

Twentieth-Century Perception in *News from Nowhere*

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The influence of Marxism on Morris has often been noted, even to the extent of the assertion that: "In the whole position adopted by Morris there is a striking resemblance to that expressed by Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology*"; and further, that the utopian vision of *News from Nowhere* was "directly inspired by Marxist philosophy".¹ Yet relatively little has been written of Morris' potential contribution to Marxism. This deficiency stems partly from the literary establishment's failure to understand the actual dynamic and diversity of the homogeneously-inclined term "Marxism"; and partly from the reluctance of political theorists to accept that someone they perceive as having aesthetic tendencies could make a valid contribution to the development of ideological analysis.

It is important not to conceive of Marxism as static. Marxist theories proliferated and developed considerably after the publication of *The Communist Manifesto* in 1848, and have continued to do so, often with bitter acrimony among the disciples. Much of the controversy has historically been about the relation between Marx's definition of the economic base of society and those elements he termed superstructure. The latter consists, *a priori*, of all social elements that are not strictly economic in function.

The decade in which Marx himself died, the 1880s, was characterised by conflict over doctrinal interpretation. Thompson summarises the intellectual confusion, and recognises Morris's contribution to the central debate, and the value of his thinking for subsequent, and very different, decades:

In the tangled context of his time he associated himself generally with the Marxist tradition ... and proposed certain qualifications to the already-hardening doctrines of the Marxists of the 1880s, all of which assume ... greater importance in the present time.²

Because Morris was more interested in culture than in theoretical economics he was able to extend the concept of ideology and superstructure beyond its existing boundaries: out of simple politics, coercive notions of the State, struggles in the industrial arena. Morris did not deny the immense importance of these factors, which is why he remained within the Marxist tradition, but his vision encompassed far more subtle areas of influence and possible conflict in the manner in which all personal experiences are mediated through cultural assumptions, whose sources appear to be clear but are actually opaque.

Since *News from Nowhere* is not a specifically doctrinal work Morris did not linguistically define his concept, but in the novel illustrated its manifestations; and in doing so pointed a way forward out of what is now regarded as "vulgar Marxism" into a more complex and subtle social analysis. The slowness of the time-scale is not so indicative of the value of the ideas as the power of the entrenched rigidity of orthodoxy

into which Marxism has sunk at various periods of fundamental challenge.

It was not until the 1920s that Antonio Gramsci reintroduced, from the Ancient Greek, the word hegemony into political debate; and it took a further three decades or more before the innate conservatism of the movement truly accepted the concept as having helped transform vulgar Marxism into a twentieth-century outlook. Yet the ideas Gramsci developed and defined pervade *News from Nowhere*. The notion of hegemony is intrinsic to the novel's structure and thematic argument, for where vulgar Marxism taught that the oppression of the masses occurred solely through the organs and institutions of repression, in *News from Nowhere* cultural – in its broadest definition – guidance, or leadership, is shown to be just as effective and important as socio-economic and legal control.

The concept of hegemony is used to analyse the circumstances in which the dominant group in society exercises moral and intellectual leadership over the interests and concerns of subordinate groups within the framework by the imposition of its own, dominant, culture and values. Old Hammond's explanation indicates Morris' conceptual leap:

“... we have ceased to be *artificially* foolish. The folly which comes by nature, the unwisdom of the immature man, or the older man caught in a trap, we must put up with that, nor are we much ashamed of it; but to be conventionally sensitive or sentimental – my friend, I am old and perhaps disappointed, but at least I think we have cast off *some* of the follies of the older world.”³

This is prophetic of Gramsci's point of departure. A key argument is that the hegemonic processes involve the voluntary and active participation of the oppressed classes. Subordinate groups subscribe to a belief in the identity of their interests with those of the dominant group:

... the State is the entire complex of practical and theoretical activities with which the ruling class not only justifies and maintains its dominance, but manages *to win the active consent* of those whom it rules ... but *with this consent organised*, and not generic and vague as it is expressed in the instance of elections.⁴

Since by 1884 most British adult males had a secret vote at elections but there had been no significant movement towards socialism, Morris could hardly have been unaware that forces beyond the simple instruments of repression – though these were still active, as on Bloody Sunday – were in operation. The failure to elect revolutionary M.P.s – all the early representatives of labour were parliamentarians and democrats rather than strict Marxists – and the absence of any popular anti-parliamentary mass violence – an irony of Bloody Sunday being that the unconstitutional violence was propagated by the forces of the State – suggests that the labouring classes generally did subscribe to the view that their interests were broadly, though not always specifically, identical with those of the rulers. The outbreaks of popular patriotism a few years before and after the writing of *News from Nowhere* tend to confirm this too. The identification was basically grounded in a consensual belief in the efficacy of the parliamentary political system.

