

Placemaking in the Utopian Imagination:

Utopia and News From Nowhere

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Although the concept of utopia is so wide-ranging, multifaceted, and diverse in its reach that a workable definition has consistently been problematical, broadly speaking it concerns the search for a better form of society¹. The original title page of Thomas More's *Utopia* claimed it to be 'concerning the best kind of commonwealth and the new island of Utopia'², thus reinforcing the sense of place as central to the utopian imagination. Yet, significantly, the search for a better society predates More; as Chris Ferns notes, we appear to have been seeking a better way both to live together and in our environment for a long time, stating that 'theories as to the nature of an ideal state go back to the time of Plato and beyond, while the basic human yearning for a better world ... seems practically coterminous with civilization itself.'³ Although the contemporary model of 'placemaking' has its origins in the 1960s, with the grassroots involvement of local communities in deciding how they want to live and determine their own environments, the concept also stretches further back, drawing influence from the utopian experiments of the nineteenth century.⁴ It is evident that the utopian impulse has huge significance and relevance for us, still informing our notions of how we want to live and may prove to be greatly influential in facing future challenges.

The focus of this essay is primarily the nineteenth century, a time of vast social upheaval resulting from the Industrial Revolution, originating in the previous century. There was a massive shift away from the traditional agricultural lifestyle for large parts of the population, with an explosion of urban growth, bringing fresh challenges and tensions. It initiated protest movements and revolts, not only in the working classes, but across the social spectrum, involving philosophers, artists, writers, and philanthropists. It was a time of flux, when the status quo was challenged and questioned, and divisions in society were highlighted, generating discussion and scrutiny of working and living

¹ Lyman Tower Sargent, *Utopianism A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

² Paul Kincaid, 'Utopia in Context', *Foundation*, 45, 124 (2016), 5-18 (p.10).

³ Chris Ferns, *Narrating Utopia: Ideology, Gender, Form in Utopian Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999), p.32.

⁴ Jim Walker (2021) *Social Alchemy: Jim Walker on Placemaking as Utopian Experiment*. Available at: <<https://www.pps.org/>>, [accessed: 17 July 2022].

conditions, the ramifications of which are still felt today.⁵ Until the publication of literary utopias such as Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* and William Morris's *News From Nowhere* in the latter part of the nineteenth century, the utopian impulse had largely been realised through the perspective of the utopian socialists.⁶ The importance of Robert Owen⁷ in terms of his social engineering and practical application of utopian ideas and how he has influenced writers makes him a key focal point of this essay; he points back to Thomas More and forwards to William Morris, providing a connection and underlining the ongoing interest, debate and discussion surrounding the concept of a better social order.

Gregory Claeys pinpoints the nineteenth century as a key moment in the timeline of the utopian imagination; it heralded the practical application of utopian ideas and experiments, underpinned by a growth in socialist theory as a counterpoint to the negative aspects of capitalism. He establishes both the primary importance of place and the potential within the utopian impulse for meaningful societal change, 'the ideal society, as conceived by socialists of this period was a realizable aspiration defined by greater equality, social justice, a more harmonious attitude towards the environment, and a more satisfactory balance of work and pleasure'.⁸ As Krishan Kumar notes, there was a marked contrast between the socialist utopia of the nineteenth century onwards and the earlier traditional utopia of the Renaissance. Published in 1516, Thomas More's *Utopia* fits neatly into the Renaissance model; his utopia is static, timeless, and ahistorical, developed along rational principles with an

⁵ R G Garnett, *Co-operation and the Owenite Socialist Communities in Britain 1825-45* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1972).

⁶ Keith Taylor identifies five significant figures responsible for the formation of the emergent socialist theory of the early nineteenth century: Henri Saint-Simon, Robert Owen, Charles Fourier, Etienne Cabet and Wilhelm Weitling. He also notes that they did not identify themselves as utopian; conversely, this was already a disparaging term, synonymous with wishful thinking and idealism. Keith Taylor, *The Political Ideas of the Utopian Socialists* (London: Frank Cass and Company Limited, 1982).

