

THE RESOURCEFUL PAST: WILLIAM MORRIS, SOCIALIST ROMANTICISM AND THE EARLY FICTION OF H. G. WELLS

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News from Somewhere?

Like its counterparts in other countries, British social democracy relied through much of the twentieth century on a 'productivist' set of assumptions. Basically, productivism contends that the centre-left should aim to foster an economic growth that is both more efficient and fairer than that of *laissez-faire* capitalism.¹ Firstly, social democrats condemned the wastefulness of unregulated capitalism (unemployment, deprivation, excessive consumption). Secondly, they attacked it on the grounds of justice, i.e. as embodying socioeconomic inequalities which are inimical to personal freedom (such as class disadvantages) and to the social community (by encouraging selfishness). To combat such waste and injustice social democrats have treated the equitable distribution of economic growth as central to their solution. And the strategy was for a long time successful, culminating in Crosland's famous claim that capitalism had been irredeemably socialised.² Yet some feared that the left had become complacent. In the 1960s both the anti-poverty lobby and the New Left attempted to inject new energy and purpose and, indeed, the emphasis on gender equality, anti-discrimination and fighting poverty is a testament to such projects. But the momentum was not sustained. Once it ran into trouble, with the post-war settlement faltering in the 1970s, British social democracy looked exhausted and its ideological enemies pounced. The fightback of the 1990s would again stress the importance of growth within the 'new economy', this time requiring flexible labour markets, supply-side dynamics, high employability levels, globally-oriented fiscal and monetary policies and semi-privatisation of the public sphere, along with a host of public policies to contain the social problems that Thatcherism allowed to thrive.³

By encroaching onto neoliberal territory, though, this 'new social democracy' has attracted various criticisms, one of the most important being that productivism, whether old or new, cannot adequately address the need for a political economy of care, for a society which is less commodified, fragmented and consumerist, and for radical measures to tackle ecological degradation.⁴ Yet by placing its faith in productivist strategies the new social democracy has been following, more than its apologists cared to admit, the lead adopted decades ago by its predecessors.

As such, those interested in a post-productivist approach are having to address the shortcomings not only of productivism but, for all its successes, of the social

¹Tony Fitzpatrick, *After the New Social Democracy* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003).

² Anthony Crosland, *The Future of Socialism* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1956).

³ Gordon Brown, *Fair is Efficient* (London: Fabian Society, 1994).

⁴ e.g. Fiona Williams, *Rethinking Families* (London: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, 2004).

democratic ideas that became almost indistinguishable from them.⁵ The article will not elucidate on the meaning or implications of post-productivism.⁶ What it will attempt is an excavation of a particular episode in the demise of one of post-productivism's intellectual ancestors: romanticism.

The romantic tradition inevitably possesses many different strands and so only a few are discussed here.⁷ Romanticism constituted a distinct sociocultural movement and philosophical tradition, and was perhaps the first to articulate a deep, modernist ambivalence *to* modernity. Its individualism expressed support for the emancipatory impulses of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, combined with an anxiety that this liberated self might become detached from its social roots. Its emphasis on imagination and feeling teased the limits of reason, rejecting abstract doctrines but often welcoming more experiential, everyday kind of rationalisms. It reacted against formalism and classicism in favour of a subjectivism that, except for the few who embraced solipsism and nihilism, sought itself in nature and in history.

This essay is concerned with one ideological component of romanticism; specifically, with its manifestation on the political left. Its leftist features would survive the long shadows of Rousseau and of German idealism, until the arrival of perhaps its most articulate, radical spokesman: William Morris. Influenced by Carlyle, Ruskin, *et al*, and by attempting to integrate their romanticism with Marxism, Morris fashioned an eco-socialism that was rediscovered in the 1980s.⁸ As such, eco-socialists appreciate that what Morris articulated was an alternative direction for left politics, one that was, unfortunately, rarely influential in the twentieth century. By neglecting the sort of romantic ideals and themes to which Morris gave voice an intellectual space was arguably cleared for a technocratic, elitist and productivist politics.

A leftist political romanticism therefore represents the 'road less travelled' in British social democracy. By examining how and why its influence waned we can hopefully shed light on a key episode in the left's history, one that may provide some of the resources upon which post-productivism can draw.

It is of course necessary to acknowledge the limitations of what follows. For all his importance Morris is just one contributor to socialist romanticism. Doing full justice to the latter would require an exploration of the entire Rousseauist tradition, which is too big a task to attempt here. Furthermore, in tracing its waning influence we will confine ourselves to an investigation of the early work of H. G. Wells who, despite his immense fame and influence, represents part of just

⁵ R. Goodin, "Towards a Post-Productivist Welfare State," *British Journal of Political Science* 31 (2001), 13-40.

⁶ See Fitzpatrick, *op cit*.

⁷ Nancy L. Rosenblum, *Another Liberalism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987).

⁸ David Pepper, *Modern Environmentalism: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1996), 213-5.

one school of British socialism. We will also concentrate largely upon Wells's early (pre-1910) fiction since, firstly, we do not need to consider the entirety of his socialism to understand its romantic elements and, secondly, because it is in the fiction that Wells most clearly wrestles with his feelings of ambivalence and paradox towards social reform.

