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REAPPRAISING *NEWS FROM NOWHERE*: WILLIAM MORRIS, J. S. MILL AND *FABIAN ESSAYS**

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This article examines News from Nowhere, *William Morris's late nineteenth-century utopian romance. It seeks, first, to establish John Stuart Mill as a crucial influence on the text. It argues that, in* News from Nowhere, *Morris engaged extensively with Mill's mid-century essay* On Liberty. *It shows how Morris dramatized Mill's "harm principle"; how he challenged the notion that custom must necessarily be antithetical to the "spirit of liberty"; and how he enacted Mill's stricture that "if opponents of all important truths do not exist," then they must be invented. The article seeks, second, to contest the view that Morris was writing in indignant response to Edward Bellamy's portrait of utopia,* Looking Backward. *The article argues, instead, that it was rather the Fabians who incurred Morris's indignation. It attempts to demonstrate that if* News from Nowhere *was indeed an answer to another book, it was an answer to* Fabian Essays.

I There are two things about *News from Nowhere*, William Morris's late nineteenth-century utopian romance, that are generally taken for granted: the first of these is its uniquely libertarian nature; the second is that Morris was writing in response to Edward Bellamy's portrait of utopia, *Looking Backward*. Neither assumption is wrong, as such.[1] It is certainly true, for example, that Morris crafted a peculiarly tolerant utopia where individuality and variety are

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1 For a classic statement of the notion that *News from Nowhere* is an "authentically libertarian utopia" see Miguel Abensour, "William Morris: The Politics of Romance," in Max Blechman, ed., *Revolutionary Romanticism* (San Francisco, 1999), 125–61, at 125. Clear-cut endorsements of the idea that Morris was writing in response to Bellamy are offered, meanwhile, in Krishan Kumar, "News from Nowhere: The Renewal of Utopia," *History of Political Thought* 14/1 (1993), 133–43; Matthew Beaumont, *Utopia Ltd: Ideologies*

given free play. It is also true that Morris sought in *News from Nowhere* to give an alternative answer to "the question 'How shall we live then?'" to that provided by Bellamy in *Looking Backward*.[2] However, while Morris's utopia is far from the interpretive puzzle of Thomas More's genre-founding book *Utopia*, it is also more complex than those assumptions suggest.

First of all, as Marcus Waithe has persuasively argued, there are limits to "Nowhere's openness."[3] And doubt must be cast, certainly, on the cogency of liberties secured by the "habit of good fellowship" alone.[4] It is well known that Morris had read J. S. Mill's *Chapters on Socialism*. The "result," he wrote, was to convince him "that Socialism was a necessary change."[5] Among other things, Morris disregarded, however, Mill's instruction that, under communism, "rivalry for reputation and for personal power" would remain.[6] He did not accept the notion that "so much less do the generality of mankind value liberty than power."[7] In Nowhere, liberties therefore inhere in a spirit of "generosity" rather than in a clearly defined set of legal rights.[8] It is a tenuous basis, undoubtedly, and there are intimations in Morris's book that real dissent, as opposed to dissent of the innocuous kind, might not be readily tolerated.

That the "book had its local and immediate political context" has not gone unnoticed either; Bellamy, some scholars have recognized, was only one of a number of targets of the speech acts that Morris performed in the text. *Looking Backward* may have *motivated* Morris to write *News from Nowhere* in the first

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of Social Dreaming in England, 1870–1900 (Chicago, 2009), 40–41; and Ruth Levitas, *The Concept of Utopia* (Oxford, 2010), 125.

2 William Morris, "Looking Backward" (1889), in Morris, *Political Writings: Contributions to Justice and Commonweal, 1883–1890*, ed. Nicholas Salmon (Bristol, 1994), 419–25, at 420.

3 Marcus Waithe, "The Laws of Hospitality: Liberty, Generosity, and the Limits of Dissent in William Morris's 'The Tables Turned' and 'News from Nowhere'," *Yearbook of English Studies* 36/2 (2006), 212–29, at 213.

4 William Morris, *News from Nowhere; Or, An Epoch of Rest: Being Some Chapters from a Utopian Romance*, in *News from Nowhere and Other Writings*, ed. Clive Wilmer (London, 2004), 41–228, at 112.

5 William Morris, "How I Became a Socialist: Written for 'Justice,' 1894," in *The Collected Works of William Morris*, 24 vols. (London, 1915), 23: 277–81, at 278. Morris retrospectively described Mill's arguments in *Chapters on Socialism* as having been put "clearly and honestly." But, at the same time, Morris misrepresented Mill's posthumous papers by describing them, on the one hand, as an attack on "Socialism in its Fourierist guise," and reporting, on the other, how he "learned from Mill against *his* intention that Socialism was necessary." Ibid., original emphasis.

6 J. S. Mill, *Chapters on Socialism* (1879), in *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, ed. John M. Robson, 33 vols. (London, 1963–91), 5: 703–56, at 744.

7 J. S. Mill, *On Liberty* (1859), in *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, 18: 213–310, at 301.

8 Waithe, "The Laws of Hospitality," 220.

instance, but the intentions embodied in the book are multifarious.[9] That *News from Nowhere* provided "a vehicle for the presentation of Morris's own 'many excellent and conclusive arguments' against Anarchism," for example, has been decisively demonstrated.[10] At the same time, however, recognition of "the level of particularity at which Morris carried on the debate" with the anarchists in the Socialist League (SL) has not yet been extended to Morris's assault on the "State Socialists"—that is, to the Fabian Society.[11] Yet, as will become clear in this article, it was precisely the authors of *Fabian Essays*, rather than Bellamy, or the anarchists in the SL, who took the main force of Morris's criticism.

The purpose of this article is twofold. On the one hand, it aims to instate Mill as an influence on Morris's libertarian communism.[12] It will argue, however, that the relevant text is not Mill's *Chapters on Socialism*, but rather Mill's mid-century essay *On Liberty*. It will be argued that, in *News from Nowhere*, Morris engaged with Mill's *On Liberty* extensively, applying its central principle and altering its emphases in turns. This article does not seek to evaluate the integrity of Morris's libertarianism.[13] It seeks merely to reveal a source rarely mentioned in the secondary literature. On the other hand, this article will show that Morris's

9 Trevor Lloyd, "The Politics of William Morris's 'News from Nowhere'," *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies* 9/3 (1977), 273–87, at 273. For this distinction see Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, vol. 1, *Regarding Method* (Cambridge, 2002), 90–102. "To speak of a writer's motives," Skinner rightly argued, "seems invariably to speak of a condition antecedent to, and contingently connected with, the appearance of their works. But to speak of a writer's intentions may either be to refer to a plan or design to create a certain type of work (an intention to do x) or else to refer to an actual work in a certain way (as embodying particular intention in x-ing). In the former case we seem (as in talking about motives) to be alluding to a contingent antecedent condition of the appearance of the work. But in the latter we seem to be alluding to a feature of the work itself. Specifically, we seem to be characterising it in terms of its embodiment of a particular aim or intention, and thus in terms of its having a particular purpose or point." Ibid., 98.

10 Michael Holzman, "Anarchism and Utopia: William Morris's News from Nowhere," *ELH* 51/3 (1984), 589–603, at 590. Lloyd also illuminated Morris's assault on the anarchists.

11 Ibid. Lloyd, "The Politics of William Morris's 'News from Nowhere'," 279–80, for instance, successfully drew attention to Morris's assault on the Fabians. But he did not shed light on just how exactly Morris did so.

12 Morris elected to describe his doctrine as communism in an effort "to step between social democracy and anarchism." Ruth Kinna, *William Morris: The Art of Socialism* (Cardiff, 2000), 115. Kinna provides the best account of Morris's political self-understanding in chapter 4 of the same book. Kinna also recognized there that "Morris never claimed to have written *News from Nowhere* as an answer to *Looking Backward*." Ibid., 19.

13 See Lawrence Davis's not always accurate criticisms of Morris in "Morris, Wilde, and Marx on the Social Preconditions of Individual Development," *Political Studies* 44/4 (1996), 719–32.

utopia was not "written in indignant response" to Bellamy.[14] The article will argue, instead, that it was the Fabians who incurred Morris's indignation. This is easily obscured by the considerable overlap between Bellamy's portrait of socialism and that of the Fabian essayists. However, although Morris did not wish to see *Looking Backward* "taken as the Socialist bible of reconstruction," he was more concerned by the "general attention paid to . . . the Fabian lecturers and pamphleteers."[15] Morris objected, in particular, to "the fantastic and unreal tactic which the Fabian Society" had "excogitated of late," namely the tactic of permeation.[16] Permeation came in a variety of forms, but what they shared in common was a parliamentary road to socialism, rather than a revolutionary one. This article will demonstrate that if *News from Nowhere* was indeed an answer to another book, it was an answer to *Fabian Essays*.

The structure of this article is as follows. Sections II, III, and IV examine *News from Nowhere*'s debt to *On Liberty*. The context in which Morris may have encountered Mill's essay is set out in section II alone. But, collectively, sections II, III, and IV reconstruct the ways in which Morris borrowed from, and adapted, Mill's text. Sections V and VI, meanwhile, highlight how Morris confronted the Fabians. Section V recovers how Morris responded in *News from Nowhere* to the argument set out in Annie Besant's Fabian essay "Industry under Socialism." Section VI, finally, performs the same task for George Bernard Shaw's second contribution to the same volume of essays, "The Transition to Social Democracy."