⁷ The focus of this essay necessitates the consideration of Robert Owen rather than the whole group of utopian socialists. As Vieira establishes, although it could be argued that there was an overall objective that the group was focused on, namely a radical change to established society towards a more egalitarian foundation, they were essentially split regarding their strategies and priorities. Fátima Vieira, 'The Concept of Utopia' in *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, ed. by Gregory Claeys (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 12.

⁸ Gregory Claeys, *Searching for Utopia: the History of an Idea* (London, Thames & Hudson Ltd., 2011), p. 149.

overriding emphasis on social order and control. Conversely, the socialist utopia is dynamic, informed by ideas of unlimited progress and growth. The key to this change in focus is a new emphasis on the importance and understanding of the historical process, so that '*eutopia* becomes *euchronia*. The good place becomes the good time. No longer was utopia to be found on a remote island or in a hidden mountain valley ... The new sense of history, the new concern with change and development, made it increasingly old-fashioned to think of utopia as belonging anywhere but in mankind's future.'⁹

However, it is important not to overlook the fact that there is also common ground between the two traditions. More broke new ground with the publication of *Utopia*, suggesting both the possibility of the attainment of a better society and that this could be achieved by human, not divine, intervention, a radical shift from traditional belief. For example, at the beginning of Book 2, we are told that the island of Utopia is not a natural formation but the result of a feat of engineering; a direct intimation that we can have some control over our lives and environment.¹⁰ As Chris Ferns notes, 'What More offers is not a blueprint, but the portrait of a more perfect society in operation, and one which has been created by the unaided use of human reason'.¹¹ Thus, although More was writing in the utopian tradition by exploring the concept of a better world, he was also developing the idea that this was within our reach, a notion that would be explored and expanded in later utopian writing and ideology. Furthermore, by locating his utopia in an imagined urban space, More signified a shift away from the pastoral idyll of earlier utopias; it is from this period that the ambiguous and complex relationship between the urban and rural space develops, an idea that writers would increasingly begin to grapple with, exploring all the ensuing challenges and tensions. More is careful to show that his utopia is not a perfect but a better place; for example, it is a society in which punishments and slavery is practiced.¹² However, it is important to contextualise *Utopia*, to

⁹ Krishan Kumar, *Utopia & Anti-Utopia in Modern Times* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell Ltd, 1987), p. 45.

¹⁰ Thomas More, *Utopia* (London: Penguin Books, 2009), p. 47.

¹¹ Chris Ferns, *Narrating Utopia*, p.32.

¹² More, *Utopia*, p. 67.

understand that this would not have been problematical for the contemporary reader who would have understood such practices were within the framework of the Great Chain of Being, that everything was ordained and ordered by God; conversely, for many, More's utopia would have been a vast improvement on existing society. More was writing at a time of intellectual enquiry when accepted ideas were beginning to be challenged and *Utopia* reflects this tension. On one level, it offers a social commentary and critique on More's England; he was reacting to his unease over the growing disparity between the wealthy classes and the rural poor, noting that land enclosure increasingly practiced by the aristocracy and clergy resulted in increased unemployment and vagrancy. *Utopia* afforded him a platform from which he could indirectly foreground these concerns and issues, cleverly distancing himself through the character of Hythloday. He was able to explore his ideas for a better, more egalitarian, and just society and, therefore, offer a veiled attack on established European society. It is impossible to determine More's intentions in writing *Utopia*, to know if he was offering a radical solution to these problems, or mere social commentary. It is both multi-layered and open ended, and it is this slipperiness wherein its greatest significance perhaps lies and why it has survived and remained relevant. The ambiguity that underlines *Utopia* is established in the letter from More to Peter Gilles that prefaces the book; More states that he wants to set down the truth but fears that it has evaded him, indicating to the reader that all is perhaps not as it seems.¹³ This ambiguity is further reinforced by the use of wordplay throughout the book with the title itself meaning both 'no place' and 'good place'; thus it is possible to read *Utopia* as a piece of irony or satire.