Morris, Romanticism and Ethics

Kenny detects the closest contemporary equivalents to romanticism in the environmentalist emphasis upon individual self-creation, holism and a concurrence of society and nature.⁹ He portrays E. P. Thompson's work as one of the most prominent attempts to reconnect the modern left to this radical heritage for, in discarding the romantic tradition as bourgeois idealism, the left had allowed conservatives to associate the emotive and expressive imagination with patriotism and nationalism, contrasting it to the left's emphasis upon institutional reform, impersonal economics and intellectual abstractions. Influenced by Morris, Thompson's ambition was to configure the human self as centred upon 'desire' and rooted within a republican context stressing virtue and commonality.¹⁰

Kenny believes that Thompson's attempt to revive the romantic tradition is not entirely successful but that his enterprise deserves reconsideration now that the other strands within the left (those which defeated Thompson's 'socialist humanism') have themselves faltered.¹¹ How then should we seek to understand the exchange between romanticism and socialism and the detachment of the latter from the former in the twentieth century? By exploring some aspects of early Fabianism at least a partial answer to this question can be suggested. Romantic themes are detectable within the work of Wells, combined with an ambivalence towards the romantic that would eventually turn him, and presumably many others, against it. We need to follow Thompson in conceptualising romanticism through the person who was its most articulate radical spokesman during the period when British socialism and social democracy were emerging.

Originally possessing a culturally conservative and apolitical complexion Morris's romanticism transformed under the influence of Marx into something more politically radical.¹² Like the early utilitarianism he abhorred, Morris regarded the search for pleasure as the driving force of human life but, unlike it, he did not believe this search should be confined within institutional walls constructed

⁹ Michael Kenny, "Socialism and the Romantic 'Self': the Case of Edward Thompson," *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 5 (2000), 105-27.

¹⁰ E. P. Thompson, *William Morris* (London: Pantheon, 1976); *The Romantics* (Woodbridge: Merlin Press, 1997).

¹¹ Kenny, 118-24.

¹² Influences suggesting why he cannot be accurately portrayed as either an anarchist or syndicalist; Ruth Kinna, "William Morris and Anti-Parliamentarianism," *History of Political Thought*, 15 (1994), 593-613.

by self-appointed elites.¹³ Desire and the frustration of desire is therefore the first and most crucial theme of Morris's romanticism. And in addition to pleasure Morris associates with desire 'real needs' such as good health, education, abundant leisure and the experience of diversity (he enthuses about people travelling and experimenting with work and new ideas).¹⁴

Work is vital here. He took from Marx an emphasis upon labour such that the transformation of nature through labour could be distinguished into higher and lower forms.¹⁵ In the earlier stages of human civilisation this was transformation for the sake of survival; in its later stages labour could transcend its lower, immature phase to become an expression of desire. Capitalism is condemned for its attempt to halt history at the point where labour has created great wealth but is not being allowed to advance to its later, more mature stage: "It would almost seem as if some phantom of the ceaseless pursuit of food which was once the master of the savage was still hunting the civilised man...".¹⁶

Reiterating Marx's portrayal of communism as the freedom to fish in the morning, etc., Morris depicts as futile a society (capitalist or otherwise) in which productive labour exists merely for the creation of more productive labour and regarded socialism as that which would allow our creative desires to be expressed, as fully as possible, in cooperative solidarity with others.¹⁷ Waters calls this vision a 'gospel of play'.¹⁸ The only value of productivity and material growth is to enable us to aim beyond them towards a non-productivist society and way of life.

Additional themes spin off from this first, most fundamental one. The second aspect of Morris's romanticism is the importance *and potential universality* of creativity. Pleasure is not passive but active, involving learning from the creations of others and reworking the fruits of nature into forms of both personal and collective self-expression. By commodifying nature into a source of profit capitalist industrialism stifles the potential possessed by everyone to be creative. Creativity is therefore a social activity, a means of cultural exchange and mutual recognition that can manifest itself in a diversity of ways. For Morris life must become slower and less frantic in order to offer greater opportunities for reflection, self-development (both mental and physical) and cooperative deliberation.¹⁹ The implication is that all humans are capable of such reflection and of working

¹³ Stephen Ingle, *Socialist Thought in Imaginative Literature* (London: Macmillan, 1979), ch. 7.

¹⁴ William Morris, *News From Nowhere and Selected Writings and Designs* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1986), 170-9.

¹⁵ John Stirling, "William Morris and Work as it is and as it Might be," *Capital & Class*, 76 (2002), 127-44.

¹⁶ Morris, 169.

¹⁷ Karl Marx, *Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), 169.

¹⁸ Chris Waters, *British Socialists and the Politics of Popular Culture, 1884-1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), 13.

¹⁹ Morris, 126.

together democratically to ensure that the social conditions for personal growth are maintained and enhanced. This is allied to a politics of time since Morris believed that necessary work must take as little time as possible while non-necessary work must be made as pleasurable as possible.²⁰ Voluntarism rather than compulsion would become the rule, even if this means vital tasks remaining unperformed, and while there are bound to be social norms these should not be restrictive enough to cramp hearts and minds.²¹

The third theme is Morris's opposition to scientism of one form or another (functionalism, positivism, utilitarianism) in favour of what might be called a 'social aestheticism'.²² To define something (whether an object, person or event) merely in terms of its function is to do violence to its wholeness and complexity.²³ This idea is clearest in his thoughts about labour. Morris certainly seeks to reconcile art and utility, but while art must be useful our understanding of usefulness evolves to encompass aesthetic qualities and meanings that go unrecognised by sterile doctrines such as utilitarianism and positivism. This reconciliation is therefore based upon a *contrast* between the functional and the aesthetic, requiring the abandonment of social hierarchies and domination, for only in relations of equality and fraternity can the creative impulse be properly expressed by *all* and pleasure no longer defined in opposition to work.²⁴ For Morris utilitarianism – by which he principally means the subordination of individuals to social systems – is necessary if capitalism is to fall but cannot be a permanent state of affairs if socialism is to mean anything. His is a 'bottom-up utopia', then, based upon an expressive and relational individuality rather than a scientific, God's-eye view in which institutions eclipse the ordinary and the commonplace. The common good – and so also service *to* the common good – is embedded in the diurnal and the human, since the point of socialism is to release from its existing social and economic confinements that which is extraordinary.