II

In *News from Nowhere*, Morris engaged with Mill's *On Liberty* in three main ways. He recycled, first, the "one very simple principle" that Mill's essay was designed to assert; that is, the principle that "the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilised community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others."[17] The second way that Morris engaged with *On Liberty* was to challenge the notion that custom is generally antithetical to "the spirit of liberty."[18] He sought to make individuality and custom compatible. Finally, Morris also enacted in *News from Nowhere* Mill's stricture "that if opponents of all important truths do not exist, it is indispensable to imagine

14 Kumar, "News from Nowhere," 133.

15 Morris, "Looking Backward," 425; William Morris, "Where Are We Now?" (1890), in Morris, *Political Writings*, 488–94, at 493.

16 William Morris, "Fabian Essays in Socialism" (1889), in Morris, *Political Writings*, 457–62, at 457.

17 Mill, *On Liberty*, 223.

18 Ibid., 272.

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them, and supply them with the strongest arguments which the most skilful devil's advocate can conjure up."[19] The first of these connections is demonstrable; the second is largely conjectural, predicated on an affinity of language and sentiment; and the third is dependent on the prior two and based entirely on conjecture. Just how convincingly Morris brought off these interventions is another question, but I shall argue here that Morris was engaging directly with Mill's text.

Apart from the reference to Mill's *Chapters* in the history that Morris gave of his conversion to socialism in 1894, Morris mentioned Mill only once in his other writings.[20] It is perfectly credible to suppose, as Waithe does, that Morris drew on Mill's *On Liberty* in the work he undertook for the campaign for the preservation of ancient buildings in the 1870s.[21] Julie Camarda likewise detects the use of Mill's essay in Morris's work during the 1880s.[22] But it is possible to say with much greater confidence, as R. Jayne Hildebrand also less definitely suggests, that Morris drew on *On Liberty* in *News from Nowhere*.[23] It seems likely that Morris engaged with Mill's ideas independently, for he was already familiar with both Mill's *Chapters on Socialism* and Mill's *Principles of Political Economy*.[24] There are

19 Ibid., 245.

20 William Morris, "Notes on News" (1887), in Morris, *Journalism: Contributions to Commonweal, 1885–1890*, ed. Nicholas Salmon (Bristol, 1996), 266–8, at 266.

21 Waithe, "The Laws of Hospitality," 217.

22 Julie Camarda, "Liberal Possibilities in a Communist Utopia: Minority Voices and Historical Consciousness in Morris's News from Nowhere," *Nineteenth Century Contexts* 37/4 (2015), 301–20. This article was discovered after the author had written the article presented here. It makes a number of similar points. It too suggests that Morris "shared fundamental methodological and political principles" with Mill. It isolates the role ascribed to dialogue and Nowhere's model of individuality as owing something to Mill's *On Liberty*. On other matters, though, and in the detail, the respective arguments diverge. The "harm principle" is not discussed in Camarda's article, and she unconvincingly presents Nowhere as an intentionally flawed utopia rather than Morris's personal ideal of the good society.

23 R. Jayne Hildebrand, "News from Nowhere and William Morris's Aesthetics of Unreflectiveness: Pleasurable Habits," *English Literature in Transition, 1880–1920* 54/1 (2011), 3–27. Hildebrand seeks to prove how Morris responded in *News From Nowhere* to "Victorian debates about the relationship among consciousness, individuality, and historical change." She invokes Mill's *On Liberty* as one of the sources that Morris railed against, but she does not seek to prove that Morris had actually read it, relying, instead, on the prevalence of ideas "about the personal and social dangers of unreflectiveness." Ibid., 6, 4.

24 "But as to this allotment scheme, J. S. Mill said all that was necessary," Morris wrote, revealing his knowledge of Mill's *Principles*, "when he said it was simply allowing the labourers to work to pay their own poor rates. The bill is really in the interests of the employing farmers and the rack-renting landlords." Morris, "Notes on News," 266. Morris was referring to the Labourers' Allotment Bill of 1887. Mill's critical remarks on "the much-

also intimations in his other writings that Morris was familiar with the text. As we shall see, he was certainly no stranger to Millian language and concerns. But should Morris have required a prompt it may have been forthcoming from one of two chief sources.

First, Mill's stepdaughter, Helen Taylor, was also a member of the Democratic Federation, and between 1882 and 1884 Taylor and Morris cooperated closely. Morris did not think that Taylor was "cut from the wood of the Socialist Tree," but he "admired her energy and competence."[25] After her mother's death, Taylor became Mill's "secretary and confidant."[26] She "was strongly influenced by his worldview" and, as Joseph Persky argued, she "did everything in her power to identify Mill with the rising socialist movement in Britain."[27] It is not therefore unreasonable to speculate that Taylor may have suggested that Morris engage more extensively with Mill's other writings. This, however, is based purely on conjecture. But the second source, if not conclusive as evidence that Morris read Mill's essay, is far more substantial, namely Morris's closest collaborator, Ernest Belfort Bax.

Despite its neglect in the secondary literature, the relationship between Morris and Bax was remarkably intimate. It was based on strong friendship and shared beliefs. May Morris referred to Bax as her "father's *enfante terrible*."[28] She spoke warmly of her father's "philosopher friend," who visited the Morris household often.[29] Bax knew Mill's work well. Indeed, his own work was often in dialogue with it: *The Legal Subjection of Men*, for instance, took its name from Mill's essay *The Subjection of Women*, and elsewhere Bax engaged with Mill's qualitative interpretation of happiness.[30] In *The Ethics of Socialism*, a volume of essays published in 1889, Bax also made use of *On Liberty*. There, he invoked Mill's "harm principle," arguing that it was not only fit for liberals but a principle that

boasted Allotment System" are set out in Book 2 chapter 12. J. S. Mill, *Principles of Political Economy with Some of Their Applications to Social Philosophy* (1848), in *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, 2: 362–6.

25 William Morris, *The Collected Letters of William Morris*, ed. Norman Kelvin, 4 vols. (Princeton, 1987), 2: 293. Fiona MacCarthy, *William Morris: A Life for Our Time* (London, 1994), 474.

26 Joseph Persky, *The Political Economy of Progress: John Stuart Mill and Modern Radicalism* (Oxford, 2016), 169.

27 Ibid.

28 William Morris, *William Morris: Artist, Writer, Socialist*, ed. May Morris, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1936), 2: 109.

29 Ibid., 173–4. The closeness of their relationship is documented in Morris's correspondence. See, for instance, the letters dated 2 Sept. 1888 and 30 Dec. 1888 in Morris, *Collected Letters*, vol. 2.

30 Ernest Belfort Bax, *The Legal Subjection of Men* (London, 1908). Bax, *The Problem of Reality: Being Outline Suggestions for a Philosophical Reconstruction* (London, 1892), 92.

socialists too should adopt.[31] Between 1886 and 1888, Bax and Morris cowrote a series of articles entitled "Socialism from the Root Up." Morris also borrowed from Bax in his independent writings.[32] *News from Nowhere* is particularly well stocked with Baxian preoccupations—most notably, perhaps, Bax's notion of a "religion of humanity."[33] Thus, in the light of their intimacy, their collaborative work, and the extent to which Morris dramatized Bax's other ideas in his work of utopian fiction, Morris, at the very minimum, would at least have been aware of Mill's text by 1890.

Bax, much more so than Morris, was on guard against the pernicious influence of majorities. He was more skeptical than Morris about the wisdom inhering in the mass. Unlike Morris, Bax was no advocate of direct democracy, believing, instead, in the principle of representation.[34] But, in *The Ethics of Socialism*, Bax conceded that, "in a free society of equals," "the will of the majority must be the ultimate court of appeal."[35] This presupposed two conditions: it presupposed, first, "perfect economic and educational equality," and second, "a high sense of public duty."[36] But Bax also insisted that there must be "one exception" to this rule.[37] "It is the principle," he wrote,

> referred to as limiting the right of all majorities—even though the dissentient minority be only one. I refer to actions which Mill calls self-regarding, or those which in no way directly concern the society or corporate body. Were any majority to enforce a particular line of conduct in such actions, and to forbid another, it is the right and duty of every individual to resist actively such interference.[38]

In *News from Nowhere*, Morris, likewise, adopted this position. "You see," Morris has old Hammond explain to Guest in chapter 15,

> in matters which are merely personal which do not affect the welfare of the community—how a man shall dress, what he shall eat and drink, what he shall write and read, and so

31 Ernest Belfort Bax, *The Ethics of Socialism: Being Further Essays in Modern Socialist Criticism, &c.* (London, 1893), 124.

32 For an account of how Morris dramatized Bax's ideas in his late Germanic romances see Anna Vaninskaya, *William Morris and the Idea of Community: Romance, History and Propaganda, 1880–1914* (Edinburgh, 2010), 77–87.

33 Morris, News from Nowhere, 112–15, 125, 137, 159. For Bax's views on these matters see Ernest Belfort Bax, The Religion of Socialism: Being Essays in Modern Socialist Criticism (London, 1886); and Bax, *Ethics of Socialism*.

