

# Marxism, Romanticism and Utopia: Ernst Bloch and William Morris

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Marxists have generally been antagonistic to anything that could be described as utopian, justifying this on the basis of Marx's and Engels' strictures on the 'utopian socialists'. In recent years, several writers have pointed out that neither Marx nor Engels was totally negative about the writings of the great utopians, Owen, Fourier and Saint-Simon; as critiques of capitalism they had great merit. Their main antipathy – and even this was not unqualified – was directed at the utopian socialist movements. In continuing to pursue utopian goals after Marxism revealed class struggle as the true motive force of social change, these became diversionary and hence reactionary – an argument based on historical process, not simply on dogma. Some have also tried to argue that Marx and Engels were equally utopian, in that it is possible to piece together an image of what the good society would be like from their writings. Such an image can of course be constructed, but it remains the case that it was deliberately never expressed in this form. There was a real reluctance to speculate about the future, for two quite explicit reasons. The first is the argument that it is impossible to think oneself out of present circumstances and predict the needs and conditions for their satisfaction that will be created in the future; in this sense, the imaginative construction of utopia as a political goal is strictly speaking impossible. Secondly, and this was the essence of their attacks on the utopian socialists, the construction of such blueprints carries with it the danger of idealism. Where the utopian socialists – leaders and followers – chiefly erred was in thinking that the propagation of a plan for the good society would, through the operation of reason, result in its own realisation.

Opposition to utopianism was, then, initially based primarily on local political judgements and attacks on idealist notions of social change. This gave rise to a general antagonism within Marxism, particularly during the period of the Second International, to any speculation which could be designated utopian;<sup>1</sup> and the term included not just images of the future which were held to be unrealistic, but any imaginative construction of the future at all. This has remained the dominant orientation of Marxism to utopia, despite the fact that such blanket condemnation can hardly be justified by reference to the works of Marx and Engels, and despite the fact that there have been recurrent attempts from within Marxism to challenge this repressive orthodoxy. This article examines and compares two such attempts. One is the work of Ernst Bloch, whose *The Principle of Hope* is the most extensive theoretical attempt to reintegrate Marxism and utopia. The second is the debate that arose, seemingly quite independently, about the significance of the work of William

Morris. Both concern not just the relationship between Marxism and utopia, but between Marxism and Romanticism, and both leave us with similar problems about the possible role of utopianism within Marxism.

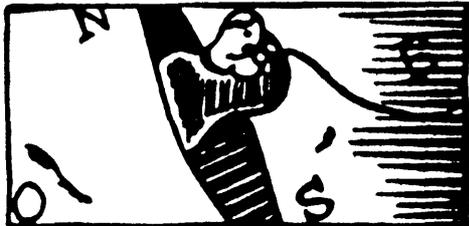
## Ernst Bloch: The Principle of Hope

Bloch was born in 1885, two years after the death of Marx. His interest in utopia preceded that in Marx, one of his key categories, that of the 'Not Yet', being originated in 1906. By 1921, he had written two major works on utopianism, *Geist der Utopie*, a study of Thomas Munzer which was a major influence on Karl Mannheim's work on utopia, and which Bloch himself later referred to as a work of 'revolutionary romanticism'. His development as a Marxist involved close relationships with Georg Lukács and with Walter Benjamin. Like many other German intellectuals, Bloch was of Jewish origin, and was forced into exile in the thirties. He spent the years from 1938 to 1949 in the USA, but unlike such people as Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse and Erich Fromm, he did not become integrated into American academic life. He spent these years working on drafts of *The Principle of Hope*, and in 1949 returned to the German Democratic Republic, where the first two volumes of this massive work were published in the fifties, and for which Bloch was awarded the National Prize. The third volume, which deals principally with religion, was published in a small edition in 1959, and did not receive the same critical acclaim. In 1961, with the building of the Berlin Wall, Bloch left the GDR, and lived in West Germany until his death in 1977.

Plainly, Bloch was practically as well as theoretically committed to Marxism. The project of *The Principle of Hope* is not to revise Marxism by the insertion of utopia (though it is arguable that this is in fact what Bloch does), but to rehabilitate it as a neglected Marxist concept. The key concept in this process is the Not Yet, which has two aspects, the Not Yet Conscious and the Not Yet Become – an ideological and a material aspect. The Not Yet Conscious is developed through a critique of Sigmund Freud. Freud regarded the unconscious as a rubbish bin of repressed material that was no longer conscious; Bloch argues that it is also a creative source of material on the verge of coming to consciousness. The creativity that derives from this is expressed in a variety of ways, from simple day-dreams to the heights of artistic activity. And in so far as these expressions are expressions of hope for a better world or a better way of being in it, they are expressions of utopia. The utopian impulse is there-

fore a fundamental human faculty, which may take a wide variety of forms, many of which are discussed in the second volume of *The Principle of Hope* and which range from alchemy to opera.

For Bloch, however, these dreams of a better world are not simply a matter of compensatory fantasies, but a venturing beyond the present to a *possible* better future. Here, the Not Yet Conscious is linked to the Not Yet Become. Fundamental to Bloch's argument are certain assertions about the material world. It is essentially unfinished, the future is indeterminate and there-



fore is a realm of possibility: 'the world is full of objective real possibilities, which are not yet actual possibilities because they have not yet fulfilled all the conditions of their possibility, and may or may not ever become fully possible.'<sup>2</sup> It is the notion of real possibility which provides the link between utopia and Marxism. Bloch is critical of versions of Marxism which present it as a deterministic philosophy:

It is not sufficient to speak of dialectical process and then to treat history as a series of sequential Fixa or even closed 'totalities'. A narrowing and diminishing of reality threatens here ... and that is not Marxism.<sup>3</sup>

Since the world is in a constant state of becoming, and what it is becoming is not determined, there are always many real possible futures – not all of which are desirable, since they include 'devastatingly, possible fascist Nothing' as well as, and above all, 'finally feasible and overdue, socialism'.<sup>4</sup>