The final theme concerns nature. Morris did not represent nature as a resource to be colonised and dominated, preferring to view the human and the natural as interdependent. The human is a being of both reason and feeling. As such, and like many romantics, Morris recommended a philosophy of 'harmonies' so that the dichotomies of modernity could be reintegrated. Unlike both Marxism and Fabianism, then, Morris challenged the construction of nature as resource transformed through the tools of labour.²⁵ This is why work must embody an ethos of inclusion and concord rather than power and domination. Note, though, that

²⁰ Ruth Kinna, "William Morris: Art, Work, and Leisure," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 61 (2000), 493-512.

²¹ Morris, 233.

²² *Ibid.*, 102-4.

²³ Kinna, 1994, 605-6.

²⁴ Morris, 124-5.

²⁵ Piers J. Hale, "Labor and the Human Relationship with Nature," *Journal of the History of Biology*, 36 (2003), 249-84.

Morris referred to his ideal society as being in “reasonable strife with nature”, the implication being that the harmonies of society-nature relations *would* sometimes be discordant, giving social reform a dynamic openness.²⁶ Even *News from Nowhere* makes room for disagreement and hard-headed realism.

This is not to claim that non-romantic themes are alien to Morris. For instance, while offering a philosophy of desire Morris also felt a strong personal sense of duty; and while heralding a future of creativity and social aesthetics Morris, in *News From Nowhere*, depicts communism as dependent upon a prior period of statist, social engineering. But these inconsistencies (if they are such) also serve to refute as simplistic the claim that Morris is an anti-modernist, oblivious to the ambivalences and trade-offs implied by liberty and progress.²⁷ He is certainly hostile towards industrialism, for instance, but his attitude towards machinery and factory production is nevertheless pragmatic and flexible.²⁸

The romantic emphases sketched earlier – (1) emancipatory individualism plus a realisation that the self’s social roots require nurturing, (2) a visionary imagination that enriches reason, (3) rejection of formalism – are therefore visible within Morris’s socialism to varying degrees. (1) He believed in the liberation of humans from circumstances that stifle both their personal and social creativities, where desire and pleasure are not to be viewed in selfish, hedonistic terms but as enlivening social and natural relationships. (2) So, while happy to accept that Marx had revealed the workings of history (the ‘inner reason’, in Hegelian terminology), he rejected an economic essentialism, preferring to see the economic and the cultural as interwoven. (3) And although a ‘conservative radical’ artistically he also emphasised the natural and the organic. All of which required understanding the conditions of production, namely how capitalism stole from mortal individuals the brief time they have on the earth, commodified their labour and alienated them from themselves and one another.²⁹

Whether you value Morris’s socialist romanticism or not it did at least address, head on, the question with which many on the left have frequently been uncomfortable: what is socialism for? This may seem a strange and certainly a contentious assertion to make. After all, isn’t the socialist tradition weighed down with utopias, critiques, values, goals, etc? Isn’t socialism for greater equality, common ownership, solidarity, collective welfare, and so on? Yet all too often socialists have allowed what they are *against* to define what they are *for*, reluctant to problematise the latter.³⁰ That the former doesn’t automatically translate into the latter is a fact many preferred to overlook. Why bother to *argue* for equality

²⁶ Morris, 232.

²⁷ Laurence Davis, “Morris, Wilde and Marx on the Social Preconditions of Individual Development,” *Political Studies*, 44 (1996): 719-32; see 725-7 in particular.

²⁸ Morris, 267.

²⁹ Fiona MacCarthy, *William Morris* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), 605.

³⁰ Think of G. A. Cohen’s mea culpa in *Self-Ownership, Freedom and Equality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 1-12.

when what you really needed to do was *organise* for it? Many socialists, including non-Marxists, shared with Marx the belief that history was on their side. Thus, the question of what common ownership, etc. might mean could be left until its advent; after all, once exploitation and poverty have been vanquished, that's for the common owners themselves to work out, isn't it? Take perhaps the most famous example.

In volume 1 of *Capital* Marx talks repetitively about surplus value and surplus labour. Nowhere, however, does Marx pose some simple questions. Is the expropriation of surplus value always unjustified? Could there be some versions of a class society which are preferable to some versions of classlessness? Instead, Marx points to the horrors of mid-nineteenth-century capitalism as if opposition to this automatically generates support for his economics. It may be that the appropriate reply to the above questions is 'yes' and 'no' respectively, but in refusing to address them, in not appreciating that there is a morally normative debate *to* address, Marx allows a scientific historicism to do his moral thinking for him. In this, Marx both inherited and bequeathed a legacy which has often debilitated socialist theory and, ultimately, left it with a managerialist pragmatism which assumed that the 'vision thing' was already sorted.³¹

Ethical socialists were correct, therefore, to distinguish between the mechanism of change and the objective of change. Tawney, it has been claimed, 'put Morris to school with Webb' and it would be interesting to explore the extent to which socialist romanticism contributed to the school of ethical socialism.³² To be sure, there is no guarantee that an ethically normative politics will be post-productivist, yet given the apparent exhaustion of both old and new social democracies example in this respect is not a resource that can be neglected indefinitely.

Fabianism

Thus, Morris viewed socialism as that which would allow our creative desires to be expressed as fully as possible and in cooperative solidarity with others. Note that this is not presented as the last word on Morris's thinking (let alone that of socialist romanticism *per se*) and, like all definitions, it omits more than it includes. My point is that although they were correct to slate Morris's naivety when it came to matters of political organisation, his critics – whether Marxist, Fabian or otherwise – failed to offer anything resembling the strength of vision which animated Morris. This is another large claim but let's take a look at Fabianism specifically.

