

UTOPIAN VISIONS

Pondering Another Possible World

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Roy Morrison, *Eco Civilization 2140: A Twenty-second Century History and Survivors' Journal*, an attempt to describe what the U.S. will be like in 133 years. Published by the Writers' Publishing Cooperative, 2006.

William Morris, *News From Nowhere: An Epoch of Rest, Being Some Chapters from a Utopian Romance*, published in weekly installments in *The Commonweal* in 1890, predicting the state of England 162 years later in 2052.

William Morris was a long-time member of the Socialist Democratic League and one of its chief publicists and field organizers. He was also an entrepreneur, owner of a plant that produced textiles and furniture. Roy Morrison was an organizer of the Clamshell Anti-nuclear Alliance and has been a technology consultant in the field of sustainable energy. In an odd way, both have a similar temperament. Both books, though covering a wide range of political and economic theory, are focused on practical details and relate to a particular place. Roy Morrison's future is located in the village of Warner, New Hampshire and William Morris' imagined view of England in Hammersmith 160 years ahead. Roy Morrison's place has the aura of the back-to-the-land movement and the decade of the 60s, a time of enthusiasm, of anti-utilitarianism and anarchist leaning to decentralism. Morris' *News From Nowhere* is in the tradition of romantic protest against industrialism, harkening back to the arts and culture of the Pre-Raphaelite 15th century.

These books, so different, are equally perceptive and relevant. They were written 130 years apart, but they are equally on the mark as to what is happening now. I am writing this review in the small town of Tepotzlan, Mexico. It is largely Indian and Christian, in many ways unchanged in the last 400 years. At the same time, it's had its own libertarian struggles closely tied to what is happening in Oaxaca and the popular resistance to the state government of PAN. For Mexico, a near-revolutionary situation. If they were here, both Morris and Roy Morrison would be at home.

We are to assume a "New World is Possible." Before going into the substance of what is said, we have to ask: how did we get here? Both books come out of the authors' experience as political activists. Roy Morrison's earlier book on the Mondragon Cooperatives in Spain, *The Road As We Travel*, contains the kernel of what he has to say. The present project gives a minimum chronology.

2000 to 2100: the Age of Pollution
2030: the Empire of Oil and resource wars
2050: dramatic Global Warming
2060: the Great Crisis: pandemics, war, ecological crisis; after population peak, collapse of financial institutions

All these precede 2075–2100, the period of what he calls “The Great Political Awakening.”

William Morris’ projection is clearer. His account drew on actual events in Europe going back to the French Revolution and to the Paris Commune of 1870. Morris himself had been a part of the political background in England and had been present in Trafalgar Square on “Bloody Sunday.” In his romance, he wakes from his dream in “nowhere.” A detailed history of the events and how they occurred is related to him by an old man, an eyewitness who supposedly lived through them. It is described in terms of class warfare. There is a triangle, a three-way pull between the organized workers, the government, and the owners who can generally count on the press. There has been a period of reform and pressure from the “combined workmen,” a kind of welfare state and benevolent state socialism. This continues into the mid-20th century when there is an economic crisis, unemployment, social distress and mass demonstrations, these leading in 1950 to the (fictional) massacre of Bloody Sunday on Trafalgar Square. This is followed by a two-year civil war and an attempted coup by the conservative “masters” backed by army officers. A general strike.

These are both utopias. They shrug off the baggage of “what is” and lead us to look ahead at “what is possible.” Both focus on a single place, the local—where the narrative of the new may be permitted. The substance of Roy Morris’ book is the transformation of a town. There is the place, Warner, New Hampshire, and the time. The persons, how they conducted their lives, their livelihoods. These are determined by the larger events and accomplishments outside the picture. Morrison calls these the 22nd century initiatives on which all depends: The Four Elements of Sustainability and Prosperity.