Of course, although the future is not determined, it is not unconstrained, so not all futures are real possibilities. The venturing beyond that is the characteristic of the Not Yet Conscious will contain elements that are anticipatory, but also those which are purely compensatory. Bloch does not, like Mannheim, reject compensatory fantasies as ideological; even the most limited forms of dreaming are products of the utopian impulse and are, as it were, better than nothing. But he does distinguish between abstract and concrete utopia, and this is essentially a distinction between the compensatory and the anticipatory elements (which in reality occur together). It is concrete utopia which is embodied in Marxism, where aspirations and effective change are interwoven. And for the concept of utopia to be rehabilitated within Marxism, it is necessary to eliminate these abstract elements which clutter up the concrete core:

... with knowledge and removal of the finished *utopistic element*, with knowledge and removal of *abstract utopia*. But what then remains: the unfinished forward dream, the doctrines which can only be discredited by the bourgeoisie – this seriously deserves the name utopia in carefully considered and carefully applied contrast to utopianism; in its brevity and new clarity, this expression then means the same as: *a methodical organ for the New, an objective aggregate state of what is coming up*.<sup>5</sup>

Concrete utopia is thus an essential constituent part of an essentially unfinished reality, and an category whose reference is human action in and on the world; it is both real, and Not Yet:

... the concrete imagination and the imagery of its mediated anticipations are fermenting in the process of the real itself and are depicted in the concrete forward dream; anticipating elements are a component of reality itself.<sup>6</sup>

What is problematic, of course, is how one distinguishes between abstract and concrete utopia – how one can distinguish the elements of anticipation from the dross of compensation. Bloch offers us no criteria. There is, however, implicit appeal to praxis, and to Marxism. Bloch argues that Marxism, rather than negating utopia, rescues it: firstly, in so far as the concept of tendency recognises the importance of what is becoming as an aspect of reality; and secondly, by revealing the process by which utopia is possible.

This latter claim uses the term utopia in a more conventional sense, referring to a state of the world which is now a possible future. Although both Bloch's work and his life indicate that at this time he believed that utopia was in the process of emergence in the GDR and the Soviet Union, Bloch does not provide us with a blue-print of what it would look like; there is no plan of an ideal society. This is not because Bloch shared the orthodox opposition to such depiction. In discussion with Adorno in 1964, he pointed out that Marx's strictures against such imagining were historically specific judgements, and argued that in spite of the dangers of drawing up blue-prints, Marx had cast too little of a picture of the future. Rather, it seems to be bound up with his emphasis on individual experience, albeit an experience which he constantly reiterates is dependent upon socio-economic conditions. Thus in 1972 he described 'the essence of what is due to be realised' as 'the individual who is no longer to be humiliated, enslaved, forsaken, scorned, estranged, annihilated, and deprived of identity', and this is the beginning of the work of the classless society.<sup>7</sup> The quest is for unalienated experience, the overcoming of antagonism between humanity and the world. This is what is prefigured in all utopian expression, and is the state which begins to be conceivable in reality through Marxism in communism. This ontological state is described, among other



things, as a 'homeland of identity'<sup>8</sup> and as the 'highest good',<sup>9</sup> and is prefigured in the greatest artistic works through the experience of the 'fulfilled moment'. Great music (particularly that of Beethoven and Brahms) conveys this as both aspiration and anticipation. The importance of religion, and in particular the image of the Kingdom of God, is that it too represents a resolution of antagonisms – one more profound than can be imagined in any currently conceivable social state, since it involves the overcoming of death, the most profound anti-utopia.<sup>10</sup>

Utopia for Bloch does then involve some reference to content, but its defining characteristic is its function, a function which has four aspects, described by Hudson as follows:

[a] *cognitive function* as a mode of operation of constructive reason, [an] *educative function* as a mythography which instructs men to will and desire more and better, [an] *anticipatory function* as a futurology of possibilities which later become actual, and [a] *causal function* as an agent of historical change.<sup>11</sup>



Bloch's cosmology requires utopia in order that we may be able to imagine, will, and effect the future. And since 'the hinge on human history is its producer',<sup>12</sup> the future is effected through our action; the content and quality of utopian anticipation are therefore of fundamental importance.

Part of what Bloch is doing is asserting the role of aspiration in social transformation; but he is also claiming that this is not a departure from Marxism, which, far from being antagonistic to forward dreaming, requires it. He argues that there are two strands in Marxism, a 'cold' and a 'warm' stream. The cold stream is that of analysis, both of material conditions and of ideological processes which serve to disguise the 'ultimately decisive conditions, which are always economic'. The warm stream is the 'liberating intention' of Marxism, in whose interest analysis is undertaken; it is this which is the ground of the 'appeal to the debased, enslaved, abandoned, belittled human being' and 'the appeal to the proletariat as the turntable of emancipation'. Marxism as a doctrine of warmth is concerned with 'that freedom, that homeland of identity, in which neither man behaves towards the world nor the world behaves towards man, as if towards a stranger'. What is essential is that these two streams are not 'held apart from one another undialectically' so that they become 'reified and isolated'.<sup>13</sup> It is a plea for the dialectical relation of reason and passion.

Bloch's central thesis is that human dreaming has always reached towards utopia, with varying mixes of the abstract and the concrete; but only with Marxism has it become possible for utopia to be fully graspable in the imagination and hence in reality. Bloch claims Marxist credentials for this position by repeated reference to a letter from Marx to Ruge, dated 1843, in which Marx wrote:

Our motto must therefore be: reform of consciousness not through dogmas, but through analysis of mystical consciousness which is still unclear to itself. It will then become apparent that the world has long possessed the dream of a matter, of which it must only possess the consciousness to possess it in reality. It will become apparent that it is not a question of a great thought-dash between past and future, but of the *carrying-through* of the thoughts of the past.<sup>14</sup>

Bloch also quotes the more well-known passage about purposive action as a distinguishing characteristic of the human species:

We are assuming work in a form in which it belongs exclusively to *man*. A spider carries out operations which resemble those of a weaver, and a bee puts many builders

to shame with the building of its wax cells. But what distinguishes the worst builder from the best bee from the outset is that he has built the cell in his head before he builds it in wax, at the end of the work process there is a result which already existed in the *imagination of the worker* at the beginning of that process, i.e. already existed *ideally*. Not that he only *effects* a formal change in the real; he also *realizes his purpose* in the natural world.<sup>15</sup>

Both passages support Bloch's case for the centrality of human vision in social transformation, but the first is a more important summary of Bloch's position, and a quotation to which he returned throughout his career. The claim that 'mankind has long possessed the dream of a matter' is the justification, for Bloch, of his interest and exploration of the variety of human dreaming as expression of the human capacity for hope. It is not simply that utopian speculation in its many and varied forms is an interesting and esoteric by-way of culture; it is the source and the goal of the warm stream of Marxism, the passion for human liberation.