34 See Ernest Belfort Bax, "Democracy and the Word of Command," in Bax, *Essays in Socialism: New and Old* (London, 1907), 75–8.

35 Bax, *Ethics of Socialism*, 127.

36 Ibid., 123, 121.

37 Ibid., 124.

38 Ibid.

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forth—there can be no difference of opinion, and everyone does as he pleases. But when the matter is of common interest to the whole community, and the doing or not doing something affects everybody, the majority must have their way.[39]

Morris agreed with Bax and Mill that the "appropriate region of human liberty" comprised both "the inward domain of consciousness" and "liberty of tastes and pursuits."[40] When he has old Hammond talk about the majority having its way, what Morris had in mind was practical questions, such as "whether haymaking in such and such a countryside shall begin this week or next," or whether "something ought to be done or undone: a new town-hall built; a clearance of inconvenient houses; or say a stone bridge substituted for some ugly old iron one."[41] Even then, no person is obliged to participate in the implementation of the decision. In chapter 26, Morris inserts "the Obstinate Refusers" as proof.[42] Morris, moreover, dramatized Mill's "harm principle" further, elsewhere in the book.

For example, in explaining to Guest that in Nowhere there are "no law-courts to enforce contracts of sentiment or passion," that civil law, in short, had been abolished, old Hammond elaborates that "there is no code of public opinion which takes the place of such courts, and which might be as tyrannical and unreasonable as they were."[43] On the contrary, he continues, "I do not say that people don't judge their neighbours' conduct, sometimes, doubtless, unfairly. But I do say that there is no unvarying conventional set of rules by which people are judged; no bed of Procrustes to stretch or cramp their minds and lives."[44] The principle that "the sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self-protection" is thus upheld.[45] In Nowhere, an individual cannot "be compelled to do or forbear because it will be better for him to do so, because it will make him happier, because in the opinion of others, to do so would be wise, or even right."[46] "Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign."[47] Public opinion, furthermore, as Morris was keen to stress, is tolerant of uncustomary conduct.

Of course, this much Morris could have borrowed directly from Bax's essay in *The Ethics of Socialism*. The manner, however, in which Morris continued

39 Morris, *News from Nowhere*, 118–19.
40 Mill, *On Liberty*, 225, 226.
41 Morris, *News from Nowhere*, 118, 119.
42 Ibid., 196.
43 Ibid., 93.
44 Ibid.
45 Mill, *On Liberty*, 223.
46 Ibid., 223–4.
47 Ibid., 224.

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to develop Mill's principle suggests that Morris's knowledge of Mill's thesis was not simply mediated by Bax. Morris, as I shall show, adopted, rather, the logic of question and answer in responding to the thesis that Mill himself set out.[48] That is to say, Morris adopted "a determinate position" in relation to the questions raised in Mill's text—not just on the "harm principle," but on other issues too.[49] One by one, Morris responded to Mill's views on issues such as "character," "custom," "energy," "genius," and "freedom of speech." The next section will illuminate how he did so with regard to the first four of those topics. The following section will illuminate how he did so with regard to the fifth. The argument set out in both sections is conjectural. But the evidence, incomplete as it is, overwhelmingly favors the view that Morris was intimately familiar with Mill's text.

III

To begin with, Mill was keen to stress that the doctrine he advanced in *On Liberty* was not one of "selfish indifference."[50] "Human beings," he wrote, "owe to each other help to distinguish the better from the worse, and encouragement to choose the former and avoid the latter."[51] "They should be for ever stimulating each other to increased exercise of their higher faculties."[52] Thus Mill argued, "Though doing no wrong to anyone, a person may so act as to compel us to judge him."[53] "We have a right, also," he went on, "to act upon our unfavourable opinion" of others, "not to the oppression" of their "individuality, but in the exercise of ours."[54] Hence to avoid a person's society or to "caution others against him" is not inconsistent with Mill's theory.[55] Society, as Morris recognized, was within its rights to be contemptuous of deficiencies in the self-regarding sphere. In Nowhere, therefore, "people would be apt to shun" a person who was not

48 For the logic of question and answer see the brief summary in Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, 1: 115–16. Skinner usefully argued that "we need to understand why a certain proposition has been put forward if we wish to understand the proposition itself. We need to see it not simply as a proposition but as a move in an argument." "Here," he went on, "I am generalising R. G. Collingwood's dictum to the effect that the understanding of any proposition requires us to identify the question to which the proposition may be viewed as an answer. I am claiming, that is, that any act of communication will always constitute the taking up of some determinate position in relation to some pre-existing conversation or argument." Ibid., 115.

49 Ibid.

50 Mill, *On Liberty*, 276.

51 Ibid., 277.

52 Ibid.

53 Ibid., 278.

54 Ibid.

55 Ibid.

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"kind" to "a perfect stranger"; and if "grief and humiliation" do not follow an "ill-deed," "society in general" is apt to make it "pretty clear to the ill-doer" that a moral failure has been performed.[56] (The individual, in short, is sovereign and public opinion benign, but tolerance has its limits.) Morris, then, cleaved to the "harm principle" as it was initially formulated. He followed Mill into discursive territory that Bax did not consider. Unlike Bax, Morris gave thought to how the individual might be "justly punished by opinion."[57] Morris also concurred with Mill's conception of how character is developed.

Morris echoed Mill's view that "Human nature is not a machine to be built after a model, and set to do exactly the work prescribed for it."[58] It was more like "a tree," he agreed, "which requires to grow and develope itself on all sides."[59] In discussing how education is carried on in Nowhere, old Hammond describes, in distinctively Millian language, the "pinched 'education'" of the past as "something to be swallowed by the beginner in the art of living whether he liked it or not"; "such a proceeding," he avers, "means ignoring the fact of *growth*."[60] Mill, too, complained in *On Liberty* of "the pinched and hidebound type of human character" produced by a society whose "ideal of character is to be without any marked character" at all.[61] According to Mill, "Among the works of man, which human life is rightly employed in perfecting and beautifying, the first in importance surely is man himself."[62] Thus, in both language and sentiment, Morris echoed Mill's essay.

Mill prioritized the individual for two reasons: he argued, first, "Where not the person's own character, but the traditions or customs of other people are the rule of conduct, there is wanting one of the principle ingredients of human happiness"; and second, that wherever individuality is absent "quite the chief ingredient of individual and social progress" is absent too.[63] Mill did not believe that custom and individuality were mutually exclusive. But he did believe that where custom reigns, individuality ceases, and progress and improvement do too. In *News from Nowhere*, Morris similarly has old Hammond censure "unconsidered habit."[64]

56 Morris, *News from Nowhere*, 89–90, 114.
57 Mill, *On Liberty*, 276.
58 Ibid., 263.
59 Ibid.
60 Morris, *News from Nowhere*, 97, original emphasis.
61 Mill, *On Liberty*, 265, 271.
62 Ibid., 263.
63 Ibid., 261.
64 Morris, *News from Nowhere*, 93. Here, my argument departs slightly from that laid out by Hildebrand. Morris by all means repudiates the "standards of honour and public estimation" built on "success in besting our neighbours" associated with the humanist tradition. But he does not embrace as wholeheartedly as Hildebrand suggests

In *On Liberty*, Mill freely admitted that "it would be absurd to pretend that people ought to live as if nothing whatever had been known in the world before they came into it; as if experience had as yet done nothing towards showing that one mode of existence, or of conduct, is preferable to another."[65] Mill argued, however, that experience should be interpreted. He isolated three reasons why traditions and customs should not be simply accepted. First, the experience of other people may "be too narrow," or it may not have been interpreted rightly.[66] Second, "the interpretation of experience may be correct," but not suitable for all.[67] And third, "to conform to custom, merely *as* custom, does not educate or develop" in a person "any of the qualities which are the distinctive endowment of a human being."[68] In *News from Nowhere*, Morris sought to reconcile individuality and custom in a manner that accommodated Mill's stipulations.

In Nowhere, "a tradition or habit of life" has become operative, "and that habit," old Hammond tells Guest in chapter 12, "has become a habit of acting on the whole for the best."[69] "This habit of good fellowship" has not, however, been achieved at the expense of "personal impulses and preferences."[70] "Each man," Morris has old Hammond posit, "is free to exercise his special faculty to the utmost, and"—as Mill counseled—"everyone encourages him in so doing."[71] It was perfectly possible, Morris thought, to conceive of a "rich, diversified, and animating" form of human life underpinned by considered adherence to custom.[72] In Nowhere, therefore, there is still "plenty of variety," as old Hammond explains again to Guest: "the landscape, the building, the diet, the amusements, all various. The men and women varying in looks as well as in habits of thought."[73]

From the very beginning of his career as a socialist, Morris refused to accept the idea that communism entailed "the compression of individuality."[74] He argued, instead, that a "healthy and undomineering individuality will be fostered and not

"unreflective behaviour." Morris, *News from Nowhere*, 113. Hildebrand, "Aesthetics of Unreflectiveness," 3.