An Ecological Tax System. *All taxes on income, abolished. Instead tax of both goods and services on the basis of how polluting, depleting and ecologically damaging they are. This has been brought about by market forces. Renewables have become predominant. Morrison has worked out an elaborate sequence. This is reflected in the colored labels on goods “to lighten the seriousness and gravitas of the situation...Income Tax Freedom Day is our most lighthearted holiday, dedicated to a celebration of foolishness, a goodhearted national Mardi Gras.”*

A National Trust savings and investment system. *Regional banks invest strategically in communities to support jobs and cooperative entrepreneurship. In community-based businesses, institutions, and in housing. This, the creation of social capital along the lines, so I take it, of a similar strategy in Mondragon’s Impresarial Division of the *Caja Laboral Popular*.*

Negative Income Tax. *The third is basically a guarantee against poverty and insecurity. An entitlement in return for a two-year period of public service. The stigma of welfare, abolished. This is the NIT, so named as a drollery on the part of the author.*

An Economy Based on Cooperatives. *A global transformation of trade and commerce into continental and subcontinental units comprised of 50 million*

cooperatives (see Fourier's 164,000 phalanxes). Unexpectedly, this system arising in China—perhaps because of the author's sense of humor. "Under the slogan: The East Is Green. They have assumed the Mantle of Heaven having concluded the cost too great of maintaining a tottering dictatorial bureaucracy."

The substance of the transformation is explained in subsequent chapters, the story spelled out in the details of events and personal lives in Warner. The account begins: "I live in the old Morrison homestead in the Mink Hills." The Bowers, his friends and neighbors, are finishing up another good year on their Kearsage Mountain Farm. He goes on to tell us:

This is a heritage organic farm having certification begun in the late-Twentieth century. The farm has used solar electricity from the start. Founders Jennifer Ohlere and Bob Bower, farmers and sustainable loggers, used only early photovoltaic arrays to wring small amounts of solar power from the daylight. Nary a power line ever snaked its way into the Kearsage Gore. They resurrected into fields from an old 400-acre woodlot that once upon a time had been a farm embracing the hard everyday work of getting up before dawn and often laboring until after the sun had gone down.

The account goes on to the sap house—maple syrup—with its collection tank from smart taps—selective reverse osmosis. After the die-off of maple trees with global warming, the Bowers' great-grandkids planted 50,000 maple seedlings as the climate began to stabilize.

Local organic farmers grow the ubiquitous mustard plant, hemp, Jerusalem artichokes and alder that the Warner Farmers' Co-op makes into chemical feedstock...Mustard's new career began in Warner in the early 21st century as the global oil production peaked. The small seed of yellow mustard was a perfect source of biodiesel fuel. The pressed mustard seed paste was used to make an organic insecticide. The rest of the plant was made into ethanol. The ash residue was an organic fertilizer to spread on the fields.

The Warner Farmers' Co-op eventually built their own biodiesel plant.

A separate chapter on business:

Daughter Phoebe runs the network part of the Kearsage Gore Farm business. She is able to sell native producer's royalty rights over the net to the global confederacy,...customers in the Central Africa Union who have a taste for maple syrup which goes particularly well with their palm wine. Instead of shipping product halfway around the world, Phoebe can sell information, the code for her syrup to be formulated by nano-tech zero emissions.

The above are illustrations of "underlying production principles: zero emissions, zero waste, and sustainable use of organic chemicals."

Production decisions among others are decided at Town Meeting. "This is more than just passing budgets and deciding when we need new pieces of ever more expensive fire and safety equipment." Town Meeting is also the annual meeting of Warner Community Enterprises, which, in conjunction with other regional farm groups, is enabled by the regional branch of the National Trust.

Town voters are also owners of the town social property, community school, housing, other institutions, and community co-op enterprises. Thus, they “have closed the gap between industrial product and ecology. This ultimately meant closing the gap between political and economic power.”

One might guess from the above with its mustard and nanotech emissions that the author is a technology and biology freak. Morrison’s neighbors are working agriculturists and homesteaders practicing their trades.

Morrison is respectful of these practitioners of techne, in the same way that William Morris delighted in the old stone carvers and painters of another century. Without this, the vision of the future is not grounded. There are other futurist excursions into the New Age by fiction writers and artists. Blake assigns these to the realm he calls *Beulah*. Below *Jerusalem* and the next higher level above the *World As It Is* and *Ulro*, its mindless, repetitive routine. William Morris was a student of radical history and also a poet. For both authors, there is a place for beauty in the scheme of things (following Ruskin and other denigrators of ugliness and the Victorian factory system). Beauty and Pleasure. In *News From Nowhere*, the inhabitants are all comely. There is even a minor love affair. Morrison beckons us on to the pleasures of sports, the citizens of Warner are still fans of the Red Sox. He is not ashamed to assign a date: in the year 2100, “the Age of Contentment Begins.”