Gramsci attributes a great deal of importance to commonly held values in this process: In acquiring one's conception of the world one always belongs to a particular grouping which is that of all the social elements which share the same mode of thinking and acting.⁵

So the values of common culture are generated by social forces, but, because they are

commonly held, have the power of being thought natural and therefore irrevocable. Gramsci emphasises this in the maxim “Man ... is a product of history, not nature”.⁶

Morris, in the Victorian context, obviously saw that the challenge concerned the question of epistemology: the nature of how individuals accumulate knowledge; not simply in the sense of formal education, but, perhaps more importantly, through broader cultural influences. He italicises “artificially” in the previous quotation from *News from Nowhere*, drawing attention to the weight of social conventions in determining common assumptions. The technique recurs at the novel’s conclusion when Ellen’s spirit is accredited with expunging “the infallible maxims of your [the reader’s] day”.⁷ Morris was half a century ahead of most Marxists in his perception of the significance of popular attitudes, embedded in the common culture, in the formation and maintaining of the social hierarchy.

Morris’s exposure of this factor is woven through the fabric of the book, and is both more subtle and more pervasive than his overt social criticism and satire. It begins with the narrator’s first meeting in the visionary London, when he offers payment to the sculler who has taken him across the Thames:

I put my hand into my waistcoat-pocket, and said, “How much?” ... He still seemed puzzled, but not at all offended ... “I have heard of this kind of thing ... it seems to us a troublesome and roundabout custom ... you see this ferrying ... is my *business*, which I would do for anybody; so to take gifts in connection with it would look very queer ...” And he laughed loud and merrily, as if the idea of being paid for his work was a very funny joke.⁸

Here the italics accentuate the irony, which is also carried by the sly linguistics of the semantic shift of “*business*” and the interchange of meaning between payment and gift. Language itself is a social construct, and in showing this when Saussure was only just founding the theories of linguistic Structuralism, Morris was again in the intellectual vanguard. The shopping expedition to replace his pipe also ends in Guest’s confusion. It is parallel to the reader’s estrangement in a world in which “normal” cultural practices are shown to be artificial – the creation of a social construction of reality rather than an inherent fact of life.

A good deal of the argument’s power emanates from Morris’s technique of making his narrator a rather conventional late-Victorian. Although not uncritical of his period, Guest is not presented in a particularly radical light. It is not the narrator – nor the author directly – who questions the infallible maxims, but the structure of the novel. The semantic theme, for instance, recurs in various forms, always to confound Guest himself:

I said: “What I mean is, that I haven’t seen any poor people about – not one.”

He knit his brows, looked puzzled, and said: “No, naturally; if anybody is poorly, he is likely to be within doors, or at best crawling about the garden: but I don’t know of any one sick at present. Why should you expect to see poorly people on the road?”

“No, no,” I said; “I don’t mean sick people ...”⁹

The notion of a society without poverty is indeed confusing to the conventionally minded. Similarly the concept of work is taken into an unexpected linguistic register. Guest fails miserably to explain the nineteenth-century meaning to Dick, who simply – and somewhat offensively for the Victorian sensibility of Guest – finds it all another joke:

... he burst out laughing at last, and said: “Excuse me, neighbours, but I can’t help it. Fancy people not liking to work! – it’s too ridiculous ...” And he laughed out again

most boisterously; rather too much so, I thought, for his usual good manners; and I laughed with him for company's sake, but from the teeth outward only; for I saw nothing funny in people not liking to work, as you may well imagine.¹⁰

It is more than Guest as an individual character who is being satirised here. The narrator is a representative of his class and educational background: the sense of superiority Guest betrays, when clearly mentally inferior to his hosts, and the touch of well-mannered hypocrisy in the outward smile, confirm the character's emblematic role. All this is elaborated when Guest meets the road-menders, who were:

... looking much like a boating party at Oxford would have looked in the days I remembered, and not more troubled with their work ... They were laughing and talking merrily ...¹¹

The nature of work is a central concept in the novel, reflecting the importance of the Victorian doctrine of industry – in both that word's senses. In presenting this challenge Morris is attacking one of the sacred beliefs of his time. It is closely related to the capitalist ethic, which Morris also projects through a new perception achieved in a similar manner.

Despite his difficulties with semantics and experiences about work, Guest persists in putting forward, as a late-Victorian gentleman would, the nineteenth-century theory of labour in his discussion with Hammond:

“... how [do] you get people to work when there is no reward of labour, and especially how [do] you get them to work strenuously?”¹²

Hammond argues a different logical case against Guest's capitalist rationality, and the aura of debate is intrinsic to the polemic which points forward to Gramsci:

“Plenty of reward,” said he – “the reward of creation. The wages which God gets, as people might have said time ago ... It is a pleasure we are afraid of losing, not a pain ... achieved by the absence of artificial coercion, and the freedom for every man to do what he can do best, joined to the knowledge of what productions of labour we really want ...”¹³

The tautology of “artificial coercion” linguistically stresses the suggestion that all coercion is necessarily artificial, a product of social forces that has been rationalised into a fact of nature. Here the undermining of common assumptions gains polemical strength because of its expression by another respectable figure. The epithet “old”, with its associations of careful thought and wisdom, is frequently used of Hammond and he is often described as speaking “gravely”. Hammond is no young hot-headed anarchist. Although it appears to have become commonplace to identify Morris with Guest, the venerable old sage is possibly an even greater imaginative self-projection. The characterisation gives Hammond a venerability the conventional Victorian Guest paradoxically lacks. Hammond appears to prophetically embody Gramsci's ideal type, specifically in contrast to Guest's position as a representative of common assumptions:

The active man-in-the-mass has a practical activity, but has no clear theoretical consciousness of his practical activity, which nonetheless involves understanding the world ...¹⁴

Guest has a practical life, but it is riddled with popular prejudices and pre-conceptions that he interprets as an understanding of the world. He lacks a theoretical framework that would provide a basis for a consciousness of social reality.