³¹ Obviously, Marx's earlier humanistic texts rebalanced this but by the time of their publication the association, by both critics and supporters, of Marxism – and, by extension, much of the left – with a mechanical politics was firmly in place.

³² Anthony Wright, *R. H. Tawney* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 135, 140-4.

Pierson, Pugh and Griffith have questioned the image of the Society as dour and puritanical; and initially the borders between it, Hyndman's Social Democratic Federation, Morris's Socialist League and other groups (like the New Fellowship) were not hard and fast, with a degree of cross-association and collaboration in evidence.³³ (The UK left, at this time, was a shifting archipelago of friendships, affiliations and cross-fertilising ideas that, to some extent, anticipated the factionalism in which socialist sisters and brothers have indulged but also reflected a period of novelty when people were working out their beliefs.) For instance, based upon her analysis of their work on local government Stapleton concludes that the Webbs were far more receptive to the importance of diversity, autonomy, spontaneity and localism than received wisdom gives them credit for.³⁴ Britain, too, was to challenge the Webbs' rather grim portrait, insisting that their disagreement with Morris was over means rather than principles or ends.³⁵

Furthermore, take the famous admonition Morris issued to reformists in 1893, warning that they risked combining social inequality with an elite-driven technocracy that would not embody the actual 'pleasures of life':

Whether the Society of Inequality might not accept the quasi-Socialist machinery...and work it for the purpose of upholding that society in a somewhat shorn condition, maybe, but a safe one.³⁶

The article was published as a Fabian Tract in 1903 and in its preface Shaw acknowledged that Morris had been correct and that reformist machinery ultimately had to produce a more inspiring and desirable vision of human life than the bureaucratised model with which the Fabians were becoming associated.³⁷ Britain is therefore able to cite passages such as these where the differences

³³ Stanley Pierson, *British Socialists: The Journey from Fantasy to Politics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 24-6; Patricia Pugh, *Educate, Agitate, Organize* (London: Methuen, 1984), Ch.9; Gareth Griffith, *Socialism and Superior Brains: The Political Thought of George Bernard Shaw* (London: Routledge, 1993), 280; Norman and Jeanne MacKenzie, *The First Fabians* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1977), 250; Robert Skidelsky, "The Fabian Ethic," in *The Genius of Shaw*, ed. Michael Holroyd (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1979); James Hinton, *Labour and Socialism* (Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 1983), Ch.3; Donald Sassoon, *One Hundred Years of Socialism: The West European Left in the Twentieth Century* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1996), 15-6; Kevin Manton, "The Fellowship of the New Life: English Ethical Socialism Reconsidered," *History of Political Thought*, 24 (2003), 282-304.

³⁴ Julia Stapleton, "Localism and Centralism in the Webbs' Political Thought," *History of Political Thought*, 12 (1991), 147-66.

³⁵ Ian Britain, *Fabianism and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 68-9.

³⁶ Morris, 154.

³⁷ MacKenzie and MacKenzie, 101-2; Alan J. Kidd, "The State and Moral Progress: The Webbs' Case for Social Reform," *Twentieth Century British History*, 7 (1996), 189-205.

between early Fabianism and Morris are much less considerable than conventionally thought.³⁸

Yet the Fabians *were* predominantly concerned with the machinery of government and Morris's point seems to be that means and ends are inseparable: a technocratic politics will surely only produce a technocratic society.³⁹ This was partly a matter of timing. The hopes which attended the growth of democracy and working-class organisations in the 1880s and 1890s meant that specifically *moral* differences between Fabians remained suppressed for many years.⁴⁰ Besides, as Ingle observes, the Fabian version of socialism was one in which individuals are to fulfil certain functions by obeying experts, it is a society of vertical integration; whereas Morris's social utopia portrays 'horizontal' associations of creative participation.⁴¹ Thus, even while rejecting the image of the Webbs as heartless bureaucrats McBriar still regrets the extent to which they stressed institutional details at the cost of articulating desirable socialist objectives.⁴² Their later support for the Bolsheviks' bureaucratic centralism justifies Morris's warning that quasi-socialist machinery might work towards inequalitarian ends. And Shaw's later, less deferential claim was that, although Morris was certainly correct to abhor the ugliness of capitalism, to base socialism upon a combination of Marxism and humanist aesthetics was a reflection of his naivety.⁴³ The rapprochement that can be detected in their earlier work had therefore died by the 1910s/20s.⁴⁴

We will now examine the early work of Wells in order to illustrate the evolving ambivalence of one influential figure towards the kind of socialist romanticism inspired by Morris. Note, this is not to claim that Wells incorporated each and every aspect of Morris's romanticism into his work, nor that he did so consciously and explicitly. Nor is it to claim that the later Wells drained every drop of romanticism from his work. Instead, it is more that, as someone developing his own position, Wells could not help but be influenced by Morris's socialist romanticism; as that position solidified, as the socialist battle to win hearts, minds and votes was underway and as the scientist within Wells triumphed over the artist, Morris's voice became dimmer.

³⁸ Britain, 98, 121-5; C. Hill, "Sidney Webb and the Common Good: 1887-1889," *History of Political Thought*, 14 (1992), 591-622, 614-5 in particular.

³⁹ Logie Barrow and Ian Bullock, *Democratic Ideas and the British Labour Movement, 1880-1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 32-7.

⁴⁰ A. M. McBriar, *Fabian Socialism and English Politics, 1884-1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), 69.

⁴¹ Ingle, 39, 112-3; also, Barrow & Bullock, 34-7.

