

Comment

CODA

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As co-editors of *To Build a Shadowy Isle of Bliss*, Paul and I are grateful for the thoughtful commentaries on our book that Nicholas Frankel, Jason Camlot, Colin Mooers, and Leo Panitch have contributed to this in-print symposium, a follow-up to the Socialist Studies roundtable event held at the 2015 Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences in Ottawa. The praise offered is much appreciated, as are the important insights that the discussants have added to our study of Morris's radicalism. The critical comment that our book does not elaborate on the vehicles and agencies of social change, as hinted at in Morris's oeuvre, is also a welcome prompt and an opportunity to bring the politically suggestive material of *Shadowy Isle* into its next phase – into yet another forum of exchange – in which Morris's radicalism can be pointedly tied to the struggles we face today.

But before taking up this challenge, it is necessary to underscore the specific reasons why *Shadowy Isle* does not attend in any immediate or summary way to the pressing question: “What are the vehicles and agencies of social change?” Such an approach was not our objective. We had a central task – to foreground the unorthodox nature of Morris's radicalism and to rescue his reputation from corrosive myths – a task that must precede any attempt to herald Morris as a beacon of inspiration for contemporary activists on the Left. Such a project, however worthy, cannot be carried out short of preliminary clearance work. For there are some striking misconceptions that need to be dispelled before we can bring Morris's legacy to today's socialists. Among these misconceptions – and there are many – is the notion that “How the Change Came” is the pre-eminent chapter in *News from Nowhere* and the key to grasping Morris's concept of revolution.

One of the claims of our volume is that we might look elsewhere for the vehicles and agencies of social change and that *News from Nowhere*'s famous chapter is the mirage, not the real oasis, of our quest. For the transformative episode as portrayed in the text is a fictive construct, a reworking of historical documents and real events, but not a paradigm for emulation or imitation. Cast as a dream vision, the utopian romance tacitly demands that we parse it with a hermeneutic suited to its literary form. We must thus be mindful that the oneiric world that Morris evokes forbids us to read the text literally and

appropriate it as a ready-made political program.

To be sure, it is tempting to look at the “How the Change Came” chapter as a launching pad for building our own socialist world; but the utopian romance discourages us from doing this. It urges us to rethink and rewrite the model of revolution as we have seen it in the past, or in fictional accounts, and adapt it to our epoch. For Morris, this process of adaptation involves *revolutionizing* political education itself, transforming the very idea of revolution. The latter needs to be reappraised and reconstituted to include objectives that are often eclipsed from received Socialist wisdoms. To achieve a society of cooperation, rather than one of competition, will involve securing a political economy of equal distribution, but it will also involve attending to questions that are frequently consigned to the margins of social “utility” and “necessity.” For Morris, a radically new vision of work, combined with equal social recognition, is as pivotal as matters of fair distribution of wealth.

Whatever his principles, ethics, and strategies for achieving socialism, the proposals he bequeaths to us will require adaptation and reconfiguration. He imparts this cautionary word to us fictively in *News from Nowhere* when Ellen demands that Guest return to his 19th century and pursue the political struggle on his own turf, in the manner that accords with the demands of his epoch. So, by analogy, Morris suggests that revolution for posterity (for us, his 21st-century followers) will not resemble the old portraits, narratives, and paradigms of a 19th-century era, much as these have come to constitute an entrenched socialist imaginary. Revolution will come under another name, and will assume different configurations, yet it will be grounded in the fundamental socialist principles that Morris tirelessly sought to disseminate (and with the most egalitarian language) – be it in lecture halls, outdoor pitches, literary periodicals, the mainstream press, or through a community of Kelmscott Press artisans, the erstwhile members of the Socialist League, activists turned radical printers.

It is this dialectic of the vicissitudes of history that Paul’s chapter in *To Build a Shadowy Isle of Bliss* makes so clear, and particularly as his analysis dwells on *A Dream of John Ball*, where the typically romanticized epic of class war is dispelled by a Victorian narrator who has come to see Bloody Sunday as a terrifying event. Morris learns from that episode that political consciousness may be a lesson or consequence of insurrection, but that it won’t flourish there. Rather, its more sustainable life will feature in times and places where “men shall talk soberly.” This line from *A Dream of John Ball*, which Paul deploys as a subtitle in his chapter, may seem paltry at first blush, but is in fact a significant disclosure of Morris’s preoccupations with political praxis: for it encapsulates an ethic of social interaction guided by egalitarian principle and realism. It prescribes a form of education and self-education governed by mutual recognition, fellowship, and cooperation. That men should talk soberly suggests that they have liberated themselves from the spell of idealism – the gleam of moonlight (i.e., the romance of revolution

construed as heroic drama) – and are able to see in the cold light of dawn the limits, vagaries, and hopes of humanity. When openly confessed and candidly shared, these intimate but powerful exchanges constitute the stuff of genuine solidarity.

Before we can use Morris’s legacy, we have to carry out some substantial preparatory work. We have to settle on a common ground of interpretation. I regard the arguments invested in *Shadowy Isle* as contributions towards that preliminary work, for the subject of Morris’s politics is still highly contested. There are misconceptions that need to be jettisoned. The field has yet to be tilled before the crops can be seeded. In short, Morris’s legacy cannot be usefully appropriated and rendered pertinent to today’s Left struggles until that happens, and the type of unorthodox radicalism that we tried to articulate in *Shadowy Isle* sets the conditions for that task.

To be clear, it was not our objective to prescribe strategies for political action; nor did we intend to offer any quick answers to the current crisis. Morris has no easy recipes, no programmatic blueprint or compendium of theories that can be instantly applied for purposes of political praxis. The substance of his legacy cannot be readily grasped without patient hermeneutical labour. But it was precisely that charge of critical scrutiny that the contributors to *Shadowy Isle* assumed. They sought to rethink mainstream perceptions of Morris’s oeuvre and dispel commonsense views that have obscured his poignant intellectual insights, not least his unique contribution to re-conceptualizing the idea of revolution against entrenched stereotypes.

To carry out this scholarly work of methodical deconstruction and reconstruction requires time and forbearance; but without this extended phase of reassessment, we cannot proceed to gauge Morris’s relevance to our epoch. We require a thoroughgoing reappraisal of Morris’s legacy before we can build on his ideas.

In November of 1887, following the Trafalgar Square massacre of innocent protesters, Morris realized there would be no easy road to revolution, only persistent education. And while he struggled to keep *Commonweal* and the Socialist League from vitiating into a mere debating society – “we must take part in all really popular movements when we can make our own views on them unmistakably clear; that is a most important part of the education in organization” (Morris, *Commonweal*, March 1886) – he also questioned the politics of “practical socialists” who strove for immediate economic reforms and fell prey to the illusions of the electoral system.

From 1887 till his death in 1896, Morris pursued a course of unflagging socialist education – of “making socialists” – through public speaking, engaged writing, but also through small-scale community projects: e.g., the establishment of a guild-like workshop (the Kelmscott Press), where socialist collaborative work and material production of quality goods could be sampled within capitalist society. In unassuming and often imperceptible ways, he reappraised and refurbished the outmoded shibboleths of social transformation, debunked the worship of insurrection as a triumphalist drama, and called

for a more far-reaching transformation of humanity in the interstices of everyday life.

It is that reappraisal of “radicalism” and “revolution” that *Shadowy Isle* sought to illuminate and cultivate among others. With no pretention to closure, our book has invited, and continues to invite, like-minded Morris admirers to go farther afield, to bring the debate to new political heights, and even to emancipatory possibilities. In Morris’s words, “if others can see this as we do, we might call this a vision rather than a dream.”