

ARTIST, VISIONARY, AUTHORITARIAN

William Morris and the Illusion of Socialist Freedom

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neither should he eat.

—WILLIAM MORRIS

————— ” —————

————— “ —————
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————— ” —————



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There is a wide gap between socialism's promises and its methods.

William Morris was a renowned British author and artisan. He is also regarded as one of socialism's most important prophets.

In works about socialism published today, only socialist superstars Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels are referenced more frequently than Morris. Such well-known figures as Che Guevara receive only a fraction of the attention Morris does.¹

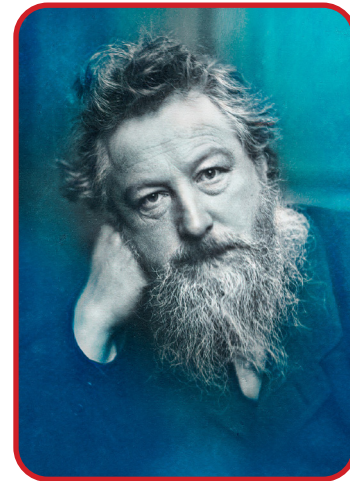
As a socialist, Morris is best known for his novel *News from Nowhere* and its captivating vision of a future socialist world. Nowhere, as the imagined society is called, is a place in which everyone's needs are met and all are free to do as they please.

A prime example of the social freedom Morris depicts is found in the characters he calls "the Obstinate Refusers."² This group of artists and builders get their name from the fact that they refuse to participate in essential community work so they can pursue a pet project of building a beautiful house.

The Obstinate Refusers ignore socialism's duty to give our abilities—our time and talents—to society. Instead, they treat their abilities in a liberal fashion: as their private property to use as they wish. Despite this, they're still welcome to take everything they need for free from the community stores. And while their neighbors think them silly, the Refusers are left alone to pursue their chosen task.

It's the freedom portrayed in *News from Nowhere* that has caused Morris's star to rise dramatically in socialist circles. Today's socialists make the most of this vision and its creator as they sell their product.

Yet it's critical for informed shoppers to understand that this vision of socialist freedom is an illusion. It is premised on a fantasy assumption that underlies all of the claims that socialists make about their philosophy resulting in a world of liberty.



And at the same time, Morris's vision of a socialist future of freedom obscures a very different and more important aspect of his socialism. The same Morris who described a community that welcomed Obstinate Refusers also wrote that in socialist society,

if a man does not work *usefully*, neither should he eat.³

And despite being an artist himself, Morris called for socialism to suppress numerous careers in the arts because he believed they result in

anti-social habits that would burden the community with a new set of idlers.⁴

Further, as biographer Paul Meier (himself a socialist) explains, Morris expected a socialist government that was "centralized" and "authoritarian."⁵ It was Morris's plan that this government would outlaw not just big business but *all* private business. Even being self-employed would be illegal. Morris wrote that the socialist state would be

the sole employer of labour.⁶

How is it that this famed author and artist who created the liberal vision of *News from Nowhere* also calls for an authoritarian society that even suppresses the arts? What is it that turns Morris from Dr. Jekyll into Mr. Hyde?

A TALE OF TWO PHASES

One of socialism's most important thinkers appears to have a split personality. However, this contradiction is characteristic not only of Morris but of socialism overall—democratic socialism included.

Socialism promises human freedom and happiness while simultaneously advocating, and indeed practicing, some of the most repressive policies imaginable. William Morris is a figure worth considering because he illustrates this paradox at the heart of socialist philosophy.

What explains the conflicting Morris? The answer is found in a key tenet of socialist theory, which says that there are to be two phases of socialism: a first following capitalism and then a second, perfected stage.

The captivating society of *Nowhere*, with its Obstinate Refusers, is Morris's vision of socialism's second phase. It's a world in which all needed goods are produced so efficiently and bountifully that they are free for the taking. Conversely, Morris's numerous authoritarian dictates are his prescriptions for how socialism would operate

Socialism promises freedom while advocating some of the most repressive policies imaginable.

during the first phase as it sets out to create a society of overflowing abundance like Nowhere.