⁴² A. McBriar, *Edwardian Mixed Doubles* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987).

⁴³ George Bernard Shaw, *The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism, Capitalism, Sovietism and Fascism* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1982), 202, 239.

⁴⁴ John T. Callaghan, *Socialism in Britain Since 1884* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), ch. 3.

Wells

From Partington's impressive overview of Wells's political development it is possible to infer what the younger Wells considered the objectives of socialism should be.⁴⁵ It involved, he averred, the elimination of undesirable circumstances so that mutual happiness could prosper. The circumstances to be eliminated involved, unsurprisingly, class barriers; but what did he mean by 'mutual happiness'? As a Darwinian, Wells appeared to support an evolutionary track whereby the truly unable and the uncompetitive would be revealed for the first time. Thus, while not advocating population control, there is a eugenic emphasis on competitive struggle combined with a view that, in a mutualist society, life could and should become more comfortable for most. There is thus something of a tension here between struggle and comfort. And although Wells's beliefs would develop, that tension would reappear in new forms. For example, education's goal is both to help individuals to develop and to improve the quality of the race where a continued distinction between 'successes' and 'failures' (the inefficient, those who do not develop and adapt) seems appropriate.⁴⁶ Wells is a eugenicist who contextualises but nevertheless respects the rights of individuals.

The free love controversy throws such tensions into sharp relief.⁴⁷ *In the Days of the Comet* had portrayed what Hattersley calls a 'utopia of free love' in which mutual cooperation extends as much to private, familial relations as it does to public ones.⁴⁸ The end of the novel depicts what, for the Edwardian era, was surely a shocking portrait of sensual release and libidinal energy.⁴⁹ Sensitive to the impact on his own reputation as well as on socialism itself, Wells later emphasised that while he supported women's rights – and so an end to the patriarchal family – he was not advocating promiscuity. Yet even if we accept Wells's claim that the novel had not been offered as a socialist utopia, he was at the very least exploring a middle way, between the bourgeois family and free love, in which sexual and emotional liberation are denoted as the counterparts to socio-institutional reform. In this, Wells was half a century ahead of his time. Yet here, too, as Partington illustrates, he could convincingly claim his opposition to promiscuity because the family, too, is subject to his doctrine of inefficiency.

In short, key to Wells's socialism is the liberation of individuals with potentially severe penalties for those who fail to take advantage of their new opportunities. As a political ethics of emancipation goes, it is a fairly unforgiving

⁴⁵ John S. Partington, "H. G. Wells: A Political Life," *Utopian Studies*, 19 (2008), 517-76 – especially 518-9; William J. Hyde, "The Socialism of H. G. Wells in the Early Twentieth Century", *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 17 (April 1956): 217-34 – see 232-8.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 521-3.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 527-9; Karen Hunt, *Equivocal Feminists: The Social Democratic Federation and the Woman Question, 1884-1911* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 113-4.

⁴⁸ Roy Hattersley, "H. G. Wells" in (eds) *Fabian Thinkers: 120 Years of Progressive Thought*, ed. Ellie Levenson, Guy Lodge and Greg Rosen (London: Fabian Society, 2004), 17.

⁴⁹ MacKenzie and MacKenzie, 363.

one; with the removal of unjust barriers, plus education, assumed to provide the sufficient conditions of social evolution. Wells associates chance not only with class background but with individual disorder such that you cannot eliminate the former without eliminating the latter also. The liberated individual is also a member of the collective mind.⁵⁰

Therefore, there are romantic themes here which echo Morris's ethic of creative companionship. Wells, too, is trying to define a new, social individualism that simultaneously releases and re-contains what has hitherto been suppressed. In particular, he calls for a 'feminization of the family' such that non-patriarchal values and practices can be allowed to flourish. This requires state regulation and aid for mothers but also punitive sanctions directed against those who are threatening to hold the human race back from its increasing mastery of chaos and chance. Liberation, utopia and feeling are thus not ends in themselves, as they seem to be for Morris's arcadia, but stages in an evolutionary, species-level ascent.⁵¹

Let us now see how this tension played out in specific aspects of Wells's early fiction. Although his 1903-8 experience with the Fabians was not a happy one he saw himself as building upon them, as breathing life into their version of socialism as administrative machinery.⁵² Wells is therefore broadly aligned to their tradition of socialist reformism and helps illuminate how they, and no doubt many others breathing the atmosphere of the time, wrestled with the influence of Morris's romanticism. Three themes illustrate the tussles that took place in Wells's work: materialism, determinism and elitism.

Firstly, Wells demonstrates a somewhat ambivalent relationship towards the material. His conception of materialism is primarily biological rather than either historical or economic. Although the left broadly accepted the Darwinian revolution Wells was, by virtue of his education, more concerned with its philosophical implications than most.⁵³ (At this time, he did not engage substantially, as other Fabians had done, with the work of Marx, George or Jevons.) For Wells the material denotes the evolutionary processes of human biology. Yet in some key novels and stories he hints at a non-reductive account of those processes, in that while consciousness (and perhaps even the soul) may be dependent upon materiality this does not mean we can simply read the former off the latter.

⁵⁰ Partington, 2008, 531-3.

⁵¹ Peter Beilharz, *Labour's Utopias: Bolshevism, Fabianism, Social Democracy* (London: Routledge, 1992), 80-3.

⁵² H. G. Wells, *New Worlds for Old* (London: Archibald Constable, 1908), ch. 12; Pugh, ch. 8. The supposed impracticalities of which initially earned him Beatrice Webb's affectionate description, "a romancer spoilt by romancing"; see Vincent Brome, *H. G. Wells* (Cornwall: Status Books, 2001), 81.

