'William Morris: The Politics of Romance', in Max Blechman, ed, *Revolutionary Romanticism: A Drunken Boat Anthology*, City Lights Books: San Francisco, 1999, pp. 125–161.
6. Edward Bellamy, *Equality*, London: William Heinemann, 1897, 365 pp.
7. Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science-Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979, p. 175; Alex Macdonald, ed, *Looking Backward: 2000–1887*, Broadview Press, 2003, p. 35.

NEWS FROM NOWHERE

William Morris' idea of the good time coming

Perhaps the most distinguished of the many converts which socialism in England has made from among the cultured class is William Morris, author of *The Earthly Paradise*, and one of the greatest of living poets. His *News from Nowhere*, just published in this country by Roberts Brothers, is a setting forth in the form of a clever fiction of his ideal of the good time coming, and is exceedingly

well worth reading. The tale is on this wise: After a heated discussion with his friends at the socialist league, the narrator goes home and to bed. When he wakes he is surprised to find it summer, whereas it was winter when he went to bed. On going forth he discovers that everything else is changed, and in fine that it is the England of the 20th century that he has awakened to. Then follows the story of a week's wanderings among the friendly people by whom he finds himself surrounded, his experience naturally consisting largely of questions and answers born of his surprise at what he sees about him and the surprise of those about him at his surprise. All the while he has a vague idea, just as one so often has in dreams, that he is dreaming, and it finally turns out that he was dreaming, and he awakes again much disgusted in this musty 19th century. This dream business is very cleverly managed, though of course it is merely the contrivance for getting the author's social ideas in objective form.

Mr. Morris appears to belong to the school of anarchistic rather than to the state socialists. That is to say, he believes that the present system of private capitalism once destroyed, voluntary co-operation, with little or no governmental administration, will be necessary to bring about the ideal social system. This is in strong contrast with the theory of nationalism, which holds that no amount of moral excellence or good feeling on the part of the community will enable them to dispense with a great deal of system in order so to co-ordinate their efforts as to obtain the best economic results. In the sense of a force to restrain and punish, governmental administration may no doubt be dispensed with in proportion as a better social system shall be introduced; but in no degree will any degree of moral improvement lessen the necessity of a strictly economic administration for the directing of the productive and distributive machinery. This is a distinction which anarchists too commonly overlook, when they argue against the necessity of government.

In Mr. Morris's ideal England there appears to be no central government, but merely an aggregation of communes or towns, each of which regulates its own affairs on a strictly democratic basis. We are given no suggestions as to how any form of administration extending beyond town limits is conducted, as, for instance, the railroad system. We are told that manufacturing has been so much improved that the greatest fear of the people is that presently there will be no more work to do; but as to the industrial system, by which this result has been effected, Mr. Morris is provokingly silent, although nothing is more certain than that a great deal of system must have been required to produce the effect described.

Such glimpses as we are given of the business methods of the people pique our curiosity still further as to how they manage to make the ends meet. In

the stores and markets everybody takes what he wants and as much of it as he wishes, and that is all there is about it. This is delightful, and we are not to be understood as saying that the plan under given conditions would be any more impossible than it is now for the community to maintain public roads and bridges for everybody to use at pleasure. We simply wish very much that Mr. Morris had told us more about the system. In Mr. Morris's England there appears to be no punishment for crime, not even homicide. It is found that society, being justly organized and artificial temptations to crime being absent, there is very little of it, and that the force of an absolutely united sentiment of public reprobation, together with his own conscience, is quite sufficient punishment for an offender. We believe that Mr. Morris is right in describing this order of things as a characteristic of the coming era of social improvement.

There is one sort of crime which Mr. Morris gives us slight hopes of ever getting rid of, — homicide growing out of love quarrels. If, indeed, the women are going to be so distractingly lovely in the new age as Mr. Morris describes them, the men are scarcely to be blamed for losing their wits over them. Upon this theme he dwells with all a poet's enthusiasm. Upon the subject of education he has some very pregnant suggestions, though here too, as in the matter of economics, we wish he had been a little more definite. In one respect we regret to be obliged to make an issue with Mr. Morris. It is quite excusable for an Englishman to select England as the locality of his 20th century Eden; but we object to his describing America as being at that time so far behindhand in social progress as to be an object of pity.