The concept of two phases of socialist society—each with very different characteristics—is not unique to Morris. Actually, it's Karl Marx who not only gets the credit for originating this idea but also for making it an essential element of the socialist gospel.⁷ Marx famously stated that the sign that a perfected second phase of socialism had arrived would be when socialist society could be based on the philosophy's most famous axiom:

From each according to their ability, to each according to their need.⁸

What does it mean to have a world that operates on the principle “to each according to their need”? Socialist theory is explicit that such a world is one in which all needed goods and services are available for free. They would be free for the taking worldwide and forever.⁹ Socialists describe this predicted world as being one of “abundance,” “superabundance,” “limitless abundance,” and the like.¹⁰

“ABUNDANCE RESOLVES SUCH DIFFICULTIES”

As socialist A. L. Morton explains,

News from Nowhere is Morris's picture, not of the immediate future, but of life in this second stage—two centuries at least after the defeat of capitalism.¹¹

Consistent with Marx's vision of a second phase of socialism based on the axiom “to each according to their need,” *Nowhere* is a society of such abundance that every needed thing is free for the taking. Everything has been free for so long that money no longer exists. No one knows what money is. No one is familiar with the concepts of buying and selling.¹²

Virtually every other noteworthy feature of the society Morris portrays is a byproduct, a corollary, of the fact that *Nowhere* is assumed to be a world of perpetual abundance. Most importantly, it's this premise that permits *News from Nowhere* to feature characters like the Obstinate Refusers without violating socialist principles.

Given the supposition of never-ending free everything, what citizens do for work is of no consequence. Some may obstinately refuse to work on societal tasks and

instead do as they choose. Big deal. No harm, no foul. The cornucopia of free goods will persist. Thus, enforcing socialism's duty to give our time and talents to society is not necessary.

As Morris biographer Paul Meier points out, when it comes to aspects of Morris's imagined future that would be impossible or illegal during socialism's first phase,

abundance resolves such difficulties.¹³

Yes, abundance is powerful magic. It makes many features of Morris's hypothetical socialist society possible, not just the Obstinate Refusers.

For example, one feature of Nowhere is its organization as a society of "small, self-sustaining and self-governing communes."¹⁴ In the real world, where we depend on large-scale production and trade, this is a recipe for subsistence living. Only the premise of an abundance that "resolves such difficulties" makes it possible for Nowhere to be portrayed as a society based exclusively on small communes.

And why is craftwork common in Nowhere despite the fact its extreme inefficiency conflicts with socialist principles? (Even Morris himself, a celebrated artisan, expected the first phase of socialism to be devoid of craft.)¹⁵ Here's why: the assumed world of abundance overrides socialism's strict requirement for efficient production just as it does the need to enforce socialism's duty of "from each according to their ability.

Morris's assumption of a world of free everything stands behind his novel's patina of socialist freedom and so much more. But what does *News from Nowhere* say about how this overflowing abundance was achieved? And what does it say about how it's sustained, not just in normal times but in times of natural disasters or epidemics?

It says nothing. Zip.

The Forever "Transition"

Morris and other socialists sometimes refer to the first phase of socialism as a "transitional" one. This reflects their belief that socialism would succeed in boosting worldwide production to the astonishing levels required to reach socialism's second stage.

But, given the realities of the climate crisis, as well as socialism's demonstrated failure to dramatically increase production, the odds of this happening are infinitesimally small. A. L. Morton suggests the first stage will last for "two centuries at least"; the reality is that it would last forever.

To learn more about socialism's requirement of "abundance" and, "constant over-production," see the RFP paper "The Secret Sauce of Socialism."

News from Nowhere simply assumes the existence of a world of abundance with the same confidence that *Harry Potter* assumes a world of magic. As socialists admit, Morris makes no meaningful effort to explain how the society he portrays created or maintains an economy that constantly produces not only enough to meet demand but also the surplus needed to handle inevitable disruptions in production.¹⁶

Morris's book is a novel. He obviously has a right to make any fantastical assumptions he desires. And he certainly doesn't disguise the fact that what he's depicting is his vision of a perfected socialist society premised on superabundance.

But there are significant problems with the way in which today's socialists sell Morris and the happy vision of socialism depicted in *News from Nowhere*. They fail to explain that it's the assumption of a world of freely abundant goods and services that makes so many of *Nowhere's* other features possible.¹⁷ Worse yet, they obscure—often completely—Morris's exceedingly authoritarian plans for socialism's first phase.¹⁸

"STATE SOCIALISM AND PRETTY STIFF AT THAT"

Morris depicts socialism's second phase as one of abundance-fueled freedom. What does he say about the nature of socialism's first phase? He writes that

some transition period was of course inevitable, I mean a transition involving State Socialism and pretty stiff at that.¹⁹

State socialism, far from being a free and voluntary society or one based on "small, self-sustaining and self-governing communes," means the top-down control of labor and production by a centralized government. State socialism is what we've seen in real-world socialist nations, where "pretty stiff" understates what occurred.