Throughout his life (1771-1858), Robert Owen was a man of towering ambition and vision, governed by strong principles and often contradictory influences. He was primarily a capitalist, a millowner driven by commercial gain and profit and, yet, he was also focused on the welfare of his workforce, campaigning for better working and living conditions, greater access to education and leisure time,

¹³ Ibid., vii-xii.

shorter working hours, and shared ownership of property. As Jacqueline Yallop notes, we should not overlook the fact that Owen may simply have been interested in creating a more efficient and, therefore, productive workforce in the pursuit of ever greater profit, acknowledging that

the mill was at the heart of a new type of far-reaching global capitalism which linked Britain to the New World and beyond, to an international marketplace that relied on both the worst inequalities of the slave-laboured cotton plantation and the excitement of a burgeoning consumerism.¹⁴

Such is the complexity that surrounds many philanthropists, an issue that we are perhaps only beginning to grapple with and address today. However, by challenging the status quo amidst political and religious opposition, Owen highlighted the need for reform and change, consistently developing better ways to live and work. Although his experiments often failed after a few years, it is important to acknowledge that he demonstrated both the possibility of an alternative social order and the potential that such a change could have on humanity as a whole. His influence can be traced throughout the nineteenth century and beyond, threading through many disciplines.¹⁵

In his collection of essays, 'A New View of Society', Owen outlined his central belief in the environment as a shaping force in the 'formation of character'.¹⁶ The vice and degeneracy that Owen identified within the working classes could be eradicated by a change in circumstances and an improvement in living and working conditions; furthermore, he believed he had a moral obligation to effect this change. His mills at New Lanark in Scotland had enabled him to experiment with his biological engineering theory, and he had developed what would become the prototype model village. In 1816, he opened an Institute for the Formation of Character at New Lanark, which would focus on the importance of education which he believed was key for optimum human development and wellbeing. On one level, Owen is using the utopian convention of contrasting a better, proposed society with the existing, failing one and, as such, can be said to echo More's *Utopia*. However, the

¹⁴ Jacqueline Yallop, *Dreamstreets: A Journey Through Britain's Village Utopias* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2015), p. 17.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Robert Owen, 'A New View of Society', in *A New View of Society and Other Writings*, ed. by Gregory Claeys (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 19.

important difference is that Owen can offer direct evidence of his utopian ideal place, and, furthermore, demonstrate that it can be replicated elsewhere. He is forthright about the success of his venture, 'these principles, applied to the community at New Lanark, ... effected a complete change in the general character of the village, containing upwards of 2,000 inhabitants, and into which, also, there was a constant influx of newcomers.'¹⁷ Owen is unswerving in his foregrounding of the sense of place and the importance that it plays in the formation of character. The future health, prosperity and wellbeing of humanity is clearly linked to the immediate environment, 'to apply these principles, however, successfully to practice, both a comprehensive and a minute view must be taken of the existing state of the society on which they are intended to operate'.¹⁸

In his later essays, Owen becomes more radical and ambitious, envisioning a 'new moral order', believing it imperative that his principles should be realised on a global scale, and that only then could the world be free of injustice, poverty, and misery. From a modern perspective, it is easy to dismiss Owen as an idealist, deluded by romantic imaginings of a better world, achieved not through revolution and mass protest but gradually, through education, mutual goodwill, and cooperation. However, he was very much at the forefront of debate, influencing government policy and campaigning for social reform, and, as Claeys notes, was forming his theories at the 'very beginning of the socialist movement, and with a degree of optimism about the prospect of ideal institutional development that many today would concede is no longer warranted'.¹⁹

It is Owen's communitarian model of society, the development of his 'social system', that has most relevance for this essay.²⁰ Although New Lanark is seen as the prototype model village and would be

¹⁷ Ibid., p.33.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 34.

¹⁹ Gregory Claeys, ed., *A New View of Society and Other Writings* (London: Penguin, 1991), xxxi.