William Morris had written articles on economics elsewhere and was familiar with Marx. But *News From Nowhere* was composed after a long evening’s meeting at the Socialist League expended in wearying argument and factional bickering. He felt they had lost heart. For Morris, the 1880s and 90s was a time in England when one could almost believe in the possibility of a kind of socialism. As *News From Nowhere* was first written, the Great Day was soon to arrive. However, after the Bloody Sunday massacre and the subsequent repression, he revised his thinking and put it ahead 80 years: from 1890 to 1952. Morris was an innocent. He could not have imagined the darkness and horror of our own century and the century ahead. Nor is this the history that concerned the inhabitant of Warner 2140. A few items in Morrison’s chronology:

2053. The Great Panic, financial institutions collapse. By 2141, global population reduced from a peak of 9 billion to 4 billion.

One guesses these events were not unattended by violence and tragedy. Morrison is not interested in eschatology; he prefers to emphasize that the system has fallen of itself. The earth can no longer afford capitalism; the system has succumbed to its own developmental logic.

Whether due to O’Connor’s Second Law? Or the Revenge of Gaia? In any case, he chooses to steer clear of the grand and global theoretical constructs Capitalism—Socialism. He prefers to look at the world “at a slant,” its process and detail. The place for this is the local.

Both authors are supremely unrealistic. William Morris wakes to find London no longer exists, the Houses of Parliament used as a place to collect dung. For Roy Morris, the city hardly comes into it at all. In this regard, the Goodman Brothers’ *Communitas* from the

late 1940s gives a more sympathetic treatment. Both were convinced urbanists. Percival was strongly Marxist, and Paul an avant-guardist and self-styled “cubist.” *Communitas* is a more persuasive book. For William Morris, the revolutionary events are cast as the drama of class warfare. As such, they had a great deal to do with the English character. He shared the opinion of the times, the Pre-Raphaelite artists’ interest in the “working man” and his family. The triumph of socialism is one of simple decency and fairness, the accord of at least some of the luxuries and privileges of the upper class to the poor and downtrodden. William Morris attempted to do this for employees of his own workshop. For Morrison, the situation is different. The territory has narrowed. We live in an Economic Age. The afflatus of the 1960s certainly was not socialist, rather anarchist and decentralist. For Morrison, the inhabitants of Warner Village are presented as comrades and fellow cooperators. He’s interested in their relation to each other and to the wider political arena outside.

It seems to me that in this, Roy Morrison was influenced by his days as one of the early members and organizers of the Clamshell Alliance. Clam originated as a protest against the construction of the Seabrook nuclear power plant and engaged people from throughout New England. Car parking had to be arranged, which entailed finding neighbor property owners to provide space. Non-violence training, assigning locations to affinity groups, and setting up and maintaining squatters’ camp all had to be organized. There was an innovative politics: meetings attended by “spokes.” What was valued was patience and ability to sit out unlimited hours of argument. The ultimate decisions reached by consensus. The plant was eventually built, but in the course of it, protesters received an education in dealing with the official bureaucracies and a growing understanding of finances, and the role of investment. The strategy was extended to a blockade of Wall Street. And to other power sites around the country. The Alliance may be seen as a model for a dynamic of growth.

Later chapters concern the “Continental Unions of nations” and “from Industrialism to Ecological civilization.” There is a system of continental unions.

These have flowered as an expression of largely cooperative initiatives from below. Trade is now largely information, not material goods, and much production is now local and customized...Our simple life rests upon an increasingly complex industrial ecology; sophisticated ecologic and technological systems; a web of global interconnections over the net; a dynamic political, economic and social system that is based on democracy, participation and local control but rooted in larger...structures of hemispheric reach.

A utopian image. “In Warner, the people living on Pumpkin Hill still are rich and those on Chemical Lane still earn a modest income...And its residents have sufficient income to live a life no more likely to be cloaked in misery and unhappiness than their more materially comfortable neighbors.”