While he portrays socialism's second stage as one in which all are free to do whatever they choose, Morris calls for the first phase to be one of duty. He says the very "first step" in creating a socialist society is to "abolish" those who "shirk their duties":

The first step to be taken is to abolish a class of men privileged to shirk their duties as men, thus forcing others to do the work which they *refuse* to do. All must work according to their ability.²⁰

"All must work according to their ability" means that work is treated as an obligation, giving those running socialist society the right to judge us, to compel us, and to control how our time and talents are used.

Morris's friend and fellow socialist Bernard Shaw explains Morris's view of those who shirk work:

He believed that people who didn't do their fair share of social work were damned thieves.²¹

It's not just slackers and the lazy whom Morris sees as "damned thieves." It's also those who perform what Morris and other socialists consider the wrong kind of work, work that socialism deems "socially useless."

Morris called for

all useless work abolished.²²

It was his plan that when the first stage of socialism began,

useless occupations would be got rid of speedily.²³

The socialist state would determine which types of work are "useless" to society. Professions so judged would become illegal. Individuals performing these supposedly pointless jobs would be "freed" (as socialists like to put it²⁴) to perform work approved by society.

Many of the jobs to be eliminated would be a byproduct of a third type of suppression that Morris desired: banning countless products that socialists also think are useless. One group of workers that Morris said should lose their jobs in this fashion were

the mass of people employed in making all those articles of folly and luxury ... things which people leading a manly and uncorrupted life would not ask for or dream of.²⁵

Suppress idlers. Suppress work making products not required by "a manly and uncorrupted life." And suppress other supposedly useless jobs. There were three steps in Morris's plan for eliminating the countless "parasites"²⁶ he believed infest capitalist society.

That he was serious about this goal is demonstrated by the rule he said should apply in socialist society, already quoted in the introduction:

If a man does not work *usefully*, neither should he eat.²⁷

Morris sets "usefully" in italics to emphasize his belief that work isn't sufficient to meet one's mandatory duty to socialist society simply because it's work. Rather,

come socialism, if you feel like eating, you must not only work, but your work must be what those running society have approved as useful.

In Morris's vision, true to the socialist norm, it would be easy for the state to eliminate alleged "parasites." He promises the socialist government will not be impeded by our present liberal system of laws and rights:

Vladimir Lenin, Ecosocialist?

When one desires, as William Morris did, a first phase of socialism that pursues multiple forms of suppression, it should come as no surprise that a tyrant ends up in charge. Case in point: Vladimir Lenin, the first dictator of the USSR, who called for and created a socialist society based on "unrestrained power and the use of force, not of law."

What's even more of a headscratcher is that today's socialists have seen the authoritarian results of socialist experiments based on Morris's ideas, yet they not only call for the same forms of suppression he did, but they even promote Lenin as a proto-ecosocialist.

To learn more about the thinking and actions of Vladimir Lenin and their relationship to ecosocialism, see the RFP paper "Vladimir Lenin, Ecosocialist?"

The present society will be gone, with all its paraphernalia of checks and safeguards; that we know for certain.²⁸

And, as we've seen, he also calls for the government to be

the sole employer of labour.²⁹

All will labor on behalf of the socialist state. It will be our boss.

In his noted work *William Morris: The Marxist Dreamer*, socialist Paul Meier summarizes Morris's expectations regarding socialism's first and likely only phase:

During the first stage of the new society, the needs of compulsion and organization have given rise to a centralized power.³⁰

Meier further defines the government Morris anticipated by saying it

would be authoritarian and would need to possess means of coercion.³¹

A SOCIETY "WHOLLY WITHOUT ART OR LITERATURE"

We can cement our understanding of the real Morris by considering what he had to say about the arts. Contrary to what you would expect of a famous author and artist, Morris demands that the arts be suppressed. It was his view that the bulk of art is

sham art and half sham art.³²

Who produces “sham art”? Sham artists.

Morris calls for socialism to cleanse society of this art he disapproved of:

[If socialism] will sweep the sham art away and give us good hope of a new art arising from a society founded on the equality of labour, there will be no loss, but immeasurable gain.³³

What powers must the socialist state have to fulfill Morris’s demand to “sweep the sham art away”? It must be empowered to decide who counts as a real artist and who does not. And it must have the authority to stop “sham” artists from creating more of their now-forbidden art and to force them to work on approved tasks instead.