²⁰ Although the philosophy of communitarianism developed in the C20th, the term communitarian has been linked to the utopian socialists of the C19th and their ideas about communal living/societies and can be traced back even earlier and as such is a useful concept to discuss at this point in the essay. Available at: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/communitarianism> [accessed 23 July 2022].

copied by later industrialists and philanthropists²¹, it was essentially an industrial village. Owen promoted the idea of rural relocation of the poor as a way of addressing the negative effects of industrialisation; in his continual pursuit for social regeneration, he believed the solution would be found in a balance between agriculture and industry in a network of villages or 'townships' with an optimum population of 1,200. He proposed a system of communal living, with everyone living together in one building, with no sense of privacy or seclusion, and what amounted to state childcare; as such this echoes the rational principles that More applied to his own ideal city. Owen envisaged his proposed townships would offer a more harmonious and progressive model of society, in effect offering the best of both worlds,

The new villages would combine within them all the advantages of the largest town, without one of its innumerable evils and inconveniences; and with all the benefits of the country, without any of the numerous disadvantages that secluded residences now present.²²

This idea of the blending of the urban and rural in the search for a better society is a cornerstone of the utopian imagination and provides a connecting thread running through much of the writing.

Claeys establishes that there has always been an ambivalence regarding the urban space, and it is interesting to note that it is often the complexities regarding the location rather than the form of the ideal place that is harder to resolve.²³ Although his proposed villages were never built, it is important to understand that Owen had planted ideas, acting as a catalyst for future thinkers and planners. Two of the most significant enterprises that emerged in the later nineteenth century, the Arts and Craft movement and the Garden City movement, can both be said to build on Owenite principles.

²¹ Yallop documents that there are over 400 model towns and villages in Britain alone, ranging from the well known to the obscure and forgotten, but all 'are places that reveal the complexities of a society in flux, exposing the debates that preoccupied a developing nation: religion, class, education, reform, art, status, wealth, science, slavery, history, identity'. Yallop, *Dreamstreets*, x.

²² Owen, 'Address Delivered at the City of London Tavern on Thursday, August 21st, 1817' in *A New View of Society and Other Writings*, p. 197.

²³ Gregory Claeys, *Searching For Utopia*.

The Arts and Crafts movement flourished from the 1860s and was comprised of a diverse group of artists, writers, and critics who, despite ideological differences, were overall concerned with the dehumanising effects of industrialisation. Its major figures, such as John Ruskin and William Morris, sought to shift focus back to traditional craftsmanship and natural materials, and to establish the link between aesthetic design and a better quality of life, with an emphasis on a rural lifestyle. At the heart of the movement was a desire to develop a better social order and it has had a major influence on urban planning and design. The Garden City movement is mainly associated with Ebenezer Howard who outlined his concept of the ideal social space in 1902, a harmonious blend of the town and country, combining housing, green space and civic amenities, 'Town and country *must be married*, and out of this joyous union will spring a new hope, a new life, a new civilisation'.²⁴ The project had evident potential for regeneration, and Howard envisioned his proposed model would be replicated throughout the country. Once again, a clear link can be traced from Howard's ambitious project of 'social cities' back to More's *Utopia* in which he provided a detailed plan of a society of interconnected yet self-contained towns.

Many of the issues that preoccupied William Morris in his lifetime have relevance today so that in some ways he seems to have been ahead of his time; for instance, he linked the effects of industrialisation and the resultant urban growth with the negative impact on the natural world and recognised the positive effect that art can have on our spiritual and mental health. Yet, there is also a sense that he was disconnected with reality, promoting an aesthetic lifestyle that was beyond the reach of most people. Evidently, Morris was a complex figure, guilty of not always living up to his own ideals and principles, but as, Fiona MacCarthy notes, his importance lies in his wide-ranging activity, 'his largeness of vision is the key to it ... he wanted to integrate the city with the country, the

²⁴ Ebenezer Howard, *Garden Cities of To-Morrow* (London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., Ltd., 1902), p. 18.

present with the past, the public and the personal moralities. Most of all he was concerned with proper human occupation, whether going under the name of work or play.²⁵

Morris wrote *News From Nowhere* (1890) as a critical response to Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward: 2000 - 1887* (1888) which he felt championed mechanisation and industry at the expense of the wellbeing of humanity and was concerned as to its political impact and the threat that it could pose to a future socialist society. He believed Bellamy's imagined utopia was not a radical vision of a better society, merely a perpetuation of the existing one, steeped in class bias,

To Morris, Bellamy's utopian ideal represents, not radical social reform, but rather the maintenance of existing privilege: an ideal utopian only in its abolition of guilt. Where Bellamy offers the vision of a world in which a bourgeois lifestyle is available to all, Morris sees its maintenance as incompatible with the existence of social and economic justice.²⁶