65 Mill, *On Liberty*, 262.

66 Ibid.

67 Ibid.

68 Ibid., original emphasis.

69 Morris, *News from Nowhere*, 112.

70 Ibid., 112.

71 Ibid., 113.

72 Ibid., 63.

73 Ibid., 117.

74 Mill, *Chapters on Socialism*, 746. See, for example, William Morris, "The Dull Level of Life" (1884), in Morris, *Political Writings*, 28–31.

crushed out by Socialism."[75] Thus, in Nowhere, the "habit of good fellowship" is a threat neither to "variety" nor to its precondition, the existence of "energetic characters."[76] Nowhere's residents "live a life of repose amidst of energy."[77] The "stagnation" that Mill coupled with the "despotism of custom" does not, therefore, set in.[78]

Unlike Mill, however, Morris was comfortable with the prospect that mediocrity might reign in a society of the future. He did not ascribe importance to "genius."[79] In *News from Nowhere*, Morris poured scorn on the notion of "an aristocracy of intellect."[80] Morris demurred at the argument that because "[n]o government by a democracy or a numerous aristocracy, either in its political acts or in its opinions, qualities, and tone of mind which it fosters, ever did or could rise above mediocrity," it would be desirable to seek out "the counsels and influence of a more highly gifted and instructed One or Few."[81] Morris did not share Mill's fear that there is "only too great a tendency in the best beliefs and practices to degenerate into the mechanical," and that the only force capable of resisting it is persons of originality.[82] Collective mediocrity did not, for Morris, mean collective unreason. In a society of equals, the "tyranny of the majority" did not rank as a real concern.[83] Nowhere's inhabitants are, on the contrary, perfectly able to "deal with things reasonably"; "we grow fat and well-liking on

75 William Morris, "A Factory as It Might Be" (1884), in *William Morris: Artist, Writer, Socialist*, 2: 130–40, at 131.

76 Mill, *On Liberty*, 272. Mill applauded "energy" as evidence of "character." "Energy," he conceded, "may be turned to bad uses." But "more good may always be made of an energetic character," he argued, if only energy "is guided by vigorous reason, and strong feelings controlled by a conscientious will." Ibid., 263, 272. As we shall see, both conditions have been fulfilled in Nowhere.

77 Morris, *News from Nowhere*, 222.

78 Mill, *On Liberty*, 272. Morris insisted that "it would be a contradiction in terms" to describe the condition of "rest and happiness" depicted in Nowhere as "stagnation." William Morris, "The Society of the Future" (1888), in *William Morris: Artist, Writer, Socialist*, 2: 453–68, at 467–8. Mill, of course, did not use the term "stagnation," using "stationary" instead. Mill, *On Liberty*, 273.

79 Ibid., 268.

80 Morris, *News from Nowhere*, 120.

81 Mill, *On Liberty*, 269. It is worth remarking that, in his review of *Looking Backward*, Morris described Bellamy's "government by alumni"—inaccurately—as "a kind of aristocracy." Yet his description of choosing out, or breeding, "a class of superior persons," combined with his use of Mill's text up to that point and after, suggests that Morris's utterance was probably provoked by Mill. Morris, "Looking Backward," 423.

82 Mill, *On Liberty*, 267.

83 Morris, *News from Nowhere*, 120.

the tyranny," old Hammond thus proffers; "a tyranny, to say the truth, not to be made visible by any microscope I know."[84]

In *On Liberty*, Mill identified a "fatal tendency" in "mankind to leave off thinking about a thing when it is no longer doubtful."[85] The ability to reason cogently was not a quality he observed in unexceptional individuals. In "the human mind," he wrote, "one-sidedness has always been the rule, and many-sidedness the exception."[86] Morris, though, was more optimistic. In Nowhere, "differences of opinion about real solid things" persist, but, as old Hammond explains, they "need not, and with us do not, crystallize into parties permanently hostile to one another."[87] Mill claimed, "Truth, in the great practical concerns of life, is so much a question of the reconciling and combining of opposites, that very few have minds sufficiently capacious and impartial to make the adjustment with an approach to correctness, and it has to be made by the rough process of a struggle between combatants fighting under hostile banners."[88] It is precisely because Nowhere's inhabitants have indeed made the adjustment of which Mill spoke that politics is extinct. Because "energy is guided by reason" and "strong feelings [are] controlled by a conscientious will," parties permanently hostile to one another do not arise, the habit of good fellowship serving as an internal check on excessive individualism.[89]

Here Morris, it seems, was responding to Mill's passage. For he not only adapts Mill's argument for his own creative purposes; Morris also has old Hammond add, as a corrective, that the political struggles of the past were "only *pretended*."[90] There was no "party of order" and "party of progress or reform," only "a few cliques of ambitious persons."[91] Clearly, then, Morris pondered the problems posed in Mill's text in some detail. It has been shown here how Morris gave consideration to Mill's utterances on issues such as "character," "energy," and "genius," making compatible, in the process, individuality and custom. The next section elucidates how Morris responded to Mill's views on freedom of speech.

84 Ibid., 102, 121. These arguments were aimed at the anarchists in the SL. But Morris was no doubt helped in bringing them into focus by engaging with Mill's warnings about "the tyranny of the majority," one of "the evils against which society requires to be on its guard." Mill, *On Liberty*, 219.

85 Ibid., 250.

86 Ibid., 252.

87 Morris, *News from Nowhere*, 117.

88 Mill, *On Liberty*, 254.

89 Ibid., 272, original emphasis.

90 Morris, *News from Nowhere*, 117.

91 Mill, *On Liberty*, 253. Morris, *News from Nowhere*, 118.

IV

Mill defended liberty of thought and discussion for four reasons. First, he argued, an opinion compelled to silence may be true. Second, an opinion may be in error, but it might also contain a portion of truth. Third, a true opinion, he held, must be challenged to be held on rational grounds. And fourth, "the meaning of the doctrine itself will be in danger of being lost" if it is not "vigorously and earnestly contested."[92]

Morris and Mill shared the view that "ages are no more infallible than individuals; every age having held many opinions which subsequent ages have deemed not only false but absurd."[93] But Morris, it seems, imbibed from Mill the idea that to silence a false opinion was to lose "the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth, produced by its collision with error."[94] Morris accepted Mill's proposal that, in the absence of serious controversy, "some contrivance" should be invented "for making the difficulties of the question as present to the learner's consciousness, as if they were pressed upon him by a dissentient champion, eager for his conversion."[95]

There is no shortage of scholars willing to testify that *News from Nowhere* is a "heuristic" text; that is to say, that it is "less about the future" than it is "about the outer limit or horizon of the present."[96] As David Leopold remarked, "political intent pervades the entire novel."[97] Its purpose, however, is not only to "historicize the present," as Matthew Beaumont put it, and to provide, in so doing, "the education of desire" that so many scholars have characterized as Morris's aim; Morris also sought, I suggest, to enact in the book Mill's stricture that we should hear the arguments of our adversaries.[98]

Throughout *News from Nowhere*, it is fair to say that the figure of Guest is only a tepid dissentient from the alien culture he encounters. Despite the reservations he inwardly expresses, outwardly Guest engages "in a process of self-censorship" in an effort to preserve his status as a guest and avoid causing offence.[99] Moreover,

92 Mill, *On Liberty*, 258.
93 Ibid., 230.
94 Ibid., 229.
95 Ibid., 251.
96 Matthew Beaumont, "News from Nowhere and the Here and Now: Reification and the Representation of the Present in Utopian Fiction," *Victorian Studies* 47/1 (2004), 33–52, at 40.
97 David Leopold, "Introduction," in William Morris, *News from Nowhere*, ed. David Leopold (Oxford, 2003), vii–xxxi, at xxix. See also David Leopold, "William Morris, *News from Nowhere*, and the Function of Utopia," *Journal of William Morris Studies* 22/1 (2016), 18–41.
98 Beaumont, "News from Nowhere," 39. Abensour, "William Morris," 145.
99 Waithe, "The Laws of Hospitality," 225.

following his extended discussion with old Hammond in the middle section of the book, Guest is won to the customs and arrangements of life in Nowhere. Thus, in chapter 22, Morris invents a genuine dissentient to perform the role of "devil's advocate." The figure of "the old grumbler" was thus Morris's solution to the dilemma posed by Mill above—the dilemma, that is, that "if opponents of all important truths do not exist, it is indispensable to imagine them."[100]

Morris, certainly, can scarcely be said to have supplied this "praiser of past times" with the "strongest arguments." However, the full antisocialist arsenal of argument had been met already in less confrontational discourse.[101] Thus "the old grumbler," presented as an unshakable contrarian, pronounces only on the "much freer, more energetic" life fostered by "unlimited competition," and on the quality of literature in "past days."[102] Ellen, the "old grumbler's" granddaughter, responds to his charges: literature had been exchanged for life, she retorts, and the freedoms he invoked, for what they were, were enjoyed by the few at the expense of the many, who "dug and sewed and baked and carpentered round about" the idle.[103] The "old grumbler" thus performs two functions. He is both a vehicle to demonstrate the tolerance observed by Nowhere's residents, yet he also provides the clash of opinion that Mill set so much store by.

