

News from Nowhere: Art for Art's Sake or the Emotional State?

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Abstract

From the nineteenth to the twenty-first century not much has changed in terms of the prevalence of capitalism. Nineteenth century writers from Marx to Morris have written about capitalist structures to discuss social systems and to provide critiques and offer solutions. Morris's *News from Nowhere* presents an alternative society where art is a form of labour and all work is deemed pleasurable. However, the novel also reflects critically on socialism, as ideas of the usefulness of unnecessary art objects, such as books, are treated in a near satirical way. Morris points out the importance of freedom of expression and considers art as therapy. In addition, he presents a socialist agenda that promotes a peaceful, fulfilled, and happy society in all aspects of art - and books could only help support his views. This paper argues that *News from Nowhere* helps us think about the importance of art and literature to society: there will always be some competition and excess emotion in the human condition; an outlet for this excess helps make an equal society free of hierarchy and greed.

Keywords: William Morris, *News From Nowhere*, Art Therapy, Critique of Capitalism

Too much competition under a system of capitalism creates greed and dehumanization, providing an unfulfilling life for many. Modern capitalist systems encourage the unequal distribution of wealth based on commodities, leading to the mass production of items that are similar aesthetically and, through uniform modes of production, allow no room for creativity. An alternative lifestyle would

promote personal creativity, artistic expression, and equality as each person would work to create objects that can be used by themselves and others, leading to the production of goods full of individualized beauty. In *News from Nowhere*, William Morris points to the dangers of excluding certain kinds of art, especially books, because reading can promote individual happiness and, by extension, social stability. For a peaceful society, there are benefits to expressing artistic creativity through the labor of literacy—as the act of releasing imaginative energy is important for mental wellbeing. To Morris, freedom of expression is therefore important, and the utopia he presents helps to reconcile the present (and the future) to the bitter past of capitalism by integrating creative practices in labour. Yet there are moments in Morris’s representation of utopia that reveal unhealthy expressions of feeling and anxieties that are problematic. This essay argues that competition continues to exist in *Nowhere*, but competition becomes a healthy activity and ultimately beneficial for all because the utopia also incorporates the idea of art and literature as potential therapy. By presenting a utopia that values artistic and spiritual expression built on respect, peace, equality, and kindness, Morris offers a system in *News from Nowhere* that challenges nineteenth (and, by extension, twenty-first) century capitalism.

Competition amongst all beings makes the world a stressful place. In his essay *Estranged Labour*, Marx states that “the only wheels which political economy sets in motion are *avarice* and the *war amongst the avaricious – competition*” (71). He connects “the doctrine of competition to the doctrine of monopoly” (71) and deems “competition” as much an evil as “the avaricious,” both flourishing under a capitalist regime. Marx argues that these are evils, yet he does not explore the concepts thoroughly in this essay before developing his critique of capital labour-regime requirements. A contemporary study by Kathleen Casto and David Edwards “Testosterone, Cortisol, and Human Competition” discusses the process of competition from a biological standpoint based on the “hormonal correlates and underpinnings of human competition.” (22). Their essay argues that the “physical and/or psychological elements of competition” (30) involves hormonal processes that produce jealousy. Even in the nineteenth century, philosophers and artists have reflected upon the stressful state of their contemporary system. William Morris criticizes this pervasive stress in *News from Nowhere* in the way “the past” of the main character (Guest’s) refers to his “real” contemporary society. As demonstrated in the footnotes of the Broadview edition of the novel, Guest’s past

imitates Morris's reality. Morris states in his 1884 essay "Art and Socialism" that labour is a "natural solace... a solace which [people] always should have, the opportunity of expressing their own thoughts to their fellows by means of that very labour" (252). He reveals that he is unhappy with the current state of Victorian politics and provides a direct message in this essay that can be read congruent to his utopian novel: Capitalism does not work for everyone.

As basic necessities are capitalized on, the system reflects a hierarchy where people must fight for work to survive. Karl Marx proposes in *Estranged Labour* that capitalism would not exist without the "presupposed" concept of "private property" (70). The concept of having one's own private property reflects the idea of taking property from another. A system of "yours" and "mine," private property helps capitalism flourish. As natural goods are bought and sold for profit, Jason Moore's Cartesian narrative (of the history of exploitation of nature) from his essay *Capitalism in the Web of Life* is realized. In the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the definition of 'capital' captures how the possession of wealth and assets leads to advantage over others. Just as a capital letter shows dominance at the beginning of a word, the word "capital" itself suggests hierarchy, domination, and gain.