Hammond, though, is the product of a society – and historical processes – that has cleansed him of common errors. He is the epitome of the type Gramsci was later to term, in a technical sense, the philosopher:

... men are “philosophers”, by defining the limits and characteristics of the “spontaneous philosophy” which is proper to everybody.¹⁵

Hammond’s philosophy is, within the Marxist context, simply rationality carried to its logical conclusion in a particular sphere. Spontaneous philosophy is having the good sense to see through the veneer of artificiality from which social conventions are created, and beyond the apparently infallible maxims to the underlying truth. The man-in-the-mass does not, for Gramsci – or Morris – achieve this; although he (and this should be extended to she) may be shown how to attain a blessed state of consciousness by a true philosopher who realises that people are the products of history, and that:

Philosophy cannot be separated from the history of philosophy, nor can culture from the history of culture.¹⁶

Hammond, pre-figuring Gramsci, certainly argues this, and is also therefore one of those who “have in society the function of intellectuals”.¹⁷

This emerges specifically in a discussion between Hammond and Guest on compulsory elements in formal education systems, in which the visitor is subjected to an uncomfortable catechism:

“... were you forced to learn arithmetic and mathematics? ... And how much arithmetic and mathematics do you know now?” quoth the old man, smiling rather mockingly.

Said I: “None whatever, I am sorry to say.”

Hammond laughed quietly, but made no other comment on my admission, and I dropped the subject of education, perceiving him to be hopeless on that side.¹⁸

The informal pedagogue has obviously failed in this case, as Guest’s consciousness is not sufficiently developed for him to appreciate the argument, and the irony is sharpened by the nineteenth-century Oxford graduate thinking, again, that it is he who is superior. The philosophical intellectual’s task, for both Morris and Gramsci, assumes monumental proportions in the light of such ignorance and complacency.

Had Morris been taken more seriously as a political thinker he might have quickened the development of Marxist analysis. His contribution was not accepted into the main arena of debate by contemporary theoreticians because his essentially twentieth-century thinking challenged their rigid orthodoxy, and because they distrusted the aesthetic and individualist aspects of Morris’s vision:

He came to believe that socialism would have to come out of the working classes: it could not be imposed upon them from above. That is both his relevance for today and a major reason why Engels attacked him for sentimentalism ... His was a Marxism infused ... with English individualism ...¹⁹

Such free-wheeling oppositional characters as the reactionary golden dustman, the Old Grumbler and the Obstinate Refusers in *News from Nowhere* provided too lively an intellectual resistance to the novel’s communist society – despite their necessity to the structure of debate – for the comfort of the orthodox.

Conservatism, however, has rarely proved a complete bulwark against the dynamic of historical processes. After the political reality of the emergence of twin totalitarian regimes in the Marxist U.S.S.R. and the Fascist state of Italy, nineteenth-century dogma on coercion and cultural superstructure had to be reviewed. If Gramsci was then the prime mover, the illumination in which he worked flowed historically – however indirectly – from Morris’s vision and ideological perception.

NOTES

- ¹ Paul Meier, *William Morris: The Marxist Dreamer*, translated by Frank Gubb (The Harvester Press, Sussex, 1978), II, 576-577.
- ² E. P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (Merlin Press, 2nd edition, 1977), p. x.
- ³ *News from Nowhere* in *William Morris: Stories in Prose, Stories in Verse, Shorter Poems, Lectures and Essays*, edited by G. D. H. Cole (Nonesuch Press, 1946), pp. 54-55.
- ⁴ *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (Lawrence and Wishart, 1971), pp. 244-259 (my italics).
- ⁵ *ibid.*, p.324.
- ⁶ *Selections from the Political Writings 1910-20*, edited and translated by Quintin Hoare (Lawrence and Wishart, 1977), p.11.
- ⁷ *op. cit.*, p.197.
- ⁸ *op. cit.*, pp.9-10.
- ⁹ *op. cit.*, p.24.
- ¹⁰ *op. cit.*, p.38.
- ¹¹ *op. cit.*, p.44.
- ¹² *op. cit.*, p.85.
- ¹³ *op. cit.*, pp.85-86.
- ¹⁴ *Prison Notebooks, op. cit.*, p.333.
- ¹⁵ *op. cit.*, p.323.
- ¹⁶ *op. cit.*, p.324.
- ¹⁷ *op. cit.*, p.9.
- ¹⁸ *op. cit.*, pp.60-61.
- ¹⁹ Peter Stansky, *William Morris* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1985), pp.60-64.