This noted artist also called for numerous careers in the arts to be abolished come socialism:

Picture painting, sculpture ... imaginative literature I feel sure that it would not do for men to be absorbed entirely in such arts. It would tend to disease, to anti-social habits that would burden the community with a new set of idlers.³⁴

Despite having done a great deal of “imaginative” writing himself—*News from Nowhere* an extraordinary example—Morris says the profession of fiction writing should be eliminated come socialism. Sculptors and painters would also get the ax.

Why must these and other vocations in the arts be done away with? Having used the power of the socialist state to suppress slackers and other supposed “parasites,” the last thing socialist society will permit is “a new set of idlers.”

Morris was a remarkable craftsman. Yet his socialist biographers admit that he expected the first phase of socialist society to be barren of craftwork.³⁵ He even endorses the possibility of a socialist society “wholly without art or literature”:

The experiment of a civilized community living wholly without art or literature has not yet been tried. The past degradation and corruption of civilization may force this denial of pleasure upon the [socialist] society which will arise from its ashes. If that must be, we will accept the passing phase of utilitarianism as a foundation for the art which is to be.³⁶

And he argues that suppressing “sham art” is so important that it’s a goal worth pursuing even if the result is *a socialist society permanently deprived of art*:

Surely it must be said that if the coming change in the basis of society [to socialism] were to make an end of all this sham and half-sham art without any hope of new art arising from it the loss would not be great.³⁷

Both Morris's general proposals for the first phase of socialist society and his ideas specific to the arts are the polar opposite of what's found in *News from Nowhere*. The real William Morris is not an advocate of societal freedom and personal satisfaction. He is a flat-out authoritarian.

In line with socialist philosophy overall, Morris treats our time and talents as society's property to control rather than our own. His thinking invests the socialist state with incredible power over our individual lives—precisely the type of power that has caused one socialist society after another to become an authoritarian dictatorship.

Morris is but one of the countless historical and present-day socialists who call for bulk suppression: suppression of our liberal rights, of alleged "parasites," of "useless" work, and of "useless" products.³⁸ And he's but one of the innumerable socialists who look forward to doing away with our liberal society and its "paraphernalia of checks and safeguards."³⁹

These are standard elements of socialist philosophy, and they are the necessary byproducts of socialism's foundation on compulsory duty to society.⁴⁰ They're not unique to Morris.

OBSTINATE REFUSERS WOULD NOT EAT

It's the Obstinate Refusers and similar aspects of *News from Nowhere* that make Morris and socialism appear like lovers of freedom. But these features only appear in Morris's novel because it's premised on the assumption that a world in which everything is eternally free already exists.

How would Refusers be viewed during socialism's first phase—the only phase any of us would ever know? Morris has told us:

The first step to be taken is to abolish a class of men privileged to shirk their duties as men, thus forcing others to do the work which they *refuse* to do.⁴¹

Obstinate Refusers would be seen as "forcing others to do the work which they refuse to do."

And what would happen to someone so foolish as to try “shirking their duties” by obstinately refusing during this period? Again, Morris has told us:

If a man does not work *usefully*, neither should he eat.

In socialism’s first and likely only phase, Obstinate Refusers wouldn’t eat.

In socialism’s first and likely only phase, neither William Morris nor socialist philosophy has anything to do with personal freedom. Morris and other socialists call for a society of suppression in the here and now, making them authoritarians—end of story.

That someone who condones suppression today believes it would eventually produce a future of freedom doesn’t change their status as an authoritarian one bit. If it did, even socialism’s bevy of mass-murdering dictators could be sold as lovers of freedom.

Lenin? Stalin? Mao? Just like Morris, they claimed socialism would create a world of abundantly available goods and services resulting in “perfect freedom.” They promised a society like Nowhere in which even government would “wither away.”⁴² And they vowed that their socialist states, which were based on the authoritarian principles Morris advocated, would create this fantasy future.

The actual result? Tens of millions dead.⁴³

Producing “Perfect Freedom”

It’s not only William Morris who portrays a socialist future of freedom. This is a standard socialist promise. But it’s critical to understand that all such claims are, like the freedom of Morris’s Nowhere, byproducts of the assumption that socialism would create a world of overflowing abundance resulting from an “unlimited expansion of production.”

For example, in his *Principles of Communism*, Friedrich Engels famously claimed socialism (which he and Marx interchangeably called “communism”) would yield a world of “perfect freedom.” What does he say about how this world would be created?