Moreover, the connection between Morris's *News from Nowhere* and Mill's *On Liberty* does not terminate there; there are other, less obviously derivative, parallels. In Nowhere, bureaucracy, for instance, is disparaged, centralization is discouraged, and children are encouraged "to learn to do things for themselves."[104] But it is, above all, the associations expounded above that indicate that Morris had, as I have argued here, directly engaged with Mill's essay. There

100 Mill, *On Liberty*, 245.

101 Camarda argues, for example, that Guest, indeed, "acts as an ideal Millian 'eccentric', whose questions and dialogue are never completely suppressed or dismissed, allowing him to illuminate Nowhere's historicity and inherent flaws." This interpretation, however, while correct insofar as it identifies the "socratic dialectics" at the core of Morris's book, is not convincing. Camarda overstates the extent to which Morris identifies with Guest and "Nowhere's exceptional and dissenting individuals." As she herself concedes, "Morris did not view Nowhere as a dystopia." Camarda, "Liberal Possibilities," 303, 310, 307.

102 Morris, *News from Nowhere*, 176, 174.

103 Ibid., 176.

104 Ibid., 119, 101, 65. For the corresponding passages in Mill see *On Liberty*, 307, 308–9, 305. One of the chief objections that Morris raised in his review of *Looking Backward*, published six months before he started writing *News from Nowhere*, was the sense created by Bellamy that "the problem of the organisation 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." Morris argued that "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"; "individual men," he continued, echoing Mill's views on political education,

can be no doubt that Morris, like Bax, adopted Mill's "harm principle," but, as I have shown, he also sought to reconcile individuality and custom, and, in the person of the "old grumbler," Morris created a Millian "devil's advocate." In this context, the metaphors and language that Morris deployed in the novel also take on a specifically Millian hue.

This connection with Mill has not gone without comment in the historiography. But it remains still a much-neglected source of Morris's libertarian communism. Part of the reason for this is that, during the second half of the twentieth century, much of the scholarship was marred by efforts to coopt Morris for one of two political projects, namely the "Marxist" and the anarchist.[105] These efforts also set the tone, however, for what subsequent historians *expected* to find in his work.[106] Morris's writings are therefore still often viewed in an insufficiently historical light. Consequently, figures like Bax, Mill, and John Ruskin rarely receive their full due. The same holds true, moreover, for the argument that *News from Nowhere* "was wrung from a somewhat reluctant Morris as a necessary antidote to Bellamy's vision of Socialism."[107] The next section will demonstrate that such a view shows no cognizance of the ideological battle which Morris had fought with the Fabian Society over the preceding three years, over the same matters with which Morris took issue with Bellamy. It will show how in *News from Nowhere* Morris responded, in particular, to Annie Besant's Fabian essay "Industry under Socialism," and to George Bernard Shaw's second contribution to the same volume, "The Transition to Social Democracy."

V

In assessing the weight that Morris assigned separately to Bellamy and the Fabian Society, a good place to start is with his reviews of their respective books, *Looking Backward* and *Fabian Essays*, both published in Britain in 1889.[108] Despite his dislike of *Looking Backward*, and the many practical reservations

"cannot shuffle off the business of life on to the shoulders of an abstraction called the State." Morris, "Looking Backward," 424–25.

105 For a summary of the debate over Morris's relation to "Marxism" and anarchism see Ruth Kinna, "William Morris and Anti-parliamentarism," *History of Political Thought* 15/4 (1994), 593–613, at 593–4.

106 This notion of "the priority of paradigms" is brought out exceptionally well in Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, 1: 58–9.

107 Kumar, "News from Nowhere," 133.

108 For the publication history and the reception of *Looking Backward* in Britain see Peter Marshall, "A British Sensation," in Sylvia E. Bowman, ed., *Edward Bellamy Abroad: An American Prophets' Influence* (New York, 1962), 86–118. For *Fabian Essays* see Asa Briggs, "Introduction," in Bernard Shaw, ed., *Fabian Essays* (London, 1962), 11–29.

he expressed about its plausibility, Morris praised Bellamy for having "faced the difficulty of economical reconstruction with courage."[109] "The book," he went on, "is one to be read and considered seriously."[110] In his review of *Fabian Essays*, by contrast, Morris offered no such endorsement. On the contrary, "I cannot help wishing that such a volume *had* appeared about three years ago," he averred.[111] For, in the interim, Sydney Webb had succeeded in dragging "some of his fellow writers somewhat unwillingly behind his chariot wheels" in adopting the tactic of permeation.[112] Morris regarded the strategy promulgated by Webb of infiltrating the Liberal elite as "disastrous."[113] He believed that Webb's success in persuading the other Fabians to embrace it boded ill for the future of the socialist movement.[114]

Moreover, there was nothing new in Morris's critique of Bellamy; each objection to Bellamy's portrait of utopia—that it would prove discouraging, to name only the most important, and that it was utopian in the pejorative sense of the term—Morris had leveled already at the Fabian Society.[115] In the wake of "Bloody Sunday," the demonstration against unemployment at home and coercion in Ireland violently suppressed by police in November 1887, the Fabians renounced their "warlike" origins.[116] They turned instead, as a group, to constitutional methods.[117] Morris had never been a great admirer of the Fabians, but this move brought them into full confrontation.[118] For instance,

109 Morris, "Looking Backward," 425.

110 Ibid.

111 Morris, "Fabian Essays," 457, original emphasis.

112 Ibid., 458.

113 Ibid.

114 The best account of permeation and its varieties is given in Mark Bevir, *The Making of British Socialism* (Princeton, 2011), 195–214. Morris, however, willfully ignored the different political strategies at play, choosing instead to conflate Webb's position with those adopted by the other Fabian lecturers.

115 See, above all, William Morris, "How Should We Live Then?", a lecture delivered to a meeting sponsored by the Fabian Society. Paul Meier, "An Unpublished Lecture of William Morris," *International Review of Social History* 16/2 (1971), 217–40. As Morris put it to Sydney Olivier, "It would be pretty much my Society of the Future with differences suited to the probable audience." Morris, *Collected Letters*, 2: 9.

116 George Bernard Shaw, *Fabian Tract, No. 41. The Fabian Society: What It Has Done; and How It Has Done It* (London, 1892), 3.

117 In addition to Bevir see A. M. McBriar, *Fabian Socialism and English Politics, 1884–1918* (Cambridge, 1966), 1–28; Norman Ian MacKenzie and Jean Mackenzie, *The First Fabians* (London, 1977), 73–116; and Stanley Pierson, *Marxism and the Origins of British Socialism: The Struggle for a New Consciousness* (Ithaca, 1973), 106–39.

118 As Shaw wrote, Morris disliked the Fabians "as a species." "However, there was no love lost on the other side." Bernard Shaw, "Morris as I Knew Him," in Morris, *William Morris: Artist, Writer, Socialist*, 2: ix–xl, at xi.

an anonymous reviewer wrote of Morris's collection of lectures, *Signs of Change*, in 1888, in the Fabian journal *To-day*, that, "If once the hard-headed English workman ... came to believe that these ideas of Mr. Morris's were in any degree representative, the present by no means un-brilliant prospects of Socialism in England would vanish like a dream."[119] Providing an excellent indication of the contours and intensity of the contest, the reviewer continued, "Happily no such mistake is likely to be made ... for the rapid conversion of so many of our writers and lecturers to political methods has left Mr. Morris almost alone in the possession of his peculiar views. The effect of this change has been immensely to raise his value of us."[120]

For Morris, Bellamy's book was "a straw to show which way the wind blows."[121] The "boom," however, in Fabian membership between 1888 and 1890 represented an *actual* problem.[122] The Fabians, unlike Bellamy, constituted a living political force, with branches, resources, and the ability therefore to forestall the advent of socialism by insisting, on the one hand, that it must be "clad in the respectable sheeps-skin of a mild economic change," and arguing, on the other, that it would be delivered peacefully by the statesmen already in office.[123] Besides, the Fabians, in contrast to Bellamy again, assailed Morris intentionally. Besant, for instance, opened her contribution to *Fabian Essays* with an attack on his views. And it is evident that it was her "sketch of State Socialism," rather than Bellamy's, that stuck in Morris's mind.[124]

Between 1888 and 1890, Morris had repeatedly pressed the point that to give one's "personal view of the Promised Land of Socialism" ought not to be seen as "waste time."[125] Indeed, he chastised the "one-sided," or "practical," socialists, by which he meant the Fabians, for their failure to formulate some such "vision of the future."[126] They should "be ready to admit," he argued, that their inability to "see except through the murky smoked glass of the present condition of life amongst us" was a "defect."[127] Thus, when Besant began by isolating "two ways in which a

119 Quoted in E. P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (London, 1977), 539.

120 Ibid., 539–40.

121 Morris, "Where Are We Now?", 493.

122 Shaw, *Fabian Tract, No. 41*, 19. Thompson, *William Morris*, 459, noted how already "in September, 1887," Morris "was identifying his real theoretical opponents as being among the Fabians, and this despite the fact that Shaw was a close personal friend.".