Although the nineteenth century system of capitalism promotes inequality, it does not necessarily lead to violence against the oppressors. In such a system, many struggle with a lack of equality and wellbeing. Marx speaks about labour and living wages, as well as the alienating features of capitalist "work" in *Estranged Labour*. His argument is that people lose their humanity by working under someone else, and that even those on top are not satisfied as they are in a "state" of alienation that is the direct result of how they treat their workers (81). In the twenty-first century, the concept of rent is associated with the word poverty. Michael Edwards in his 2016 essay on the examination of the market in London entitled *The Housing Crisis and London* acknowledges that "crisis" is directly related to the affordability of housing. This crisis is far from manageable in London (and many other places globally). People are forced to seek work out of pure need for basic items required to function under capitalism. William Morris, like Marx, makes the case in *News from Nowhere* that those at the top do not enjoy their lives of excess. Described negatively by Dick's grandfather Hammond in Morris's novel, their lack of enjoyment is the result of "a disease called Idleness" (87). Dehumanizing, competing against, and using others may offer material gain but, in turn, dehumanizes and alienates the self as both a worker and master.

Morris, narrating in *News from Nowhere*, shows by the very word “disease” (87) in his ‘utopian’ society, that this is not a happy life.

Under the contemporary capitalist regime of the nineteenth century onward, art often becomes complicit with and/or subservient to capitalism. There is a hierarchy, and those at the top dictate the demand, pace, practice, and aesthetics of the product. In *News from Nowhere* Morris illustrates the “old” way of life, through the stories of older men as well as Guest’s experience of an earlier London. While the older men in the novel know the stories from the times of revolution, Morris focuses quite on sight in the novel with his long descriptions of buildings, architecture, and landscape, showing that aesthetic pleasure is important to him as a narrator. In fact, the footnotes of the Broadview edition draw parallels to Morris’ personal life.

In the essay *Estranged labour*, Marx explains that the concept of production under a capitalism regime is a form of “appropriation” (81). All things are mechanically dictated by a fixed plan. At the top, a figurehead determines the product, how it should be made, how much it should cost, and time effective workers are expected to do whatever is needed by the “master” in order to survive. One of the many wise old men Henry Morsom in Morris’s *News from Nowhere* reflects on this kind of labour as “the makeshift work of the machines” (218). If not literally, these ‘machines’ metaphorically describe the way in which nineteenth to twenty-first century workers practice labour as a means to an end. There is waste and mourning in excessive useless, boring items, that both do not let people express themselves or help them find joy in their use.

On the surface, people in *Nowhere* are patient and accepting. They do not make a big deal of separation in instances where they might not get back together. For example: Dick and Clara’s relationship is thought to work itself out, and to intervene would be to “pile up degradation on [their] unhappiness” (104). Though this appears to be respectful and there is more of a personal creative freedom to explore life while promoting and respecting the wellbeing of others, it also invites insecurities. Clara’s insecurities arise when Dick pays attention to Ellen and she admits “she had been rather frightened of Ellen” (227). In the work, such talk and investigation is not always invited. Old Mr. Hammond expresses to Guest that “talk” for him is a “must”. He “must talk”, and he must also “make his talk profitable to [Guest]” (103). This shows that he feels the need to suppress his nature, were it is not useful. It seems that ‘talk’ is not encouraged for pleasure,

which is ironic given the weight of pleasure in the novel. The benefits of this lifestyle (without law) aside, if a person is unhappy, they are not taken seriously. Hammond states that “if [a person] [is] not kind... people would be apt to shun him” (103). Later in the novel the characters surmise that a death arose as a “tragedy” (209), as a man who committed murder out of jealousy of another was deemed to be mentally ill and is to be sent to live in semi-isolation.

Morris reveals the problematic nature of a society that fancies simple and positive attitudes with no other outlets for expressing thought besides necessary labour (such as verbal, written, and honest expression). There is a layered critique in Morris’s choice to express an attitude about books that is not respectful towards them. Morris is critiquing books within a book. It is in an ironic passage where Henry Morsom states that books reflect “dreary introspective nonsense about [people’s] feelings and aspirations” (193). This statement reveals that he does not respect this kind of art; yet Morris offers a larger critique of the statement through the rest of the novel, which ultimately promotes the expression of feelings through labour.

In *News from Nowhere* there are moments where people work to express themselves in a society that frowns upon verbal expression. There are peaceful actions that do not harm others and are therapeutic in the novel, and ones that do harm others and even result in death. An excess of energy being put forth into something else is considered work action, or an act of expression dictated by human objectives from feelings. Carvings tell stories, rowing furthers stories, killing ends a story, and books share stories openly. Based on all these comparisons, Morris seems to say that conditioning, in the form of literature or societal based teachings, is problematic. It is more likely, however, that he means for an audience to read his novel and make critical points against capitalism while appreciating art and creative labour as a peaceful and necessary outlet for the natural release of emotions and expression of the spirit. Morris promotes writing as a therapeutic exercise by creating well-thought discourse, which can resolve issues by presenting and sharing solutions. Wise Old Hammond states that the “remedy [of the past] was... the production of what used to be called art, but which has no name amongst us now, because it has become a necessary part of the labour of every man who produces” (176). Creatively working through anxious or charged “negative” energy through labour (that does not hurt the self and others) cannot be a bad thing. Hammond also states that “work-pleasure [is an] instinct amongst

people” (176). In order to live a healthy and happy life, people must be able to express themselves. They must be able to explore and share their feelings to be free to enjoy life with a healthy mind— helping others by offering a practiced, peaceful, lifestyle.