Bloch's contention that his position is more orthodoxly Marxist than that of Marxist orthodoxy is one with which many might choose to take issue, but it is not the central concern of this paper. In any case, it is much more important to ask whether Bloch was right than whether he interpreted Marx correctly, while recognising the political importance for Bloch of pursuing this rapprochement within Marxism. What is at issue here, however, is the way in which certain themes and issues which are apparent in Bloch's work relate, in different ways, both to the work of William Morris himself, and to the more recent debates about the significance of that work. The transcendence of alienation and the centrality of art are features of both Bloch's and Morris's thought, both of them drawing heavily on the romantic tradition. Subsequent debates share with Bloch a focus on the relationship between reason and passion, which reappears as the relationship between knowledge and desire, and the definition of utopia in terms of a function which is simultaneously educative and transformative. The question of the significance of dreaming occurs in all three contexts.

### Alienation, Art and Socialism

Morris was, of course, writing much earlier than Bloch. He was born in 1834 and died in 1896, thus being more nearly contemporary with Marx himself. His overtly socialist work was produced from 1881, and the utopian novel, *News from Nowhere*, was written in 1890 – when Bloch was six years old. This novel was by far the most widely known of Morris's socialist writings, and, as we shall see, formed the basis of many people's interpretations and misinterpretations of Morris's political position. *News from Nowhere*, subtitled 'An Epoch of Rest', portrays a society where the ugliness of industrialism has been superseded by an ecologically sustainable system, largely based on craft production. It is an account of England in the twenty-second century, to which Morris travels in a dream, waking up on the site of his own house by the Thames at Hammersmith. In this future England, most of London has disappeared to be replaced by fields and gardens. Villages remain, with markets and communal meeting places. Schools have been abolished. The Houses of Parliament are used to store manure – 'dung is not the worst kind of corruption'.<sup>16</sup> In spite of the apparent dominance of craft production, there is machinery available, and power which can be used by small workshops and as fuel for transport. The central theme is of work as pleasure, and the distinction between mental and manual labour has been abolished. It is a dream from which Morris wakes up to

the reality of industrial capitalism and political struggle; but the book ends with the words 'if others can see it as I have seen it, then it may be called a vision rather than a dream'.<sup>17</sup>

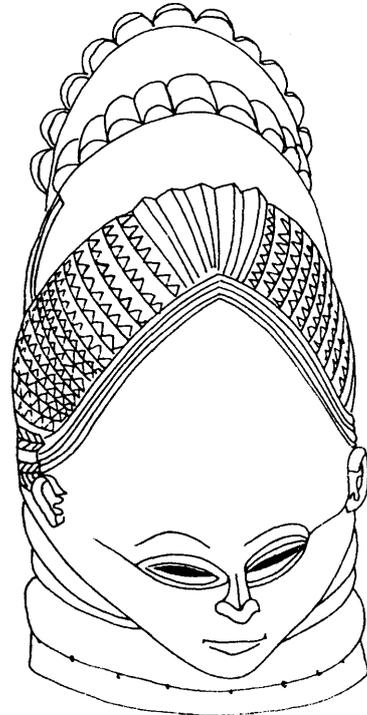
Despite the fact that *News from Nowhere* contains a long section on 'how the change came about', which takes the form of a proletarian revolution followed by the withering away of the state, the dominant mood of the book remains anti-industrial, and the society presented by Morris is one of much greater simplicity than can be regarded as feasible. Nevertheless, the specific context of the writing of *News from Nowhere*, and the broader context of Morris's socialist writings as a whole, as well as the concluding words of the book itself, emphasise that it is far more than a reactionary and medievalist romance. It was written, in fact, in response to another socialist utopian novel, Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward*. This, which also enjoyed massive sales, portrayed a centralised socialist society emerging without conflict from monopoly capitalism. Production was based on 'industrial armies', and the life aspired to that of the suburban middle classes of the time. Morris referred to it as a Cockney paradise; his published review was remarkably restrained, but made his position and his reasons for writing his own utopia clear:

I believe that the ideal of the future does not point to the lessening of men's energy by the reduction of *labour* to a minimum, but rather to the reduction of *pain in labour* to a minimum, so small that it will cease to be a pain; a gain to humanity which can only be dreamed of till men are more completely equal than Mr. Bellamy's Utopia will allow them to be..... there are some socialists who do not think that the problem of the organization of life and necessary labour can be dealt with by a huge national centralisation ... for which no-one feels himself responsible; ... that individuals cannot shuffle off the business of life on to the shoulders of some abstraction called the State, but must deal with it in conscious association with each other; that variety of life is as much an aim of true Communism as equality of condition, and that nothing but a union of these two will bring about real freedom.... And finally, that art, using that word in its widest and due signification, is not a mere adjunct of life ... but the necessary expression and indispensable instrument of human happiness.<sup>18</sup>

The first statement underlines the fact that the emphasis on work as pleasure and as the proper ground of human self-actualisation which pervades *News from Nowhere* is precisely about the transcendence of alienation. As for Bloch, this is a key concern. To debate whether Morris or Bloch is more authentically Marxist is to collude in a sterile and unhelpful competition for credentials. Nevertheless, Morris's approach to the issue incorporates a central theme from Marx which is largely absent from Bloch's analysis, since it is concerned with unalienated labour, in the combination of mental and manual labour characteristic of craft production, and craft production which is not commodity production since there is no market, no buying and selling of goods. (There are 'markets' in *News from Nowhere*, but they are simply areas for the collection and distribution of goods, without the assigning of exchange values.) The transcendence of alienation for Morris, as for Bloch, involves the sphere of art, but for Morris it is artistic production which is the key. In contrast, when Bloch talks of the utopian function of art, and refers to the experience of, for example, the 'fulfilled moment' through particular artistic work, he focusses on the consumption rather than the production of art. It is an important contrast, but a dangerous one, since Bloch himself was at pains to distinguish 'contemplation (and passive enjoyment)' as features of bourgeois-classical

aesthetics from 'hope (and the aroused will)' which are the essence of the utopian function of art, and which imply an active and involved response – but a response, nonetheless.<sup>19</sup> And, as Edward Thompson points out, Morris's idea of 'beauty' implies 'sweet, easeful, decorative, soothing' in a manner characteristic of romanticism, and of that contemplative attitude which Bloch seeks to distance himself from.<sup>20</sup>