123 William Morris, "On Some 'Practical' Socialists" (1888), in Morris, *Political Writings*, 336–42, at 337.

124 Morris, "Fabian Essays," 462.

125 Meier, "An Unpublished Lecture," 222.

126 Morris, "'Practical' Socialists," 338.

127 Ibid.

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scheme for a future organisation of industry may be constructed," insisting that "by far the easier and less useful is the sketching of Utopia," she had Morris in her sights.[128] The utopist "is a law unto himself," she argued; "he creates, he does not construct."[129] "The second way," by contrast, "is less attractive, less easy, but more useful."[130] "Starting from the present state of society," she continued, "it seeks to discover the tendencies underlying it; to trace those tendencies to their natural outworking in institutions; and so to forecast, not the far-off future, but the next social stage."[131]

Besant, in other words, refused to concede that there was a flaw in the Fabian position. Rather, she returned the charge to Morris; the "defect" resided entirely with him. It was preposterous to claim that it was "utopian to put forward a scheme of gradual logical reconstruction" because it did not involve a "brilliant" picture "of the future of society" from which "hope" could be drawn.[132] Unlike Morris, Besant sought to "work out changes practicable among men and women as we know them; always seeking to lay down, not what is ideally best, but what is possible."[133] The consensus among the Fabians was that Morris's socialism was "a bold make-believe," requiring the "Olympian unworldliness of an irresponsible rich man of the shareholding type."[134] They were modernists who, like Bellamy, believed that the "line of progress is to substitute machines for men in every department of production."[135] "There is not the slightest reason to suppose," Besant claimed, in direct opposition to Morris, "that we are at the end of an inventive era."[136]

Besant's Fabian essay was strongly derivative of *Looking Backward*. It was not only on the question of how laborers should be apportioned to the various forms of labor that she borrowed a solution from its "ingenious author"; she surreptitiously looked to Bellamy for guidance all along the line, from "the municipal industrial army" to the production of commodities where the "claims of small minorities" are involved, such as books and newspapers.[137] When Morris therefore rebuked the arguments for state socialism and the "dull level

128 Annie Besant, "Industry under Socialism," in Shaw, *Fabian Essays*, 184–204, at 184.
129 Ibid.
130 Ibid.
131 Ibid.
132 Morris, "'Practical' Socialists," 341.
133 Besant, "Industry under Socialism," 185.
134 H. G. Wells, *A Modern Utopia*, ed. Gregory Claeys and Patrick Parrinder (London, 2005), 72.
135 Besant, "Industry under Socialism," 195.
136 Ibid., 196.
137 Ibid., 194, 190, 193. Edward Bellamy, *Looking Backward 2000–1887*, ed. Matthew Beaumont (Oxford, 2007), 108.

of utilitarian comfort" engendered by an excess of labor-saving machinery in *News from Nowhere*, his target was often collective.[138] In many instances it is impossible to pick out a single object whom he sought to upbraid. Nonetheless, Morris clearly had Besant's essay in mind when he wrote in May 1889 that "there is a school of Socialists now extant who worship utilitarianism" to such an extent that, given the chance, they would turn "the country into a big Bonanza farm."[139] He recycled Besant's exact language, and there are two instances in *News from Nowhere* where Morris issued particular rejoinders to Besant's Fabian essay.[140]

First, Morris contested the idea put up by Besant that "[l]arge dwellings, with suites of rooms, might perhaps replace old-fashioned cottages."[141] The mode of "associated living" that she imagined—modern flats, where meals are taken collectively at restaurants and workers engaged to clean for the whole block—"could only have been conceived of," he wrote, "by people surrounded by the worst form of poverty."[142] The "Fourierist phalangsteries and all their kind," Morris has old Hammond explain to Guest, "implied nothing but a refuge from mere destitution."[143] In Nowhere, then, "separate households are the rule."[144]

Second, and more importantly, however, Morris responded to Besant's claim that, "in the very near future, the skilled worker will not be the man who is able to perform a particular set of operations, but the man who has been trained in the use of machinery."[145] He took up the argument that the "difference of trade will be in the machine rather than in the man" by showing how, in Nowhere, after a short period of torpor brought on by the supersession of handicraft by machinery, the old agricultural arts and artisanship were reacquired by "watching the way in which the machines worked, gathering an idea of handicraft from machinery."[146] Morris conceded that those socialists for whom it was impossible to "look upon labour and its results from any other point of view" than productivity would

138 Morris, *News from Nowhere*, 159.

139 William Morris, "Correspondence" (1889), in Morris, *Political Writings*, 414–18, at 416.

140 Besant described the "great farms" that she envisaged for the rural unemployed as "improvements of the Bonanza farms in America." Besant, "Industry under Socialism," 191.

141 Ibid., 189.

142 Ibid. Morris, *News from Nowhere*, 98.

143 Morris, *News from Nowhere*, 98.

144 Ibid. The same, of course, is true of Bellamy's Boston. In Bellamy's utopia evening meals are, however, taken at a "general-dining house," but each family is assigned a separate room for its exclusive use. Bellamy, *Looking Backward*, 87, 90.

145 Besant, "Industry under Socialism," 195.

146 Ibid. Morris, *News from Nowhere*, 199.

initially have their way; but, at the same time, he has old Hammond reiterate—pace Besant—that "this is not an age of inventions."[147]

For Nowhere's residents work "is a pleasure" which they "are afraid of losing, not a pain."[148] It is done, for the most part, "by artists," and it is the single change which made all the others possible.[149] Morris cleaved to the belief that there is "an instinct for beauty which is inborn" in every human being.[150] Released from the commercial imperatives of the past which had kept that instinct in check, the "art or work-pleasure" thus springs up in Nowhere "almost spontaneously."[151] According to Morris, there could be no happiness in a life without pleasurable work. Labor-saving machines would confer "too much time for thought or idle musing."[152] In Nowhere, therefore, "machine after machine" is "quietly dropped under the excuse that" machines "could not produce works of art."[153]

This lesson on meaning applied, of course, to Bellamy and the Fabians conjointly. But by having Guest posit in chapter 15 that "this change . . . seems to me far greater and more important than all the others you have told me about as to crime, politics, property, marriage," Morris cued himself up for the assault on Shaw mentioned above, a far more sustained intervention.[154]

In "Transition," Shaw wrote that "an army of light is no more to be gathered from the human product of nineteenth-century civilization than grapes are to be gathered from thistles."[155] Thus Morris, in anticipation of the full attack he launches on Shaw two chapters later, has old Hammond respond to Guest's observation: "shall we expect peace and stability from unhappiness? The gathering of grapes from thorns and figs from thistles is a reasonable expectation compared with that! And happiness without daily work is impossible."[156] The final section of this article will show how chapter 17 of *News from Nowhere* was an effort conceived by Morris not to respond to Bellamy's short account of the transition, but rather to counter Shaw's advice and induce him to "forget the Sydney–Webbian permeation tactic."[157]

147 Ibid., 124, 192.
148 Ibid., 122.
149 Ibid., 123.
150 William Morris, "Art under Plutocracy" (1883), in *The Collected Works of William Morris*, 23: 164–91, at 168.
151 Morris, *News from Nowhere*, 160.
152 Ibid., 159.
153 Ibid., 201.
154 Ibid., 123.
155 George Bernard Shaw, "The Transition to Social Democracy," in Shaw, *Fabian Essays*, 207–36, at 235.
156 Morris, *News from Nowhere*, 123.
157 Morris, "Fabian Essays," 463.

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VI

During the 1880s, Morris and Shaw were good friends. Morris, indeed, took Shaw "on as one who knew," and Shaw "penetrated to the Morris interior."[158] He visited the Morris household often, and Morris makes plain in his review of *Fabian Essays* that he continued to put a high value on Shaw's talents as a "head" and a "pen."[159] It was therefore all the more galling for Morris to see Shaw, who "does not love opportunism for its own sweet self," take "the course" in *Fabian Essays* "to which, as he thinks, circumstances have driven him."[160] A self-proclaimed "revolutionist in grain," by 1889 Shaw had disavowed revolution.[161] Implicit in "the humdrum programme of the practical Social Democrat" that he advanced in *Fabian Essays* was also the disavowal of Morris's utopianism.[162] "The poor," Shaw wrote later, did not share the tastes of men like Ruskin, Morris, or Prince Kropotkin; they did not "understand their art-criticisms," nor did they "want the simple life, the aesthetic life, the literate life" that these "[r]ich men or aristocrats with a developed sense of life" envisaged.[163] What they wanted, Shaw argued, was "more money" and an end to the poverty that degraded them.[164] He had felt that way from 1887 onwards. However, as Morris noted in the review, Shaw disclaimed "all admiration" for the "sordid, slow, reluctant, cowardly path to justice" that he sketched.[165]

In his second Fabian essay, Shaw argued that, insofar "as any phase of social evolution can be said to begin at all," the transition to socialism "began some forty-five years ago."[166] For Shaw and the other Fabians, the "transition to Social Democracy" meant two things: it meant, on the one hand, "the gradual extension of the franchise," and on the other, "the transfer of rent and interest to the State, not in one lump, but by instalments."[167] According to Shaw, the ascent of socialism was inevitable; "but all the mobs and guillotines in the world" could "no more establish it than police coercion" could "avert it."[168] Building on the peculiarly English tradition of describing any fresh extension of the state as a step towards socialism, Shaw argued that the first part of the transition had been realized by

158 Shaw, "Morris as I Knew Him," xxiii, xx.
159 Morris, "Fabian Essays," 463.
160 Ibid., 462.
161 Shaw, "Morris as I Knew Him," xi.
162 Shaw, "Transition," 235.
163 Bernard Shaw, *Major Barbara* (Harmondsworth, 1945), xi.
164 Ibid., xii.
165 Shaw, "Transition," 235.
166 Ibid., 214.
167 Ibid., 218.
168 Ibid., 214.