Engels writes, “Large-scale industry and the unlimited expansion of production which it makes possible can bring into being a social order in which so much of all the necessities of life will be produced that every member of society will thereby be enabled to develop and exercise all his powers and abilities in perfect freedom.”

To learn more about the sort of world that the philosophy of Morris, Engles, and Marx aims to create, see the RFP paper, “The Ripple Effects of Socialist Duty.”

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1. A search of JSTOR (an electronic archive of journals and book chapters published across many academic disciplines) for works published between 2013 and 2022 that contained the term “socialism” and the name of a celebrated socialist shows that Morris (5,857 results) trails only Marx (11,114) and Engels (7,143) in terms of the frequency with which he is discussed. That’s not a significant gap considering the prominence of Marx and Engels. Morris is referenced far more frequently than other celebrated socialists, such as Vladimir Lenin (2,800), Fidel Castro (2,106), Che Guevara (1,928), Eugene Debs (693), and August Bebel (435).

2. William Morris, *News from Nowhere* (Hammersmith: Kelmscott Press, 1893), 249–55.

3. William Morris, “The Depression of Trade,” in *The Unpublished Lectures of William Morris*, ed. Eugene D. Lemire (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1969), 132.

4. “An Unpublished Lecture of William Morris,” ed. Paul Meier, *International Review of Social History* 16, no. 2 (1971): 15–16. Morris’s most famous socialist biographer, E. P. Thompson, admits that “Morris repeatedly leaves the impression that he had come to regard the poetry and painting of his time (including his own) as in some way marginal activities.” E. P. Thompson, *William Morris: From Romantic to Revolutionary* (Oakland: PM Press, 2011), 666.

5. Paul Meier, *William Morris: The Marxist Dreamer* (Sussex: Harvester, 1978), 1:82, 2:306.

6. William Morris, “True and False Society” (1886), The William Morris Internet Archive, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/morris/works/1886/false.htm>.

7. In one of his most important works, *The Critique of the Gotha Programme*, Marx originated the idea that socialist society would develop over two phases. Karl Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Program*, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert Tucker (New York: W. W. Norton and Co., 1972), 380–85.

Fans of Morris debate whether Morris came up with the two-phase idea depicted in *News from Nowhere* independently of Marx (e.g., Thompson, *Morris*, 690) or as a result of becoming aware of the ideas expressed in *The Critique of the Gotha Programme*, possibly from Engels, even though it had not yet been published when *News from Nowhere* was released (e.g., Meier, *Morris*, 282). Even if Morris did develop the two-phase concept independently of Marx, the fact that this theory dominates socialist thought is without question due to Marx’s pronouncement that this was how socialist society would develop.

8. Marx wrote that socialist society would eventually “inscribe on its banners, ‘From each according to his ability, to each according to his need,’” thereby signifying that perfected socialism had arrived. Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Program*, 383.

9. Vladimir Lenin writes that in second phase of socialist society based on abundance, there would be “no need for society to regulate the quantity of products to be distributed to each; each will take freely ‘according to his needs.’” Vladimir Lenin, *The State and Revolution*, 2nd ed. (London: Laurence and Wishart, 1943), 113.

Tatah Mentah writes that a society based on “to each according to their needs” means that “individuals will have free access to what is produced according to self-defined needs.” Tatah Mentah, *Socialism: The Only Practical Alternative to Contemporary Capitalism* (Mankon: Langaa Research and Publishing, 2012), 36.

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Binay Sakar and Adam Buick write that “when the means of production had been sufficiently developed, socialism could go over to the principle: from each according to their ability, to each according to their needs.” They define this as “free access according to needs.” Binay Sakar and Adam Buick, *Marxism, Leninism: Poles Apart* (West Bengal: Kolkata Avenel Press, 2012), ch. 10. See <http://www.worldsocialistpartyindia.org/sc.php?cat=marxism-leninism-poles-apart>.

For additional examples of this view, see the RFP paper “The Secret Sauce of Socialism.”

10. One example of instances in which socialists have used the term “superabundance” to describe their expectation of what socialism would produce comes from Leo Huberman: “With the discovery of atomic power and its ownership and planned development by a socialist society, the ultimate goal of satisfying the wants of all with a minimum of monotonous and burdensome labor need no longer be relegated to the distant future. Where formerly it was wise to estimate our ability to create a *super-abundance* in terms of centuries, now it is perhaps not over-optimistic to think in terms of years.” Leo Huberman, *The Truth about Socialism* (New York: Lear Publishing, 1950), 198n. Emphasis added.