Both Morris and Bloch attribute a utopian function to art, but



it operates differently. A full exploration of the aesthetic theories implicit in Morris and Bloch is beyond the scope of this discussion, but some preliminary observations can be made. Firstly, what is meant by 'art' differs somewhat between the two. Morris was concerned primarily with architecture and the visual, particularly decorative, arts, distinguishing these from the 'intellectual' arts, the latter being addressed 'wholly to our mental needs', while the former were aspects of things 'intended primarily for the use of the body'.<sup>21</sup> Bloch would scarcely make such a distinction, since the utopian function is in his case attributed to culture in its broadest sense; nevertheless, his discussions of art place far more emphasis on the intellectual than the decorative arts. Secondly, Bloch attributes a more active role to art than does Morris, but simultaneously pays far less attention to the conditions of its production; a properly dialectical approach would need to combine these perspectives.

For Morris, art is primarily product. It is 'the expression of man's joy in labour'.<sup>22</sup> The unalienated activity of communist society will produce more and better art, and the activity of artistic production epitomises the transcendence of alienation; but art itself plays little role in the transition to communist society. Indeed, Morris finds it thinkable that art may have to die awhile until the conditions conducive to its flourishing are created.<sup>23</sup> This position should not be overstated; Morris also argued that the ugliness of industrial society stunted the human personality, and *News from Nowhere* was written because he believed it could inspire people to work for a form of socialism worth having. It was, he said, 'essential that the ideal of the new society should always be kept before the eyes of the working classes, lest

the continuity of the demands of the people should be broken, or lest they should be misdirected'.<sup>24</sup> If the arts are 'man's expression of the value of life', it is also true that 'the production of them makes his life of value'.<sup>25</sup> And Bloch would surely agree that 'all the greater arts appeal directly to that intricate combination of intuitive perceptions, feelings, experience and memory which is called imagination', and that 'all worthy schools of art ... [are] the outcome of the aspirations of the people towards the true beauty and pleasure of life'.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, Thompson's judgement stands: 'Morris has not emphasised sufficiently the ideological role of art, its active agency in changing human beings, its agency in man's class-divided history'.<sup>27</sup> Nor, therefore, does it attribute active agency to art in the realisation of utopia.

For Bloch, on the other hand, the utopian function of art is more active. It nourishes the sense that 'something's missing', simultaneously drawing attention to an experience of lack in the present and potential fulfillment in the future, and is a necessary inspiration to social transformation. Without art (in its widest sense) to embody the 'dream of a matter', we will scarcely be able to possess it in reality. Bloch seems to have little to say about how social conditions impinge on the artist; he is a philosopher, rather than a sociologist of art. Yet Bloch's insistence that hunger is the most fundamental human drive qualifies the priority assigned to art: 'people must first fill their stomachs and then they can dance.'<sup>28</sup> Similarly, Morris wrote that 'any one who professes to think that the question of art and cultivation must go before the knife and fork ... does not understand what art means'.<sup>29</sup> Thus the contrast, while significant, should not be overdrawn; it is perhaps more a matter of a difference of emphasis within arguments that are at least complementary. Yet if there are common issues raised by Bloch and Morris, there are even more striking similarities between Bloch's work and the themes of the re-evaluation of Morris. Here, with very little direct reference between the two, the arguments about the function of utopia and the relationship between Marxism and utopianism run in parallel.

### News from Nowhere: Claims and Counter-Claims

The interpretation of *News from Nowhere* remains contentious. Many Marxists would still not give it the time of day, although arguably contemporary eco-politics makes it more relevant than ever. In the years following its publication, the very wide circulation of the book, combined with the deliberate suppression of Morris's political activities and writings by his biographers, and the strongly anti-utopian attitudes characterising Marxism, led to the propagation of two myths about Morris. In one, the 'bourgeois myth', his socialism was ignored or denied altogether; in the other, the 'Menshevik myth', he was portrayed as a gentle, eccentric, and above all anti-Marxist, English socialist. The latter myth was the one most prevalent among Marxists, even after Robin Page Arnot both named the myths and attempted to reclaim Morris for Marxism in the 1930s.<sup>30</sup>

Bloch, who dismisses Morris in less than two pages, subscribes to the same myth: 'capitalism is fought by Morris not so much because of its inhumanity as because of its ugliness, and this is measured against the old craftsmanship.'<sup>31</sup> Even the revolutionary transition fails to redeem Morris in Bloch's eyes:

Morris prophesies the revolution as the fruit and self-destruction of 'unnatural' industrialism, and he welcomes the revolution, though only as an act of annihilation. For once it has died down, not only the capitalists, but also the factories will be destroyed, in fact the whole plague of civilisation in the modern age will have been removed.

Revolution thus appears to this machine-wrecker to be a sheer turning back of history or a dismantling; once it has done its work, the world of craftsmanship will return, people will stand – after the modern age has disappeared – on the colourful ground of native Gothic, which was only disguised in the English renaissance.<sup>32</sup>

Bloch is said not to have been greatly at ease with the English language, and probably had only limited access to Morris's writings. His judgement, which appears to be based solely on a reading of *News from Nowhere* and an ignorance of its context is understandable; nevertheless, the dismissal is ironic given subsequent debates.

The beginning of the general re-evaluation of Morris came not with Arnot's *Vindication*, but with three books published in the 1950s – that is, at the same time as Bloch's *The Principle of Hope*. The first was A. L. Morton's *The English Utopia*.<sup>33</sup> This was interesting for two reasons. Firstly, it was a major departure for a Marxist to address the history of utopias at all, and there is no doubt that Morton's analysis was, by and large, orthodoxly Marxist. Secondly, he accords the greatest positive value to the medieval folk utopia of the Land of Cokaygne and to Morris's *News from Nowhere*. 'Nowhere' is Cokaygne transformed and presented as the outcome of class struggle and revolution, as communism achieved. It is, says Morton, 'not only the one utopia in whose possibility we can believe, but the one in which we could wish to live'<sup>34</sup> – although given the persistence of the sexual division of labour in *Nowhere*, some of us might give only qualified support to this sentiment.