In *News from Nowhere*²⁷ (*News*), Morris offers an alternative vision, drawing on his own experiences as a campaigner for social reform, and applying them to a future imagined socialist society. To some extent, *News* is a traditional utopia, and Morris draws on the expected conventions. Thus, the visitor (William Guest) wakes up in a future London reimagined as a communist society, he is given a tour by a guide (Dick/Richard Hammond) and is given a detailed history of this utopia by both Dick and his great-grandfather (Old Hammond). However, what sets *News* apart in the utopian tradition is that Morris does not gloss over how the change in society has been achieved. As Ferns notes, in the longest chapter of the book, *How the Change Came*,²⁸ Morris details at length the harsh conflict and bloody struggle that is necessary to effect the change.²⁹ Furthermore, the narrative does not move fully away from reality, there are constant references to Guest's 'other world' and an awareness that he perhaps is not of this one; possibly a further comment on the difficulty of creating a better world. Thus, having re-joined Guest and his great-grandfather, Dick gives voice to his fear that Guest may simply disappear; the implication being that even though we are in a future world, we are keenly

²⁵ Fiona MacCarthy, *William Morris: A Life for Our Time* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1994), vii.

²⁶ Chris Ferns, *Narrating Utopia*, p.143.

²⁷ William Morris, *News From Nowhere* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2009).

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 89-111.

²⁹ Ferns, *Narrating Utopia*, p. 145.

aware of reality. Thus, Dick is relieved, 'to find that you and my kinsman have not quite talked yourselves into another world; I was half suspecting ... that you would presently be vanishing away from us.'³⁰

Throughout the novel, Morris expands on the importance of place, emphasising the concept that the environment is essential to one's wellbeing; the journey that Guest makes through London allows Morris to detail this point. Green spaces and access to them for all is possible in this future society, a topic that was debated at the time³¹; Dick explains that children often camp out in the woods in the summer months, and that rather than being confined in a school they are educated by each other and the natural environment. Guest is amazed to find that London and the surrounding areas have been reduced in size, and that they have been rewilded; in effect they have been 'countrified'. Old Hammond describes how the villages have been repopulated and repurposed, with people moving back to them from the manufacturing towns. This concept of shifting between country and city echoes *Utopia* as More similarly proposed a system whereby people alternate between the two, with everyone having to farm the land. Morris provides a clear link to the notion of place and wellbeing, pointing to the positive and beneficial influence of one's environment,

the town invaded the country; but the invaders ... yielded to the influence of their surroundings, and became country people; and in their turn, as they became more numerous than the townsmen, influenced them also; so that the difference between the town and country grew less and less ; and it was indeed this world of the country vivified by the thought and briskness of town-bred folk which has produced that happy and leisurely but eager life of which you have had a first taste.³²

Thus, Morris has fulfilled the blending between the urban and rural space that had been a major thread of the utopian impulse. There is no longer a need to distinguish between town and country; thus Dick is perplexed by Guest's question about 'country' people.³³ This concept of town/country

³⁰ Morris, *News From Nowhere*, p. 116.

³¹ Fiona MacCarthy, *Anarchy & Beauty* (London: National Portrait Gallery Publications, 2014), p. 77. MacCarthy notes that Octavia Hill, who would later establish The National Trust, was a keen champion of green spaces for all, and was passionate about the protection of land from unnecessary development.

³² Morris, *New From Nowhere*, p. 62.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

blending was a key element of Morris' philosophy; in 1894, he gave a lecture that deliberated upon the mutual benefit to both, and points back to Owen, 'I want the town to be impregnated with the beauty of the country, and the country with the intelligence and vivid life of the town.'³⁴ *News* is clearly a fictional homage to his vision.