Similarly, an example of socialists speaking in terms of “limitless abundance” comes from Fidel Castro: “Anyone can understand that this [increased productivity] is the only way to develop the wealth of our country, its natural resources, to a maximum and that it is the only way to enable our people to benefit from a *limitless abundance* of the necessities of life.” Fidel Castro, “Fidel Castro Speaks to Graduation Tractor Operators [October 2, 1968],” Castro Speech Database, <http://lanic.utexas.edu/project/castro/db/1968/19681002.html>. Emphasis added.

To learn more and see additional examples, see the RFP paper “The Secret Sauce of Socialism.”

11. A. L. Morton, review of *William Morris: The Marxist Dreamer*, by Paul Meier, *Science and Society* 45, no. 2 (Summer 1981): 241.

12. In *News from Nowhere*, Morris is explicit that the society of Nowhere is one in which “there is no buying and selling” (138) and no money. The book’s first edition includes in the phrase “Where’s the money[?]” (48) in the marginalia alongside a scene in which the protagonist, William Guest (a visitor to Nowhere transported magically from the capitalist past), attempts to pay for goods like a pipe (52) and services like a river ferry (12) only to be met with confusion by the citizens of Nowhere, who have no idea what he’s trying to do. When Guest visits what appears to be a market with shops, he notes that “as far as I could see, the people were ignorant of the art of buying and selling,” and he receives goods for free (46). There are a few instances when citizens of Nowhere recognize “money” and “buying and selling” as concepts from a distant past. For example, when Guest talks about “making money,” the person he’s speaking with responds, “I understand what that queer phrase means” (285).

13. Meier, *Morris*, 2:390.

14. This is how author Dennis Bartels describes Morris’s vision of socialist society in *News from Nowhere*. Bartels even suggests that this is a realistic vision for our current world. Dennis Bartels, “The Road to Nowhere: Morris, Utopia and Global Climate Change,” *Journal of William Morris Studies* 12, no. 3. (Fall 1997): 40.

15. Socialist thinkers are explicit that craftwork and socialism do not mix. Craft violates multiple socialist principles, including socialism’s demand for efficiency of production. As Michael Harrington, the founder of the Democratic Socialists of America, explains, efficient production is a “moral as well as an economic necessity.” Harrington also states that, in socialist society, efficiency would not to be defined by the “private interest” but rather on the basis of social goals. This makes it clear that society would have to determine which methods are sufficiently productive—a test it’s hard to imagine craft could ever pass. Michael Harrington, *Socialism, Past and Future* (New York: Mentor, 1992), 267.

Morris himself recognized that craftwork’s inefficiency would mean that socialist society would be devoid of craftwork—unless and until socialism created a world of overflowing abundance. E. P. Thompson explains that Morris expected craft to play no role in the first phase of socialism: any return of craft would be a “choice to be

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made after the transitional stage” (Thompson, *William Morris*, 654). Paul Meier writes, “Not for one moment could William Morris be regarded as a crusader for handicraft [in socialist society] For him, handicraft was ... a distant utopian expectation” (Meier, *Morris*, 2:352; cf. 2:351).

To learn more, see the RFP paper “Why Socialism Says Craftwork Is ‘Idiocy.’”

16. A. L. Morton explains that “Morris, perfectly aware that socialism implies the victory of man over his environment, is not concerned with such details [of how the economy functions], which are passed over with the most casual of references.” A. L. Morton, *The English Utopia* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1922), 165.

Perry Anderson explains that the “material abundance” that underpins the socialist society of Nowhere is “founded on the facilities of an advanced technology that has abolished all industrial drudgery.” But there are no details in the novel about this magic technology. Instead, “Unseen, machinery and technology effortlessly support this universe.” Perry Anderson, *Arguments within English Marxism: Utopias* (London: Verso, 1980).

17. Every work referring to *News from Nowhere* should make it clear that the society Morris depicts represents a second, perfected phase of socialist society premised on the existence of superabundance that makes every needed thing free forever. And every such work should explain that Morris’s vision of what socialism would be like *prior* to the magic of abundance is diametrically opposed to what’s portrayed in his novel.

But such disclosures rarely occur. As one example of the dozens of similarly misleading claims, consider Dennis Bartels’s description of William Morris’s beliefs, already quoted above: “Morris envisaged a society composed of small, self-sustaining and self-governing communes” (Bartels, “Road to Nowhere,” 40). This was *not* Morris’s vision of socialism following capitalism. It’s what he hoped perfected, abundance-fueled socialism might be like.