Arguably, both Arnot and Morton did much to try to create another myth, a Marxist myth which reads *News from Nowhere* as an account of the goal of communism *tout court*. 1955, however, saw the publication of E. P. Thompson's *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*. Thompson was not concerned primarily with the interpretation of *News from Nowhere*, although he quoted approvingly Morton's assertion that it was 'the first utopia that was not utopian',<sup>35</sup> adding his own description of it as a 'scientific utopia'.<sup>36</sup> The central project of Thompson's book was more important: it analysed Morris's transition from the Romantic tradition of Carlyle and Ruskin to a revolutionary socialist position. What was important about Morris, however, was not that he made this move, but that in the process of doing so he effected a synthesis between Romanticism and Marxism which enriched and transformed both. Marxists were not culpable for failing to recognise that Morris was really a Marxist, but because they ignored the element of 'moral realism' in Morris's work which would enrich Marxism itself.

The sheer lack of understanding by Marxists of the importance of Morris (and indeed of the whole radical Romantic tradition) is emphasised by the lack of impact of this remarkable book. That lack of understanding was fractured by Raymond Williams' *Culture and Society*, published in 1958.<sup>37</sup> This book was much broader in scope, addressing the development of the idea of culture in Britain between 1780 and 1950. It was focussed neither on utopianism nor on Morris, and was not written from a Marxist perspective. Indeed, commentators have located Williams' work as stemming from the same radical romantic tradition as that of Morris: 'Williams' own writing over two decades ... has exemplified how tough a mutation of the tradition can still be, and how congruent to the thought of Marx.'<sup>38</sup> In *Culture and Society*, Williams, who had read Thompson's book, as Thompson had read Morton's, advanced a substantially similar argument about the significance of Morris's work. Morris, he argued, drew from Ruskin 'a right understanding ... of what kinds of labour are good for men, raising them and making them happy',<sup>39</sup> but he took the general values of this tradition and

'sought to attach [them] to an actual and growing social force: that of the organized working class'.<sup>40</sup> Morris was thus a pivotal figure, integrating the romantic tradition, which was the source of his general rebellion against industrial capitalism and of the idea that the arts define a 'quality of life which it is the whole purpose of political change to make possible', with the economic reasoning and political promise of Marxism.<sup>41</sup>



Williams' judgements (and indeed Thompson's) were, however, based not upon a reading of *News from Nowhere*, but upon a much broader reading of Morris's work, and particularly his political essays. The rehabilitation of Morris does not therefore necessarily imply a rehabilitation of the utopian form, if by that we understand a fictional description of the desired society. It does, however, imply a recognition of the utopian function, of venturing beyond, which is a general characteristic of Morris's political writing. This remained largely implicit, however, until the re-issue of Thompson's book in 1977, with its now famous postscript which discusses the development of the debate about Morris since the 1950s and which directly addresses the relationship between Marxism and utopia. The debate about the significance of Morris's work was thus shown to have far wider implications than the proper evaluation of that work per se; it addressed precisely that relationship which is Bloch's central problematic. As Edward Thompson puts it:

... what may be involved ... is the whole problem of the subordination of the imaginative utopian faculties within the later Marxist tradition: its lack of a moral self-consciousness or even a vocabulary of desire, its inability to project any images of the future, or even its tendency to fall back in lieu of these upon the Utilitarian's earthly paradise – the maximisation of economic growth ... to vindicate Morris's Utopianism may be at the same time to vindicate Utopianism itself, and set it free to walk the world once more without shame and without accusations of bad faith.<sup>42</sup>

Bloch evinced a similar concern:

Vulgar Marxism is already haunting the world in a kind of petit bourgeois communism, or, to put it in a less paradoxical way, it sees the main goal of communism in triviality such as an electric refrigerator for everyone, or art for everyone. It is exactly against such red philistinism that the new surplus, free of ideology, establishes and launches its utopian essence, its most central concern.<sup>43</sup>

Thompson reiterates that his book was an argument about Morris's transformation of the Romantic tradition: 'the moral critique of capitalist process was pressing forward to conclusions consonant with Marx's critique, and it was Morris's particular

genius to think through this transformation, effect its juncture, and seal it with action.'<sup>44</sup> In rejecting Morris's socialism as regressive 'orthodox Marxism turned its back upon a juncture which it neglected at its own peril and to its subsequent disgrace';<sup>45</sup> on the other hand, it was important to avoid the creation of a new myth, the 'Marxist myth', which simply assimilated Morris to Marxism, and which, in Thompson's words, was not merely wrong, but 'repressive, distancing and boring'.<sup>46</sup>

The particular target for this attack was a long study by the French Marxist Paul Meier, *Le Pensée Utopique de William Morris* (translated into English as *William Morris: The Marxist Dreamer*). Meier takes the text of *News from Nowhere*, elaborated by the political writings, as a statement of Morris's goal, and argues that the critique of capitalism, the principles and details of the projected society, and the transition between them, constitute a thoroughly Marxist account. He notes in particular the two stages (of socialism and communism) and the similarity with the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*. It is, he says, 'ridiculous ... to put William Morris into the last generation of Romantic writers' since 'the main inspiration and starting point of Morris's utopia are to be sought in Marxism'.<sup>47</sup>

Some of Thompson's objections to this approach are legitimate. It is undoubtedly true that Meier understates both the importance of the Romantic tradition in the development of Morris's thought, and his own independent contribution. It also involves evaluating Morris's ideas in terms of their approximation to a definition of Marxist orthodoxy. More importantly, however, it reinforces precisely that dichotomous division between Marxism and Romanticism which Thompson and Williams argue Morris has overcome. And in assimilating Morris to Marxism rather than Romanticism, Meier treats *News from Nowhere* as a literal statement of a goal, which may be to misunderstand the function of dreaming. The Marxism to which Meier assimilates Morris, however, is not the same as that of Arnot or Morton, for Meier seeks to argue that it is Marx rather than Ruskin who is the source of Morris's humanism. To think otherwise, he argues

betrays an ignorance ... of the fact that Marxism is humanism, totally different from traditional abstract humanism, but real and fertile; ... it is this materialist humanism, and not speculative humanism, which is at the base of Morris's utopia.<sup>48</sup>