No system is perfect, but pairing art with labour allows for a healthy lifestyle, whether it solves humanity’s problems or not. Art in work is natural in expression and can even be therapeutic. Art therapy works by allowing for human expression and openness. In Simon Bell’s essay “Art Therapy and Spirituality,” Bell analyzes what spirituality is. He states that “[t]he human spirit is the essential life-force that undergirds, motivates and vitalizes human existence. Spirituality is the specific way in which individuals and communities respond to the experience of the spirit” (216). This quotation is from the “Swinton’s Model” (216), in which Bell reflects multiple perspectives. In this sense, spirituality is the expression of the spirit. If the human spirit is the thing that “undergirds, motivates, and vitalizes human existence” (216), capitalism, as argued by Marx and Morris, completely contradicts Bell’s vitality of expression.

The article continues with a discussion about the use of art therapy in healthcare. Bell describes specific examples where people with mental health issues have been helped by the practice of art. He explains that spirituality and art can reflect the purpose and meaning of life. Bell writes:

Art is often an attempt to reveal and expose the archaeology of the soul through the imaginative excavation of human experience in order to discover hidden truths and realities. Art has the potential to re-envision life, presenting previously unimagined possibilities and igniting a curiosity about those things that make life meaningful and purposeful. (220)

This practice appears in Morris’s novel *News from Nowhere* when Ellen rows in her boat to Guest because she felt “uncomfortable” (221) even though it seems she’s not a fan of the water - as she later cries out that she “love[s] the earth” (241). When they arrive on land, the chapter entitled “The Obstinate Refusers” demonstrates how the character Philippa won’t stop carving, even when another says to her “if you gobble up your work like that, you will soon have none to do; and what will become of you then?” (214). Philippa keeps going because she had been ill, and the carving seems to be a fixation to make up anxiously for lost time and to be part of the project (214-215). An extreme example is reflected upon when a murder takes place. A jealous man lashes out, and another man reacts and

kills him, to which a friend of Guest's company calls "an excess of tragedy" (209). All of these physical actions require energy that stem from issues that haven't been expressed in any other way.

The house carvings and the paddling are beneficial work efforts that are therapeutic and personally creative, as well as aesthetically pleasing and useful. The eerie part is the killing and how murder is dealt with. They isolate the murderer. This is problematic. As Simon Bell states in *Art Therapy and Spirituality*, "A spiritual crisis may not initially be named as such and may take time to be defined in terms that make sense.... The need for a creative space within which to therapeutically reset problems and discover coping strategies becomes imperative." (222). Hammond stresses that there is benefit in "the reward of creation" (136), a concept necessary to art therapy expression - that fulfills the soul in action.

Civilians of Nowhere create useful artistic objects in order to reconcile the past competition of capitalism with the inherent value of art. Anxiety exists, however, from this process. If there are enough of these artistic products made, there will be fewer uses for them. Marx in *Estranged Labour* states that "degrading spontaneous activity, free activity, to a means, estranged labour makes man's species life a means to his physical existence" (77). Suppressing feelings is not conducive to mental health. From the discussion around books and the importance of artistic practice of labour, Morris's critique goes beyond necessary products of labour as suggestions on how to solve emotional issues to pave the way for peace, respect, and mutually beneficial existence. Books are an outlet for emitting negative energy rather than an extreme action of heightened excess feeling. Art and labour, with a reading of spiritual importance, can be read in any action situation. Morris portrays books as necessary art that would allow for a practice of the self that goes beyond necessary, pleasurable labour because each book is unique and can work to promote wellbeing in labour when necessary non-perishable work is complete.

Though there is no need for competition if everyone is both free and has access to necessary useful items that offer pleasure in both the making and reception, people are still subject to feelings. Art provides a useful and open outlet for expression of complex feelings, even if that sublime beauty is in excess. Capitalism suppresses the need for expression by commodifying everything under the guise of private property and necessary greed. Fortunately, though often branded as a selling point, many contemporary companies of the twenty-first

century embrace creativity and fair trade. This practice makes for a healthier lifestyle and wellbeing; though even Marx admits “competition comes in everywhere” (70). Morris reveals in his novel *News From Nowhere* that artistic labour has a beneficial function far aside from capital and unequal wealth, and serves to provide a more rewarding and happy way of life for all - without extreme competition or hierarchy and by freedom of spiritual expression - though the human condition will remain imperfect.

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