⁵³ Brome, 62, 132-3; D. A. Stack, "The First Darwinian Left: Radical and Socialist Responses to Darwin 1859-1914", *History of Political Thought*, 21 (2000), 682-710.

For instance, in ‘Under the Knife’ and ‘The Story of the Late Mr Elvisham’ humans are depicted as material beings that a straightforward philosophy of materialism cannot capture.⁵⁴ The former in particular is a powerful story of consciousness encountering itself at the edge of life, of an experience that is detached from matter and yet one which brings the initially alienated and anxious narrator back to a hunger for the radiance of the ordinary and commonplace. It is practically a Blakean vision at the infinite possibilities residing within the everyday. Then, in *Love and Mr Lewisham* Wells both satirises and celebrates our yearning for the non-material; that he is mocking the alienated desire for mediums, séances and spirits does not mean that a dogmatic, essentialist materialism will suffice as an alternative. Chaffery may use his philosophy (‘science can deal only with phenomena and has nothing to say about the noumenal realm’) to con the gullible but that does not necessarily invalidate the philosophy itself and Lewisham can find no convincing arguments in return.⁵⁵ Chaffery is compelling precisely because he points out that the ground of our understanding is unstable and the difference between Lewisham’s attachment to scientific materialism and socialism differs from the spiritualism he disdains only as a matter of degree. It is a different *kind* of faith.

Thus, Wells’s thought echoes aspects of Morris’s. The non-reductive materialism of the former resembles the naturalism of the latter, the way in which both human and physical nature offer the basis of social association and knowledge but cannot provide comprehensive models telling us how to live or what to believe. We must be attuned to nature and evolution without following them slavishly. Morris’s scepticism towards scientism is therefore one that finds echoes even within the scientifically-inclined Wells and Morris haunts this early work as a figure who both attracted and repelled (see ‘A Slip Under the Microscope’).

Yet this non-reductive materialism is never properly incorporated into Wells’s *political* prescriptions. He could be effective at capturing the *individual’s* place at the interface of the material and the non-material, their navigation of those boundaries. In ‘The Door in the Wall’ Wallace’s death is presented ambivalently, perhaps a waste but perhaps also a price worth paying; this is also the fate of Chatteris at the end of *The Sea Lady*.⁵⁶ Yet the very fact that each character dies (or appears to) suggests that Wells believed that these individualistic vignettes offered no political programme. At the social, collectivist level Wells does not seem to propose an equivalent to those interfaces and navigations. His closest attempt comes in *A Modern Utopia* with the notion that the end of human life involves the contemplation of ‘the emptiness, the enigmatic spaces and silences, the winds and torrents and soulless forces that lie about the lit and ordered world of

⁵⁴ H. G. Wells, *The Science Fiction*, vol. 1 (London: Phoenix, 1995); all references to *The First Men on the Moon*, *The Invisible Man*, *The Time Machine* and *The War of the Worlds* are from this volume.

⁵⁵ H. G. Wells, *Love and Mr Lewisham*, ed. Simon J. James (London: Penguin, 2005), 134-9.

⁵⁶ H. G. Wells, *The Sea Lady* (London: Methuen, 1902).

men....the high distances of God'.⁵⁷ Yet this utopia is not intended as a blueprint but, instead, as a meditation on the ineluctable paradoxes of human life. On returning to this world the narrator first experiences a Moreau-like repulsion at the half-familiar faces around him and is left to ponder an inevitable incongruity: the need for utopia and its impossibility outside the social imagination.⁵⁸ In short, Wells can incorporate the material and non-material at a social level only by confining his vision to the unreal.

The second theme concerns determinism in two senses. Wells questions the extent to which humans *per se* are free in the context of the powerful evolutionary forces from which they spring; there is also, as indicated above, an exploration of the individual's liberty vis-à-vis the social community. We will explore these in turn.⁵⁹

There are occasional echoes of Morris's conception of freedom as the peaceful but ultimately unrealistic expression of desire and pleasure. In *The Time Machine* Wells offered the Morlocks as the social sublimation of the Eloi, the repressed underworld of what the traveller first welcomes as a communism similar to that of Morris's: leisure-based, aesthetic, informal and a bit boring. The disabusing of the traveller suggests that Wells was sensitive to the appeal of utopia but more aware of the difficulties of getting from here to there. It was a problematic he continued to struggle with. His closest approximation to *News From Nowhere* is *In the Days of the Comet*. In both we see beings who are free, because they fashion the environments that envelope them, but neither book deals with the revolutionary's dilemma: how to inspire and mobilise passions that might not subsequently be tameable? For Wells this neglect may have been deliberate. He offers a vision of social harmony that makes suspension of disbelief difficult, almost as if the work is a half-regretted satire on Morris's utopianism produced by someone whose utopian energies are fading.⁶⁰ A utopia of free love it may be, but the cost of erasing petty fears, jealousies and hatreds brings about an insipid community, where elimination of the darker passions has also eroded creativity.

What for Wells therefore supplies the engine of social change? His fallback position is not simply that of science and technology. Orwell's characterisation of Wells as heralding the victory of the scientific over the romantic man is facile, ignoring the extent to which Wells depicts the downside of scientific progress, e.g. in *The Invisible Man*.⁶¹ Instead, science is only the surface of deeper, evolutionary battles. *The Food of the Gods* is the picture of a world where 'pigmy' and 'giants' cannot coexist, where growth for growth's sake is the 'law of the spirit' so

⁵⁷ H. G. Wells, *A Modern Utopia*, ed.. Gregory Claeys (Middlesex: Penguin, 2005), 206.

⁵⁸ Wells, *A Modern Utopia*, 278.