Morris expected the first stage of socialist society to be based on a centralized society, the very opposite of “small, self-sustaining and self-governing communes.” But Bartels makes none of this clear. He discusses Morris’s belief that the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism would be required but fails say one word about Morris’s expectation of a first phase of socialist society that would have nothing to do with the fictional depiction in *News from Nowhere*. Rather it would be a centralized, authoritarian society devoted to the mass suppression of private enterprise, of social “parasites,” of “useless” work, of “useless” products, and even of art.

Moreover, he fails to explain that it’s the very fact that Morris assumes a world of overflowing abundance which makes the key features of Nowhere, including its basis on “small, self-sustaining and self-governing communes” possible.

18. Countless articles about Morris’s socialism fail to make it clear that *News from Nowhere* is premised on the assumption of superabundance. And countless of these articles also fail to explain that Morris expected a first phase of socialist society based on an authoritarian government undertaking a campaign of suppression.

A particularly egregious example of both of these issues is found in Stephen Coleman’s “The Economics of Utopia Contrasted” (*Journal of William Morris Studies* 7, no. 2, [Spring 1989]: 40). This article compares the worlds depicted in the two most famous novels describing a socialist future: Morris’s *News from Nowhere* and Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backwards*.

Bellamy’s novel portrays a centralized authoritarian state where all citizens are compelled to perform their duty. Coleman contrasts this vision with that of *News from Nowhere*, a society where citizens are free to do as they wish. But Coleman makes no mention of the fact Morris expected a first stage of socialism based on an authoritarian and centralized government that in many ways mirrors what Bellamy describes. There’s no question that Morris hoped this would not be the endpoint of socialism, but that doesn’t mean he believed this period of authoritarianism could be skipped over. If anything, the suppression Morris expected in the first phase of socialist society exceeds that depicted by Bellamy. Morris expected wholesale suppression of various types of jobs, an incredible number of products, and even the arts, which is far more draconian than what Bellamy portrays.

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Coleman fails to explain Morris's expectations about the first phase of socialist society. He also fails to explain that it's the assumption of a world of superabundance that stands behind every feature of *News from Nowhere* that he praises.

Socialists who want to sell Morris's vision of the future are flatly dishonest when they fail to mention the "transitional" period that Morris believed was necessary. That's also the case when they fail to explain that it's the assumption of a world of overflowing abundance that makes the features of *Nowhere* possible.

19. William Morris, quoted in Thompson, *William Morris*, 510.

20. William Morris, *Useful Work versus Useless Toil* (London: The Socialist League, 1886), 27. Note that Morris is effectively citing socialism's long running standard of duty "from each according to their ability."

21. Bernard Shaw, "William Morris as I Knew Him," in *William Morris, Artist, Writer, Socialist*, vol. 2, *Morris as a Socialist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1936), ix.

22. William Morris, "Art and Labour," in *Unpublished Lectures*, 115.

23. Morris, "Unpublished Lecture," 23.

24. Talk of suppressing people's jobs can be off-putting, so socialists often speak in terms of "freeing" people instead. Socialist superstar Friedrich Engels may have been the first to do so.

What does Engels say would happen to those of us whose work he considers "at best, superfluous"? Come socialism, we would "become free to engage in useful labour." Friedrich Engels, "Speeches in Elberfeld," in *Marx/Engels Collected Works* (Chadwell Heath: Lawrence and Wishart, 2010), 4:248.

To learn more, see the RFP paper "The Socialist Obsession."

25. Morris, *Useful Work versus Useless Toil*, 24.

26. Typical of socialists generally, Morris often attacked various groups in capitalist society as "parasites." Among the parasites to be eliminated come socialism were not only capitalists and the well-off but also all those who make products or provide services for the well-off. Morris even labeled domestic servants as "parasites" despite the fact he was himself wealthy and the employer of at least three full-time live-in domestics to serve his household.

Morris wrote, "Many of these workers are not producers. A vast number of them once more are merely *parasites* of property, some of them openly so, as the soldiers by land and sea who are kept on foot for the perpetuating of national rivalries and enmities, and for the purposes of the national struggle for the share of the product of unpaid labour. But besides this obvious burden on the producers and the scarcely less obvious one of domestic servants there is first the army of clerks, shop assistants and so forth." Morris, "Useful Work," 23.

To learn more, see the RFP paper "The Socialist Obsession."