Another of Morris' beliefs is that one should be surrounded by beauty, and he often references this idea in the novel. All evidence of industrialisation has been eradicated, and as such, Guest is struck by the contrast between the beauty and simplicity to be found in this future London compared with the noise, dirt, and ugliness of his own city. Similarly, Guest notices the beauty of the architecture, commenting favourably on the bridges that span the Thames and the many buildings that he passes. Morris saw beauty in the mundane; thus, the working mills that Guest sees as he travels upriver are elevated, compared to the beauty of a gothic cathedral. In contrast, the Houses of Parliament are now used to store manure. The river Thames is a constant presence throughout *News*; it has central importance to the narrative, providing a link to both the London of Guest's reality and that of the imagined future and Morris uses the Thames to symbolise the transformation that has been made. Old Hammond remembers how the river had been valued only for its commercial potential and, that when it had been superseded by the railways, it had been neglected and abused; thus, Morris is directly critiquing the effects of industrialisation. Conversely, as Guest journeys on the Thames, he experiences it as a life affirming, vital and valued part of the landscape.

As a major figure in the Arts and Crafts movement, Morris was inspired by the medieval period, frequent references to which are made throughout the novel. Ferns finds the sense of nostalgia that underlines *News* to be problematical, noting that the novel is essentially backward looking, so that 'in places, his vision of a Communist future reads more than an evocation of some vanished golden age.'³⁵ Furthermore, he argues that rather than a vision of a future imagined society, Morris has

³⁴ MacCarthy, *Anarchy & Beauty*, p. 80.

³⁵ Ferns, *Narrating Utopia*, p. 148.

merely managed to 'render visible once more the outline of an ideal order that is *already there*.'³⁶

However, I would argue that this is too simplistic, overlooking the central messaging that is conveyed by the novel, the suggestion that an alternative society is possible. *News* is not simply an imitation of the past, it enables Morris to illustrate his concept of progress; he establishes that we have a moral obligation not to discard the work and achievements of past generations but to build on them,

it is not we who can build up the new social order; the past ages have done the most of that work for us; but we can clear our eyes to the signs of the times, and we shall then see that the attainment of a good condition of life is being made possible for us, and that it is our business to stretch out our hands to take it.³⁷

Thus, the novel ends on a message of hope, almost a call to arms; having returned to the reality of his own time, Guest clearly has work to do, that, having experienced a better social order, he has been given the impetus to bring about the change. Morris reinforces his radical messaging in the last sentence, stressing that, 'if others see it as I have seen it, then it may be called a vision rather than a dream'.³⁸

The idea that the sense of place is central to the utopian imagination is clear in that we are still seeking a better way in which to both live with each other and in our environment. Recent events have shown that local community response and initiative seems to be the driving force that highlights the need for radical reform and meaningful change.³⁹ Thus, perhaps the utopian model of the small, interconnected village/town network as proposed in the works of More, Owen and Morris may be the ideal solution to the problem of urbanisation but it needs to be realised differently, not

³⁶ Ibid., p.149.

³⁷ William Morris, 'How We Live and How We Might Live', lecture to the Hammersmith Branch of the S.D.F. (Kelmescott House, Hammersmith, 30th November 1884).

³⁸ Morris, *New From Nowhere*, p. 182.

³⁹ For instance, following the Grenfell Tower fire in 2017, it was the local community rather than the government that provided a proactive response, 'we should all remember this: the role of the community, how it came together, how it was they who provided the humanitarian response when the government's was so completely lacking, and how this extended into the weeks and months that followed'. Seraphima Kennedy, 'From the darkness of Grenfell came solidarity, kindness and hope. They saved us.', *The Guardian*, 13 June 2008, Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com>, [accessed: 29 July 2022].

imposed from above but coming from the community themselves.⁴⁰ Although the utopian impulse is perhaps wishful thinking, thereby fanciful and unattainable, we should not underestimate the need to dream and envision a better social order, for 'without it humanity would never have struggled onward towards betterment. It is a pole-star, a guide, a reference point on a common map of an eternal quest for the improvement of the human condition'.⁴¹

⁴⁰ It could be argued that many of the utopias written in the C19th foreshadowed the dystopias of the C20th. Writers such as George Orwell, Aldous Huxley and Margaret Atwood have developed and expanded on utopian themes such as control, surveillance, loss of individualism to devastating effect, a far remove from the concept of the ideal place.

⁴¹ Claeys, *Searching For Utopia*, p. 15.