⁵⁹ John S. Partington, "The Pen as Sword: George Orwell, H. G. Wells and Journalistic Parricide," *Journal of Contemporary History*, 39 (2004), 45-56 – especially 49.

⁶⁰ H. G. Wells, *In the Days of the Comet* (London: Macmillan, 1906), 303-5; Wells, 1908, 255-7.

⁶¹ George Orwell, *The Collected Letters, Essays and Journalism, Volume 2* (Middlesex: Penguin, 1968), 169.

that the only real option is to develop a new ethic which will outpace the human capacity for self-destruction.⁶² The pigmies are presumably the failures, the inefficient whom the new (socialist) order will have to target for intervention. That said, as noted above, Wells's eugenics is one of education rather than sterilisation, of humans having to take control of their own future evolution. He therefore appears to conceive of freedom as dynamic, as having to outdistance, through the constant search for a 'new ethic', the determinisms which flow from our material evolution and which constantly threaten to overwhelm us.

What must this new ethic be? How should the social relations of individuals be conceived? It is here that Wells occasionally hesitates before opting for the dominative, centralising impulses which Morris had rejected. In some of his most famous work Wells offers versions of himself. The life upon which Lewisham settles is, compared to his earlier ambitions, perhaps a form of defeat and yet also represents a kind of equilibrium. It is the same sort of peaceful resignation and reconciliation to the slow, natural currents of life with which Wells was to leave Polly – and Kipps and Ann Veronica. These are characters that could have populated utopia too, yet they also sit uneasily with the Wells who, having escaped the smaller life into which those characters settle, builds systems, charts the future of the world or impatiently demands worldwide revolution (in *The Sleeper Awakes*).⁶³ Lewisham *et al* therefore represent individuals that this other Wells was eventually to silence as his sense of urgency accelerated, his social critiques dominate and his novelistic skills declined. At the end of *Tono-Bungay* George's concluding images are of war, of nature as a resource to be fought, of evolution as apocalypse where there is little room for the habituation of ordinary localities. After 1910 Wells makes considerably less room in his fiction for the Pollys of the world.⁶⁴

A Modern Utopia again captures Wells's ambivalence. It carries echoes of Morris in that the relationship between the individual and the collective is conceived as a form of creative cooperation. Social progress is manifested at the level of subjectivity but these are individuals who have transcended the egoism and privacy of our world. But this relationship is allied to a ruthless evolutionism.⁶⁵ Wells would not eliminate 'failures' but he would certainly prevent their reproduction within the species through 'social surgery'. Satisfying the material needs of everyone demands that no-one place an excessive and unnecessary strain on the world's resources. This means that the shadows of the workhouse stretch across Wells's utopia just as surely as they characterised Victorian and Edwardian society. In both cases, the penalty for failure affects not only the 'feeble and spiritless' but also those who must constantly strive to prove their desert: '...there

⁶² H. G. Wells, *The Food of the Gods* (London: Collins, 1904), 304-11.

⁶³ John Batchelor, *H. G. Wells* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 86-7; John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses* (London: Faber & Faber, 1992), 147-8.

⁶⁴ H. G. Wells, *Tono-Bungay* (London: Pan, 1964), 324-30.

⁶⁵ Wells, *A Modern Utopia*, 95-100.

must be a competition in life of some sort to determine who are to be pushed to the edge, and who are to prevail and multiply.’⁶⁶ It is a common presumption within the social policy literature that even the well-off are disciplined through fear of what may happen to them if forced back onto the state’s safety-net.⁶⁷ Wells also states that for the remaining miscreants seclusion on ‘prison islands’ is appropriate. Those liberties inconsistent with the needs of a social organism, on its evolutionary path, are to be suppressed.

Similar tensions therefore run through a final theme. Morris had presumed against elitism by valuing democratic consensus and imagining that in the correct social environment the creative abilities of everyone could find proper expression. Wells, too, articulates a suspicion of elitism. Scientific pioneers such as Moreau and Griffin are hardly portrayed sympathetically and in *The First Men in the Moon* Selenite society turns out to be more peaceful than Earth but also more sterile, a regimented and functionalist hive.

Furthermore, in ‘The Country of the Blind’ Nunez’s sight sets him apart from the community, the source (he imagines) of his superiority and capacity for dominance. But his leadership ambitions are thwarted and he becomes, instead, psychologically isolated from the blind. The vision he possesses turns out to be less of an advantage than he had believed. Nunez escapes to enjoy his sight but with no others there to nurture or comfort him. Again, Wells is presenting us with an ambivalence, the simultaneous desire for and flight from those to whom one considers oneself superior. His own introduction to the 1939 re-writing of the story verifies that the earlier version was meant to depict ‘spiritual isolation’. The re-written version is socially more bitter.⁶⁸ Nunez’s superiority to the valley-dwellers is confirmed and his sight condemns him to see catastrophes ahead that they cannot see. Wells’s own resentful epitaph – ‘I told you so. You *damned* fools’ – is near.⁶⁹ The world no longer holds room for paradox.

Wells’s own predilection for elitism is visible early on, then. We have already seen this in *A Modern Utopia* and in *Anticipations* Wells could both talk of race as a kind of construction, of social unity as conducive to greater diversity, and yet also draw eugenic inferences from what he saw as the natural inferiority of some.⁷⁰ It is therefore not surprising that these elements should become more and more prominent in his thinking as the late Victorian and Edwardian worlds give

⁶⁶ Wells, *A Modern Utopia*, 96.

⁶⁷ e.g. Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Regulating the Poor* (New York: Random House, 1971).

⁶⁸ H. G. Wells, *Selected Stories* (New York: Modern Library, 2004), 386-95; all short stories mentioned are from this edition

⁶⁹ H. G. Wells, *The War in the Air* (London: Penguin, 2005), 279. This is in the preface to the 1941 edition.