27. Morris, "Depression of Trade," 132.

28. William Morris and E. Belfort Bax, *Socialism: Its Growth and Outcome* (London: Swan Sonnenschein and Co., 1893), 289.

29. Morris, "True and False Society."

30. Meier, *Morris*, 2:306.

31. Meier, *Morris*, 1:82.

32. William Morris, "Individualism at the Royal Academy," *Justice*, April 24, 1884.

33. Morris, "Individualism at the Royal Academy."

34. Morris, "Unpublished Lecture," 15–16. E. P. Thompson admits that "Morris repeatedly leaves the impression that he had come to regard the poetry and painting of his time (including his own) as in some way marginal activities" (Thompson, *William Morris*, 666).

35. See note 15 above.

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36. Morris, “Useful Work,” 36.

37. Morris, “Individualism at the Royal Academy.”

38. Suppression is at the heart of the socialist project. To learn more, see the RFP papers “Our ‘So-Called’ Rights,” “The Socialist Obsession,” and “A ‘Defect’ of Liberalism.”

39. The lynchpin of what Morris disparages as liberalism’s “paraphernalia of checks and safeguards” is our individual rights. Our liberal rights are the “safeguards” that protect us from compulsion by others, including the state. The very fact that socialism is based on the compulsory duty of “from each according to their ability” means these rights will be severely curtailed in any socialist society. For socialism’s duty to give our time and talents to society to have meaning (as socialists certainly intend it to) requires that our rights be limited.

Karl Marx had little use for human rights, describing them as “rubbish,” “nonsense,” and “so-called” rights. And, as celebrated socialist R. H. Tawney explains, the socialist view is that “society should be organized primarily for the performance of *duties*, not for the maintenance of *rights*.”

To learn more, see the RFP paper “Our ‘So-Called’ Rights.”

40. So many aspects of socialism are byproducts of its foundation on the compulsory duty of “from each according to their ability,” a duty that gives those running society the right to control our time and talents. For example, socialism’s fixation with alleged “parasites” and their suppression—a fixation shared by Morris—results from the fact that socialism assumes that our time and talents are society’s property to control. Noted socialist Beatrice Webb describes socialist duty as “the duty not to be a parasite.” To learn more, see the RFP paper “The Ripple Effects of Socialist Duty.”

41. Morris, “Useful Work,” 27.

42. Lenin describes the arrival of socialism’s second phase: “The state will be able to wither away completely when society adopts the rule: ‘From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs’” (Vladimir Lenin, *The State and Revolution*, 2nd ed. [London: Laurence and Wishart, 1943], 112). Lenin, Stalin, and Mao each promised that their socialist societies would create a world of abundance and, in turn, a society of freedom in which government—and thus the threat of government compulsion—would “wither away.” Like Morris, these three socialist dictators were clear that the first phase of socialism would be one of authoritarianism and suppression in the belief this would yield the perfected second phase of superabundance and freedom. Unlike Morris, however, Lenin, Stalin, and Mao had the power to act on socialism’s plan for suppression, and millions perished in the process.

Those who promote Morris will surely argue that he would have been appalled by Lenin and Stalin’s Russia and by Mao’s China. They will, of course, argue that he didn’t desire anything like what happened. But should he really have been surprised by this outcome? True to the socialist norm, he called for a first phase of socialist society that was based on compulsory duty and suppression galore. Morris called for a society with the very conditions that made Lenin, Stalin, and Mao possible. How could anyone who called for an authoritarian society hell bent on suppression be surprised when a Lenin, Stalin, or Mao ended up in charge? How could anyone who called for a society in which even art is the focus of mass suppression be surprised when things go off the rails?

43. In the USSR and the People’s Republic of China, over 50 million individuals lost their lives directly at the hands of the socialist state or indirectly when the flaws of socialist theory resulted in devastating famines. Millions more died at the hands of their government in other socialist states.

In the USSR, millions were murdered by the socialist government, executed without trial, or victims of intentional starvation. For a good introduction to the history of oppression and death in the USSR, see Anne Applebaum’s *Red Famine* and Robert Conquest’s *Harvest of Sorrow*.

Similarly, in the People’s Republic of China, millions died directly at the hands of the socialist state, and tens of millions more lost their lives during the famine resulting from the socialist government’s so-called “Great Leap Forward.” For a good introduction to this history of oppression and death, see two works from

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Frank Dittoker's award-winning trilogy about China under socialism: *Mao's Great Famine* and *The Cultural Revolution*.