This is more congruent with the beginning and end of the book, which point to an interpretation of utopian thought and writing very different from the literalism which dominates the main text. There is an early reference, echoing Bloch, to 'anticipatory thinking',<sup>49</sup> and a long passage re-iterating Lenin's quotation from Pisarev on the rift between dreams and reality.<sup>50</sup> And despite Meier's attention to the detail of Morris's utopia, he also points out that this was no blue-print, but a hypothetical construction in which Morris 'is careful not to draw up a detailed plan of future society and aims above all to suggest a utopian scale of values'.<sup>51</sup> It is the humanism of this 'tissue of possibilities' which gives *News from Nowhere* its lasting significance; and the function of utopia in general is precisely that it 'supports a scale of values'.<sup>52</sup> Such an interpretation calls for a much less literal reading than Meier in fact provides, and it is to precisely such a reading that Thompson inclines, following Miguel Abensour and John Goode – a reading based on its status as dream.

### Dreams and the Education of Desire

In the first part of *The Principle of Hope*, Bloch argues that dreams constitute an expression of the utopian faculty of anticipatory consciousness. He distinguished between day-dreams and

night-dreams, claiming that nocturnal dreams fed on the past and were a space in which 'very early wishes circulate', while day-dreams were subject to direction and therefore contain more anticipatory and less compensatory elements.<sup>53</sup> Similar points are touched on in Goode's discussion of the significance of the dream form in *News from Nowhere* and in *A Dream of John Ball*. Morris himself wrote in the opening paragraph of *A Dream of John Ball* 'all this have I seen in the dreams of the night clearer than I can force myself to do in the dreams of the day', and Goode comments:

'Force' suggests that dream, though an alienated activity, is one which is open to discipline, and 'clearer' implies that the relief which is sought still has a responsibility to truth. Dream is given a positive intellectual role. More importantly, however, the sentence makes an important distinction between the involuntary dream of the night and the willed dream of the day: not only do dreams have specific responsibilities, but these responsibilities are fulfilled better by the proper assessment of the involuntary invasion of consciousness than by the conscious effort to bring those values to mind. The fullest possibility of vision is available only to the dream that is beyond the individual will.<sup>54</sup>

It is a different judgement from Bloch's, yet both address the role of intentionality in dreaming, and in day-dreams as opposed to nocturnal dreams. And Morris's work of course involves both – the nocturnal dream as an aspect of the form and content of his utopian novels, the day-dream as the constructive process of creation which is involved in writing them.

Goode in fact argues that the particular function of the dream form is neither to posit a goal nor to construct a compensatory fantasy, but to emphasize the role of vision and will in the process of social transformation:

Morris invents new worlds or reinvents dream versions of old worlds, not in order to escape the exigencies of the depressing actuality but in order to insist on a whole structure of values and perspectives which must emerge in the conscious mind in order to assert the inner truth of that actuality, and give man the knowledge of his own participation in the historical process that dissolves that actuality.<sup>55</sup>

The function, as for Bloch, is not compensation, but anticipation, transformation. And it is not a literal goal, but the vehicle for the communication of the values on which a socialist society would be based: 'What it sets out to portray is not what the future will be like, but how a nineteenth-century socialist might conceive of it in order to communicate the rationale of his faith in his socialist activity.'<sup>56</sup> Again, for Bloch, communicability is one of the key features distinguishing the day-dream from the nocturnal dream. Utopia, says Goode, is 'the collectivization of dream', the dream made public.<sup>57</sup> In the end, he argues that *News from Nowhere* fails to fulfil this role because the transition is not sufficiently effective in bringing 'the collectivity of the dream ... into relationship with the collectivity of the present'; but that is what utopia should do.<sup>58</sup> Similar sentiments on the role of literature are contained in Gerd Ueding's exposition of Bloch's position:

Literature as utopia is generally encroachment of the power of the imagination on new realities of experience.... In addition, its temporal point of reference is the future. However, it does not withdraw from the reality principle merely to place an ethereal and empty realm of freedom in place of the oppressive realm of necessity. Rather it does this intentionally to test human possibili-

ties, to conserve human demands for happiness and playfully to anticipate what in reality has not at all been produced but what dreams and religious or profane wish-images of humans are full of. On this definition, literary activity becomes a special form of dream work.<sup>59</sup>

Abensour shares with Goode the central argument that the importance of *News from Nowhere*, and of all utopias, lies not in the descriptions of social arrangements, but in the exploration of values that is undertaken. He rejects the opposition between science and utopia asserted by Engels, and argues that from 1850 the nature of utopian writing became 'heuristic' rather than systematic – that is, it shifted from the construction of literal blue-prints to more open and more exploratory projects. The purpose of *News from Nowhere*, then, is to 'embody in the forms of fantasy alternative values sketched as an alternative way of life'.<sup>60</sup> The point then becomes not whether one agrees or disagrees with the institutional arrangements, but rather that the utopian experiment disrupts the taken-for-granted nature of the present:



And in such an adventure two things happen: our habitual values (the 'commonsense' of bourgeois society) are thrown into disarray. And we enter Utopia's proper and new-found space: *the education of desire*. This is not the same as 'a moral education' towards a given end: it is rather, to open a way to aspiration, to 'teach desire to desire, to desire better, to desire more, and above all to desire in a different way'.<sup>61</sup>

What is claimed here as the key function of utopia is exactly the educative aspect which Bloch also stressed. The education of desire is part of the process of allowing the abstract elements of utopia to be gradually replaced by the concrete, allowing anticipation to dominate compensation. Utopia does not just express desire, but enables people to work towards an understanding of what is necessary for human fulfilment, a broadening, deepening and raising of aspirations in terms quite different from those of their every-day life. Thus *News from Nowhere*, as a critique of alienation, invites us not just to think about an alternative society, but invites us to experience what it would mean to be fully in possession of our own humanity – an experience which Bloch claims is offered to us through artistic works in the 'fulfilled moment'.