⁷⁰ H. G. Wells, *Anticipations* (Mineola: Dover, 1999), 140, 177-8; see John S. Partington, *Building Cosmopolis* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 55-8.

way to world war, Depression, Fascism and then war again.⁷¹ The urgent need for a new social ethic appropriate to our biological evolution, technological innovation and social collectivism is so urgent that we cannot wait for democratic procedures and niceties to develop one. The Samurai (Wells's nearest equivalent to Plato's philosopher-kings) become less a dream and more of a necessity.

The early Wells therefore offers several possible elements of a new ethic, some of which resemble Morris's romanticism (a non-reductive materialism, harmony with nature and cooperative creativity) but where others point towards intolerance, technocratic engineering and elitism. Take *The War of the Worlds*: the Martians are more evolved versions of ourselves, imperialists who have long since decided that survival is more important than the morality of their methods. Yet with humanity's partial destruction so the choice to pursue a different path still lies before us. The elitist vision stripped of an ethical dimension is satirised in the character of the artilleryman whose vision of a rebuilt future is hardly different from the Martian's. Yet if values are important we are challenged by Wells to insert them into the narrative ourselves; since the journalist is persuaded by the artilleryman's scheme, and had earlier contributed to the deaths of the landlord and the curate, readers are called upon to effect a moral distance between him and themselves. Finally, Wells contrasts the bourgeois complacency of the Home Counties – where the Martians are first regarded as slightly backward foreigners – to the 'swift liquefaction' of the social body which occurs once the attack begins and which satirises an unthinking collectivism. By the book's end a belief in the 'commonweal of Mankind' has replaced these extremes. And we have only survived because the Martian's ignored the biological nature of Earth; not a mistake we should make, Wells seems to urge.

What we have in the early Wells, then, is a willingness to explore the implications of social reform through a wider set of ideas than he is usually given credit for.⁷² He opens up ambivalent spaces when exploring materialist, determinist and elitist themes, ones influenced by a romantic conception of human integrity and creativity, where his most convincing characters feel at home with nature. Despite Wells's occasional antipathy for Morris, then, they do hold certain themes in common.⁷³ For Morris had talked not only of desire but of 'education for desire', of sighting new possibilities for life and society.⁷⁴ Desire is always developmental rather than static. The pedagogic and explorative aspects of his early fiction suggest that Wells was not only aware of the need for education but embodied the learning process in his best fiction by establishing a dialogue between a series of competing voices and with the reader.⁷⁵ Unfortunately, he

⁷¹ MacKenzie and MacKenzie, 250.

⁷² Patrick Parrinder, *H.G. Wells* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1970); Michael Draper, *H. G. Wells* (London: Macmillan, 1987).

⁷³ Partington, 2003, 38-9.

⁷⁴ Kinna, 1994, 611-2.

⁷⁵ Brome, 97-8, 105.

became so panicked by the thought that we would not win the race between socialism and barbarism that those voices were sometimes suppressed even in his early work and, by the First World War, had silenced altogether, amputating Wells's artistry and leaving a crude polemicist behind. He came to see education as less *by* the masses and more *of* the masses; this is consistent with his earlier depiction of the Samurai but, as the dialogical, explorative nature of his fiction faded, so the authoritarian side of his socialism was more and more evidential.⁷⁶ Yet this later path should not obscure the fact that in his earlier work (1895-1910) Wells explored alternative interests and possibilities.⁷⁷

Conclusion

Key elements of Wells's early work reveal the influences of a socialist romanticism whose most impressive, late Victorian spokesman in Britain was Morris. For Wells this romanticism emerged as a utopian impulse in which material beings are not explicable according to a simple materialism, our freedom is communally interdependent and we must be suspicious towards elites. But those romantic themes were to fade. Wells becomes more concerned with driving humanity along evolutionary tramlines and while Polly, etc. are depicted with sardonic warmth they become less and less relevant to Wells's political imagination. It would be facile to propose that Wells first experimented with romanticism and then abandoned it; his development was not this linear and several voices competed within him for many years. Nevertheless, a review of his fiction up until 1910 hints at what a further study of his post-war work might well confirm, that socialist romanticism increasingly held less of a place within his writing. That said, the early Wells is perhaps alert to the tensions which, in the world of practical politics, a romantic ethic must give rise. Therefore, in mining the resources of the past and in seeking a post-productivist social democracy, it may well be that Wells is as valuable as Morris in guiding us where we should and should not go.

It would be simplistic to infer from this examination alone that Fabianism took a similar path. As a political movement its scope was more diverse. Also, it would be facile to think that romanticism faded from socialist and social democratic thought entirely in the twentieth century, though it is certainly accurate to see it as marginal to mainstream politics. My hypothesis has been that the downgrading of romanticism deprived the left of an important framework for moral values, socio-political objectives and cultural resources which left it less pluralistic, and so arguably weaker, than it had been before. The above

⁷⁶ Samuel Hynes, *The Edwardian Turn of Mind* (London: Oxford University Press, 1968), 94-5; John E. Coombes, *Writing from the Left* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989), 57-64; Philip Coupland, "H. G. Wells's 'Liberal Fascism'," *Journal of Contemporary History*, 35 (2000), 541-58; cf. Hyde, 232.

⁷⁷ Bernard Bergonzi, *The Early H. G. Wells* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1962).

examination of Wells is only one of many steps that would need to be taken to validate that hypothesis or otherwise. But if it is at least partially correct then the new social democracy may be bequeathing for the twenty-first century the same mistaken narrowness that Fabian productivism bequeathed for the twentieth. If so, then an understanding of romanticism and its detachment from the British left a century ago could be crucial.