politicians who did "not dream" that they were "touched with Socialism."[169] And politicians, he continued, "who have no suspicion that they are Socialists, are advocating further instalments of Socialism with a recklessness of indirect results which scandalizes the conscious Social Democrat."[170]

In this respect, Shaw isolated, first, the Local Government Bill of 1888. Like Besant, he believed that, "in perfect unconsciousness of the nature of his act," the conservative politician Charles Ritchie had created "the machinery for Socialism."[171] Shaw drew attention next to the land tax proposed by Lord Hobhouse. Hobhouse's proposal was ill-thought-out and premature. But Shaw believed that, rather than simply "withdrawing capital from private hands to lock it up unproductively," sufficient pressure had accrued in the meantime to force the state to embark upon a program of "productive enterprise."[172] Poverty and inequality had reached "explosion point."[173] Further demonstrations of the unemployed, like those of the winter of 1887–8, would produce two results: they would serve, first, to elicit the sympathy of the "humane section of the middle class"; and second, they would enhance the fear of "personal violence" among those "blinded by class prejudice to all sense of social responsibility."[174] "Municipal employment," Shaw therefore concluded, "must be offered at last."[175]

The capital required for the municipal organization of industry would be raised by municipalizing land values by taxation. The land would also be acquired by compensating, by the same means, the expropriated landowners. Between them, then, Ritchie and Hobhouse had initiated the municipal road to socialism that Shaw now upheld. The rest would be accomplished in stages. First of all, on Shaw's reading, the establishment of a municipal minimum wage would compel private capitalists to match municipal remuneration. As a result, the capitalists would pass on the loss. They would "demand and obtain a reduction of rent" from the landlords.[176] The landlords would therefore experience a pinch from both sides, which would in turn decrease the availability of municipal capital. By

169 See, for instance, Henry Fawcett, "The Recent Development of Socialism in Germany and the United States," *Fortnightly Review* 24/143 (1878), 605–15; Herbert Spencer's classic diatribe *The Man versus the State*, in Spencer, *Political Writings*, ed. John Offer (Cambridge, 1994), 59–175; as well as John W. Mason, "Political Economy and the Response to Socialism in Britain, 1870–1914," *Historical Journal* 23/3 (1980), 565–87. Shaw, "Transition," 218.

170 Ibid., 222.

171 Besant, "Industry under Socialism," 186. Shaw, "Transition," 222.

172 Ibid., 224, 225.

173 Ibid., 225.

174 Ibid., 226.

175 Ibid., 227.

176 Ibid., 230.

this time, however, Shaw argued that the municipalities would "have begun to save capital out of the product of their own industries."[177] Exploiting the natural advantages, as he saw it, of state production, "In the market," he claimed, "the competition of those industries with the private concerns will be irresistible."[178] "Eventually," then, according to Shaw's account, "the land and industry of the whole town would pass by the spontaneous action of economic forces into the hands of the municipality; and, so far, the problem of socialising industry would be solved."[179]

For Morris, Shaw's account was flawed in all respects. In his reviews of *Looking Backward* and *Fabian Essays*, he issued three main reasons why it was so unsound. First, the "economical semi-fatalism" that Shaw endorsed was "a deadening and discouraging view"; it could not engender the desire for change among "the discontented miserable workers."[180] Second, like John Rae and other moderate liberals, Morris objected to the notion that it was possible to plausibly describe any instance of state intervention as socialist irrespective of the intention underpinning it; socialism presupposed the ideal of equality.[181] Finally, Morris quarrelled with Shaw's grasp of historical process; though the plan that he and the other Fabian essayists formulated "should *logically* (perhaps) lead to the destruction of privilege and poverty," "*historically*," Morris argued, "it may do nothing of the kind."[182] Morris maintained that it was dreadfully naive to think that the "privileged classes" would renounce their favored position without a fight. The "humane" section of the middle class, no less than the selfish, would seek to crush any such experiment in state socialism. In chapter 17 of *News from Nowhere*, Morris sought to press these points home.

It is well known that Morris placed a "bloody revolution at the centre" of his account of "How the Change Came."[183] Less widely known, however, is that when Morris described how the socialists "shrunk from what seemed to them the barren task of preaching the realization of a happy dream," he was signaling

177 Ibid.

178 Ibid.

179 Ibid., 231.

180 Morris, "Looking Backward," 422. Morris, "Fabian Essays," 458.

181 For contemporary objections to the expansive use of the word "socialism" by extreme individualists like Spencer see John Rae, *Contemporary Socialism* (London, 1908), 12; and, more particularly, George C. Brodrick, "Democracy and Socialism," *Nineteenth Century* 15/86 (1884), 626–44, at 628–9. For an historical appraisal see Stefan Collini, *Liberalism and Sociology: L. T. Hobhouse and Political Argument in England, 1880–1914* (Cambridge, 1979), 13–50.

182 Morris, "Fabian Essays," 459, original emphasis.

183 Kumar, "News from Nowhere," 138.

at the Fabian Society, and, more particularly, at Shaw.[184] Bellamy, for instance, did not "shrink."[185] Shaw, on the other hand, did; and in a passage that follows soon after, Morris clearly has old Hammond summarize Shaw's conception of the transition. Though the socialists "knew," old Hammond begins,

> that the only reasonable aim for those who would better the world was a condition of equality; in their impatience and despair they managed to convince themselves that if they could by hook or by crook get the machinery of production and the management of property so altered that the "lower classes" (so the horrible word ran) might have their slavery somewhat ameliorated, they would be ready to fit into this machinery, and would use it for bettering their condition still more and still more, until at last the result would be a practical equality (they were very fond of using the word "practical") because "the rich" would be forced to pay so much for keeping "the poor" in a tolerable condition that the condition of riches would become no longer valuable and would gradually die out.[186]

In chapter 17 of *News from Nowhere* Morris attempted to invert Shaw's statement that "[t]he Socialists need not be ashamed of beginning as they did by proposing militant organisation of the working classes and general insurrection."[187] It was the Fabians, he implied, who need not be ashamed. In response to Shaw's claim that "[t]he proposal proved impracticable," Morris thus has old Hammond posit that, "as a theory," the socialists' plan "was not altogether unreasonable; but 'practically', it turned out a failure."[188] Given "the power of the middle classes" and the apathy "of the oppressed," it was not "wonderful" that the socialists "had no faith" in the masses.[189] But "the great motive power of the change," old Hammond goes on, was "a longing for freedom and equality, akin if you please to the unreasonable passion of the lover."[190] Morris, in short, sought to show in chapter 17 how it *would*, indeed, be "possible to enlist the whole body

184 Morris, *News from Nowhere*, 134. John Crump, "How the Change Came: *News from Nowhere* and Revolution," in Stephen Coleman and Paddy O'Sullivan, eds., *William Morris and News from Nowhere: A Vision for Our Time* (Bideford, 1990), 57–73, for instance, fails to even mention the Fabian Society in his analysis of Morris's view of the transition to socialism.

185 Bellamy was strident in his advocacy of cross-class party-political action. In *Looking Backward* the "followers of the red flag" are depicted not only as having hindered "the establishment of the new order," they are also supposed to have been subsidized to persist in their strategy by the opponents of change. Bellamy, *Looking Backward*, 148–9.

186 Morris, *News from Nowhere*, 134. The right-wing group among the Fabians put out a journal called *Practical Socialist*. See McBriar's remarks in *Fabian Socialism and English Politics*, 19–20.

187 Shaw, "Transition," 235–6.

188 Ibid., 236. Morris, *News from Nowhere*, 135.

189 Ibid., 133–4.

190 Ibid., 134.

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of workers—soldiers, policeman, and all—under the banner of brotherhood and equality; and," if not "at one great stroke to set Justice on her rightful throne," then how it *would* be possible to do so in two, three, or more.[191]

To make the point Morris has old Hammond describe how, at the beginning of the transition, state socialism "was partly put in motion."[192] However, contrary to Shaw's expectation, it does "not work smoothly."[193] Rather, the program adumbrated by Shaw is "resisted at every turn by the capitalists."[194] Thus, instead of accelerating the "irresistible glide into collectivist Socialism," the system all but breaks down.[195] Civil war famously ensues in Morris's account, and in place of the "consummation of democracy" forecast by Shaw, Morris puts a dictatorship of capital squarely on the cards.

Morris subscribed to the so-called "Marxist" view of the state, the view, namely, that "the state is nothing but a machine for the oppression of one class by another" destined ultimately to "wither away."[196] In *News from Nowhere*, he therefore has old Hammond describe the state as "a kind of watch-committee sitting to see that the interests of the Upper Classes took no hurt."[197] In chapter 17 Morris has it perform accordingly the role that he ascribed to it. It is "but the machinery of tyranny."[198]

Socialism is thus accomplished in "How the Change Came" not through the state, but against it. The revolution succeeds through the action of the "Committee of Public Safety," an organization modeled on the SL as it was initially conceived by Morris, Bax, and others. That is to say, it is a federation, as Bax retrospectively put it, of socialist societies, "bearing some sort of analogy to the federated Jacobin Clubs of the French Revolution," which educates and organizes public opinion.[199] "The Committee of Public Safety" provides the revolution with direction. But

191 Shaw, "Transition," 235.

192 Morris, *News from Nowhere*, 135.

193 Ibid.

194 Ibid.

195 Sidney Webb, "Historic," in Shaw, *Fabian Essays*, 62–93, at 92.

196 Frederick Engels, "Introduction," in Karl Marx, *The Civil War in France* (Peking, 1966), 1–18, at 17. In the *Communist Manifesto* Marx and Engels famously posited that the "executive of the modern State is but a committee for managing the affairs of the whole bourgeoisie." Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (London, 2002), 221; and Engels elaborated on this foundation in the chapters of *Anti-Dühring* later republished as *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific*, where he formulates the proposition that the "state is not 'abolished'" but "*withers away*." Frederick Engels, *Socialism: Utopian and Scientific* (London, 1993), 107, original emphasis.