Of course there is no point in the education of desire for its own sake. For Morris's commentators, as for Morris and Bloch, the education of desire is important because it informs human action in the pursuit of social transformation. If the function of utopia is the education of desire, the function of the education of desire is the realisation of utopia. And one of the problems which

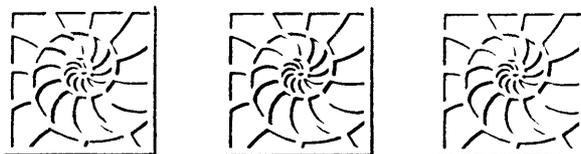
runs through these debates is the same problem that confronted Marx and Engels. Some processes of dreaming may aid the process of struggle, others may inhibit it. Williams remarked that the particular danger of the heuristic utopia is that it 'can settle into isolated and sentimental desire, a means of living with alienation'.<sup>62</sup> Thompson, too, stressed that there are disciplined and undisciplined ways of dreaming.<sup>63</sup> And indeed Bloch uses the term 'docta spes' for the utopian function which ultimately embodies both idea and action – a term which combines knowledge and desire as educated hope.<sup>64</sup>



It would be a mistake to claim that the positions implied by Bloch and by Morris's commentators are identical, although they are remarkably similar. Thompson's conclusions in fact posit a relationship between Marxism and utopia which differs from that claimed by Bloch. Thompson wishes to recognise Morris as a utopian and as a Marxist, without 'either a hyphen or a sense of contradiction ... between the two terms'.<sup>66</sup> Whereas Bloch argues that utopia is an existing but neglected Marxist category, Thompson argues that 'Morris may be assimilated to Marxism only in the course of a re-ordering of Marxism itself' – a re-ordering, that is, away from economism.<sup>66</sup> Of course, it is precisely such a re-ordering of Marxism that Bloch's thesis demands. But for Thompson there can be no total assimilation to even a re-ordered Marxism, because the 'operative principles' of utopia and Marxism are different. Utopia is the realm of desire, Marxism of knowledge, and 'one may not assimilate desire to knowledge'.<sup>67</sup> Utopia and Marxism need to be dialectically related. This of course is exactly what Bloch said about the warm and cold streams of Marxism, the streams of passion and analysis. Depending on whether the element of passion/desire is located within or outside Marxism, the problematic relationship is either within Marxism itself or between Marxism and utopia. But it is the same relationship and the same problem. In both cases, there is an attempt to argue that dreaming is an activity necessary to transcending our present sorry state, and that such dreams have both an educative and a transformative function; that the goal of that transformation is the transcendence of alienation; that art can prefigure that experience (Bloch), and will be fundamental to its realisation (Morris); and that these claims are, if not already contained within Marxism, at least compatible with and a necessary adjunct to it.

While the influence of Gramsci on contemporary Marxism means that there is much sympathy for the notion that the development of an alternative common sense is necessary to social transformation and indeed is part of it, this is not, of course, a position without its critics. Marxists of an economic persuasion are likely to find the Marxism/utopia debate so much idealistic hogwash and to prefer the bracing waters of the cold stream. And there are of course some real problems, raised (if perhaps overstated) by Perry Anderson in *Arguments within English Marxism*. Anderson is sharply critical of the notion of the education of desire, and the distinction between the principles of desire and knowledge. The phrase 'to teach desire to desire, to desire better, to desire more, and above all to desire in a different way' he rejects as 'Parisian irrationalism' (although,

as we have seen, it is scarcely exclusively Parisian).<sup>68</sup> Behind this xenophobic epithet, there are real objections which demand to be taken seriously, for while it may not be irrational, it is plainly a non-rational concept; the whole point is that the 'rational' categories of knowledge and analysis cannot contain human experience, and one must take account also of its non-rational aspects. Yet the non-rational and the irrational may be difficult to distinguish. Desire does not necessarily lead in a utopian direction, as the anti-utopian lobby has pointed out with greater insistence than acuity. The emphasis upon experience and feeling does have real dangers, as shown by the close affinity between fascism and Sorel's notion of the heroic possession of the self.<sup>69</sup> But it is a problem clearly recognised by both Bloch and Thompson. It is the reason why utopia is not simply about the expression and pursuit of desire, but about its education, and why feeling and experience must be constantly subjected to the discipline of thought. Indeed, while one can conceive of a dialectical relationship between the rational and the non-rational, it is hard to imagine any such relationship between the rational and the irrational.



Anderson also argues that the distinction between desire and knowledge as posited by Thompson substitutes an ontological for an historical explanation. Both Thompson and Bloch, it is true, treat utopianism as arising from an ontological given. Although the expressions of hope and desire are various and are historically determined, their roots lie in the essential characteristics of human nature. It is a contentious claim, but not necessarily un-Marxist; even Marx worked with a notion of human nature which assumed some aspects as given. More interestingly, Anderson suggests that the distinction between the principles of desire and knowledge re-iterates the antithesis between Romanticism and Utilitarianism which he sees as expressed in *News from Nowhere*, and which is undoubtedly reflected in the contrast between *News from Nowhere* and *Looking Backward*. For Anderson, the real advance would be the supersession of this conflict – which at the time he saw as provided by Rudolf Bahro's *The Alternative in Eastern Europe*, a judgement difficult to sustain in the light of Bahro's subsequent intellectual trajectory. However Anderson criticises Thompson, he is essentially concurring in the judgement that synthesis is necessary – and, since the opposition is historically contingent rather than ontologically given, possible.

## Conclusion

Where, then, does this leave us? We have two separate but essentially similar arguments about the need to make space within or alongside Marxism for expressions of human aspiration which arise from feeling and may take many forms, including that of the dream. The importance of these fantasies of desire is that they are not simply escape attempts, but explorations of perhaps possible futures, and particularly of the values which would be necessary to a humanly satisfying future. Further, they are necessary to motivate people to action; there is little impetus

to engage in a struggle for change unless there is a belief that the world could, in identifiable ways, be made into a better place. Without the sense of lack and of what is lacked, without wishful thinking, there can be no will-full action. Both arguments focus on feeling and experience as the criteria by which capitalism is criticised and utopia evaluated; both are concerned primarily with the transcendence of alienation.

It is this, as well as the regressive elements in Morris's utopia, which open not only Morris but Thompson, Abensour, Goode and Bloch to charges of Romanticism. But why 'charges'? Romantic anti-capitalism was not only a major source of Morris's revolutionary commitment, but also of Marx's, and the concept of alienation provides the connection between the analysis of economic structures and human experience. It is hardly possible to argue that alienation is not a Marxist concept, although it may cease to be one when it is interpreted in ways which sever this link. Thus Michael Löwy argues that:

Marx's own view is neither Romantic nor Utilitarian, but the dialectical *Aufhebung* of both in a new, critical and revolutionary *weltanschauung*. Neither apologetic of bourgeois civilization nor blind to its achievements, he aims at a higher form of social organization, which would integrate both the technical advances of modern society and some of the human qualities of pre-capitalist societies – as well as opening a new and boundless field for the development and enrichment of human life. A new conception of labor as a free, non-alienated, and creative activity – as against the dull and narrow toil of mechanical industrial work – is a central feature of his socialist utopia.<sup>70</sup>

It seems that in so far as there is a problematic relationship between Marxism and utopia, it does not hang on the question of whether or not we should think about the future. Although it often arises in this form, this is based on a misunderstanding and is relatively easily dealt with. The real problem is how we should think about the future, and specifically, how we should think about feelings and about experience. The problem of Marxism versus utopia manifests as a problem of Utilitarianism versus Romanticism, knowledge versus desire, thought versus feeling. In the form of Romanticism versus Utilitarianism, Löwy and Anderson argue that Marx overcomes this antithesis, Thompson that Morris does so, Anderson that Bahro does so. In the form of knowledge versus desire and the cold and warm streams, Thompson and Bloch propose their dialectical relationship, stopping short of a synthesis which overcomes the difference and tension between them. If some writers manage to synthesize the two, it is a fragile synthesis, constantly in danger of disintegrating into its component parts, but one which must therefore constantly be re-established.

## Notes

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- 2 W. Hudson, *The Marxist Philosophy of Ernst Bloch*, Macmillan, London, 1982, p. 90.
- 3 E. Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, tr. N. Plaice, S. Plaice and Paul Knight, Basil Blackwell, London, 1986, p. 197.
- 4 Loc. cit.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 157.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 197.
- 7 E. Bloch, *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature*, tr. Jack Zipes and Frank Mecklenburg, MIT Press, 1988, p. 42.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p. 209.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p. 1101.
- 10 See Bloch's discussion with Adorno *in op. cit.*, pp. 8-12.
- 11 Hudson, *op. cit.*, p. 51.
- 12 Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, p. 249.
- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 209.
- 14 *Ibid.*, pp. 155-56
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 76.
- 16 W. Morris, *News from Nowhere*, Longmans, Green & Co., London, 1905, p. 83.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p. 238.
- 18 A. L. Morton, *Political Writings of William Morris*, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1984, pp. 252-53.
- 19 Bloch, *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature*, p. 71. This section is in fact an excerpt from *The Principle of Hope*, but is one of the few points at which the Zipes translation seems preferable.
- 20 E. P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*, Merlin Press, London, 1977, p. 658.
- 21 William Morris, 'Art under Plutocracy', cited in Thompson, *op. cit.*, p. 642.
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- 24 William Morris (with Belfort Bax), *Socialism: Its Growth and Outcome*, 1893, p. 278.
- 25 Cited in Thompson, *op. cit.*, p. 656.
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- 27 Loc. cit.
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- 30 R. P. Arnot, *William Morris: A Vindication*, 1934. More accessible is the same author's *William Morris: The Man and The Myth*, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1964.
- 31 Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, p. 614.
- 32 Loc. cit.
- 33 A. L. Morton, *The English Utopia*, Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1952. (Page references are to the 1969 paperback edition.)
- 34 *Ibid.*, p. 221.
- 35 Morton, *op. cit.*, p. 215; Thompson, *op. cit.*, p. 695.
- 36 Thompson, p. 697.
- 37 E. Williams, *Culture and Society*, Chatto and Windus, London, 1958. (Page references are to the 1963 Penguin edition.)
- 38 Thompson, *op. cit.*, p. 785.
- 39 J. Ruskin, *On the Nature of Gothic*, quoted in Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 147.
- 40 Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 153.
- 41 *Ibid.*, p. 161.
- 42 Thompson, *op. cit.*, p. 792.
- 43 Bloch, *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature*, p. 41.
- 44 Thompson, *op. cit.*, p. 779.
- 45 Loc. cit.
- 46 *Ibid.*, p. 802.
- 47 P. Meier, *William Morris: The Marxist Dreamer*, Harvester, Sussex, 1976, p. 53.
- 48 *Ibid.*, p. 164.
- 49 *Ibid.*, p. xi
- 50 *Ibid.*, pp. xiii-xiv.
- 51 *Ibid.*, p. 76

- 52 *Ibid.*, p. 578.
- 53 Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, p. 79.
- 54 J. Goode, 'William Morris and the Dream of Revolution', in J. Lucas (ed.), *Literature and Politics in the Nineteenth Century*, 1971, p. 257.
- 55 *Ibid.*, pp. 269-70.
- 56 *Ibid.*, p. 273.
- 57 *Ibid.*, p. 274.
- 58 *Ibid.*, p. 277.
- 59 Cited in Zipes' introduction to Bloch, *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature*, p. xxxiii.
- 60 Thompson (glossing Abensour, whose work is not available in English), *op. cit.*, p. 790.
- 61 *Ibid.*, p. 790-91.
- 62 R. Williams, 'Utopia and Science Fiction' in *Problems in Materialism and Culture*, Verso, London, 1980, p. 203.
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- 64 Bloch, *The Principle of Hope*, pp. 146-47.
- 65 *Ibid.*, p. 791.
- 66 *Ibid.*, p. 806.
- 67 *Ibid.*, p. 807.
- 68 P. Anderson, *Arguments within English Marxism*, Verso, London, 1980, p. 161.
- 69 G. Sorel, *Reflections on Violence*, *passim*.
- 70 M. Löwy, 'The Romantic and the Marxist critique of modern civilization', *Theory and Society* 16, 1987, p. 900.

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