197 Morris, *News from Nowhere*, 108.

198 Ibid., 111.

199 Ernest Belfort Bax, *Reminiscences and Reflexions of a Mid and Late Victorian* (London, 1918), 81.

the "revolutionary instinct" that Morris has old Hammond invoke is organic.[200] And in writing that the "sloth, the hopelessness, and if I may say so, the cowardice of the last century, had given place to the eager, restless heroism of a declared revolutionary period," Morris issued one final assault on Shaw's pessimistic stance on the efficacy of class struggle; "cowardly," he confirmed, was the right adjective for the "path to justice" that Shaw described.[201]

VII

Upon completing the serialized form of his utopian romance, Morris confessed in a letter to John Bruce Glasier that writing *News from Nowhere* had "amused" him "very much."[202] That admission should perhaps come as small surprise. For Morris, as we have seen, used the book to pursue not only his own vision of the good society, but also a series of retributions against his political foes in the British socialist movement. As much as anything else, writing *News from Nowhere* was an exercise in catharsis. Midway through its composition Morris was purged from his position as editor of *Commonweal*, the newspaper of the SL. The Fabian Society was also recruiting widely in the provinces, giving Morris the impression that "people have really got their heads turned more or less in their direction."[203] In other words, politically, Morris was on the back foot. He therefore elected to join the fray at one remove. The ironic and mocking speech acts that he performed in the book no doubt provided solace to Morris at that moment of political disappointment. However, if Morris took refuge in the utopian literary form, there can be no mistake that *News from Nowhere* was the continuation of politics by other means.[204]

This article has argued that it is a mistake to interpret *News from Nowhere* as an indignant reply to Bellamy. It has sought to demonstrate how Morris foregrounded, instead, the Fabians as an object of critique. Morris fixed attention on two Fabians in particular, Besant and Shaw. He did so for four principal reasons. First of all, as has been shown, in her Fabian essay Besant attacked Morris on two counts: she rejected, on the one hand, Morris's ambitions as a "Utopist," and, on the other, she denied Morris's claim that society had reached the end of "an inventive era." Morris, in short, had good reason to retain in his memory the

200 Morris, *News from Nowhere*, 156.

201 Ibid., 155.

202 Morris, *Collected Letters*, 2: 218.

203 Morris, "Where Are We Now?", 493.

204 David Leopold brings these points out well—that is, the political intent pervading the novel and the solace Morris derived from writing the book—in his introduction to the edition he edited. Leopold, "Introduction," xi, xxix.

details of Besant's account and to seek to respond in kind. Second, Morris isolated Shaw owing, first, to the latter's insistence on the futility of revolutionary tactics and, second, to the personal friendship that obtained between them. Morris used *News from Nowhere* to indicate in turns the improbability of Shaw's reformist prescriptions, and his disappointment at the trajectory that Shaw had taken. The third reason why Morris fixed attention on Besant and Shaw was because they both occupied a position on the Fabian Society's left wing. Unlike Webb, they were receptive to tactics which did not focus on a preexisting political elite.[205] Morris therefore sought to encourage that minor fissure. The final, connected, reason why Morris assailed Besant and Shaw was because, paradoxically, their essays were also the most decidedly Webbian. Morris held Webb accountable for the recent Fabian turn. His ideas showed "most clearly the present position of the Fabian Society towards the Socialist movement."[206]

However, to say that *Fabian Essays* was the book that Morris sought to answer in *News from Nowhere* is not, of course, to say that *Looking Backward* does not figure in Morris's utopian romance. On the contrary, Morris took issue with Bellamy's vision of utopia on numerous occasions in the text. For example, Morris's portrait of how music is consumed in Nowhere, how shopping is carried out, and how Nowhere's residents dine, all answer to an equivalent in *Looking Backward*. In these and other instances, Morris intentionally sought to set Bellamy right. In responding to Bellamy, however, Morris focused primarily on the details of everyday life. To the impersonal interaction and cold individualism in Bellamy's Boston, Morris counterposed scenes of warm social intercourse and community-centered life. In contrast, when Morris responded to the Fabians, he intervened, as we have seen, in high political issues—the nature of the state, socialist strategy, socialist economics, and human psychology. Over the preceding three years, Morris had fought the Fabians "tooth and nail."[207] It would be strange to suppose, therefore, that at the moment when the Fabian Society began to grow organizationally, Morris would cease to do so. He did not turn his political attention, instead, to a figure marginal to the British socialist movement.

Most Morris scholars have not been adept at identifying the various layers of intentionality in *News from Nowhere*. The targets, however, of Morris's utterances cannot have failed to have secured "uptake," so to speak, of the intended meaning in those acts of communication. First serialized in *Commonweal*, Morris's various jibes were meant to provoke the extremely small audience of British socialists for whom the book was initially written, and they would have been legible as such. This article has shown that it pays to be more attentive to that immediate political

205 See Bevir, *Making of British Socialism*, 196–205.

206 Morris, "Fabian Essays," 460.

207 Shaw, *Fabian Tract, No. 41*, 12.

context. This is true not only of the speech acts that Morris performed in the text, but also of the intellectual influences that informed its construction. This article has demonstrated that the failure of Morris scholars to light upon Mill in this respect is a serious omission. In *News from Nowhere*, *On Liberty* is a constant source of reference. Yet Morris's use of Mill's essay has gone almost completely unnoticed in the secondary literature. Bax, too, rarely receives the credit that he is likewise due in shaping Morris's thought.[208] In the politically charged atmosphere that once obtained among historians of British socialism, Bax was judged a bad "Marxist."[209] He has therefore been discounted as a source of Morrisian ideas. Yet, as we have seen, that Morris deployed Mill's "harm principle" in *News from Nowhere* was in no small part due to Bax's guidance.

The efforts to claim Morris for one intellectual tradition or another are also at the root of why Mill has not been instated before as an influence on Morris. Put simply, Mill was not an anarchist and *On Liberty* was not an anarchist tract. The connection between Mill and Morris has therefore been neglected. Anarchist scholars have searched instead for connections between Morris and figures in the same intellectual tradition to themselves. Some of these connections are more convincing than others. The case for Kropotkin's contribution to Morris's political thought, for instance, is a strong one.[210] The suggestion, however, that Morris was "thinking of Stepniak's first book" when, in 1883, he offered a program "of 'reconstructive Socialism' that hoped to avoid chaos" is less persuasive.[211] Morris may have been deeply moved by *Underground Russia*, but it seems more likely that, in this instance, he was channeling Mill's prophylactic *Chapters*. It is the ideological inconvenience of the connection that prevented scholars from seeing the relationship between their work. It has been shown here, however,

208 For an effort to rectify the "Stalinist air-brushing" of Bax from Morris's life see Roger Aldous, "'Compulsory Baxination': Morris and the Misogynist," *Journal of the William Morris Society* 12/1 (1996), 35–40. For a measured response see Ruth Kinna, "Time and Utopia: the gap between Morris and Bax," *Journal of William Morris Studies* 18/4 (2010), 36–47.

209 Eric Hobsbawm, *Labouring Men: Studies in the History of Labour* (London, 1964), 234, for instance, imperiously dismissed Bax as a "cranky" author of "pioneer Marxist histories"; and Thompson similarly dealt summarily with Bax, spurning his "sudden fits of utter abstraction," his "completely unpractical cast of mind," and his "essential lack of proportion." Reversing the true nature of the relationship, "His best work was done," Thompson concluded, "when Morris was at his elbow to bring him down with a bang out of his naïve ruminations." Thompson, *William Morris*, 373.

210 See James Hulse, *Revolutionists in London: A Study of Five Unorthodox Socialists* (Oxford, 1970), 77–110. It was by no means resolved, however, by Hulse's at times not altogether convincing analysis.

211 Ibid., 82.

how Morris engaged with Mill's *On Liberty* extensively in *News from Nowhere*, adopting its arguments and altering its emphases in turns.

News from Nowhere is a book open to endless interpretation. Indeed it is so rich in meaning that it already supports a minor academic cottage industry. The purpose of this article has been simply to confront the excessive emphasis placed on *Looking Backward* in the scholarship, and to ensure that Mill is accorded recognition as part of the context that produced Morris's highly unusual work of mature political theory. At the same time, the article illuminates the importance of Bax to Morris. Whether or not Bax prompted Morris to read *On Liberty* in the first instance is beside the point; Morris's work is suffused with Baxian ideas. This article has shown that, to fully understand Morris's mature political thought, one must understand Bax first.

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