The nation state has failed. In final chapters, Morrison engages the philosophical implications of the ecological turn away from the industrial. The “industrial” period includes both capitalism and socialism. He examines the “sinews of the extinct industrial beast”—that is, more consumption and production maximized without limit. There is the inevitable breakdown. Morrison is more interested in picking up the pieces, in “a second and more often neglected dynamic informing human social evolution...a healing response to excess.” These have always been there. He gives as an example the response of his neighbor, Doug

Newton. The genetic engineering practices of inserting biological toxins into the fruit genome proved quickly to breed highly resistance super pests. Newton could no longer afford the cost of oil-based fertilizers and toxic pesticides and fungicides. He turned to an organic fruit-growing technique.

This is a benign example. It might apply as well to Indian agriculture of corn and wheat. But India has many farmers. Faced with the same crisis, thousands of them have committed suicide.

For Morrison, industrialism has been that period of history. He speaks of *THE INDUSTRIAL STEEL TRIANGLE: HIERARCHY, TECHNOLOGY, PROGRESS*. One guesses the influence of Bookchin. His examples of place have more substance, the New England Town Meeting (with the Athenian agora) are more than a facile mantra. But Bookchin's insistence on the popular assembly as a way of actual governance and the final check to power—which at the time of writing seemed far-fetched—now when the elective democracy has become hollowed out and our representatives no longer have the power to represent us—has become more relevant.

Both accounts, *News From Nowhere* and *Warner 2140*, are as much about the past—or borrowings from the past—as they are about the future. In the Warner town meeting, there is reserved the customary place in the front row for the town historian. In the town of Tepoztlan, Mexico, the past survives. The town is on a steep hillside, narrow streets of cobblestones where barely a bus can pass. Walls and houses are made of brick and of adobe from the native volcanic earth, a tree trunk penetrating through a garden wall. One sees through a gate into a backyard where there is parked the ubiquitous Volkswagen and maybe beside it a horse tied by its halter, nearby a bag of corn cobs. Ancient wooden saddle and an old man riding out in white pants tied at the ankle and sombrero, with his machete to cut corn on the *ejido*, a portion of the common lands assigned to each barrio. The town wired for electricity, phone lines on tattered and leaning wooden poles. Religious processions in the streets. The 15th century churches or basilica enhanced with sound system and neon lights. These were the bells in all the twelve barrios which alerted the town some years ago to its crisis. Much of the *ejidos* had been sold to a developer for a golf course. The population summoned to City Hall, surrounded it, took the mayor prisoner, declared an end of the PRI administration, and elected a new mayor.

I mentioned before the situation in Oaxaca with APPO, the Organization of Popular Protest. And how closely this resembles the scenario projected by William Morris.

Agitation in Oaxaca had continued. People had retaken the plaza, protesters, and women with sticks resisting the takeover by the police of the college radio station. There was wide coverage by the press—not altogether hostile. Up to this point, the administration had been careful in deployment of the army, killings of random protestors were by the local paramilitaries and undercover agents. Then in November '06, there occurred the equivalent of Morris' "Bloody Sunday." The aftermath—the government announced that "chaos had been averted" and "the situation had returned to normal." From this point on, there has been a three way tug-of-war or triangle of forces: the government, the business interests, and the resistance, that is the allies of the original striking teachers, with mixed coverage by the press, arrest of leaders of APPO (the Oaxaca Popular Resistance Organization), equivalent

of Morris' Committee of Public Safety. Leaders of the opposition selectively arrested then released, the opposition more or less underground with a network of "working men's associations" in other cities. The administration has continued to govern but in a situation of dual power. It was widely believed that the elections were stolen. There were huge popular demonstrations and marches led by the defeated candidate. Return to the status quo. A period of relative equilibrium but general uneasiness and uncertainty as to whether it would last.

The similarity to the story imagined by Morris is close. The difference, of course, is the global economic framework: NAFTA. The world, as it is capitalist to the core, dominated by the spread of multinational corporations. This is the case in Mexico.

Shortly after the crackdown, there was a rise in the price of bread. This was attributed by the (socialist) newspaper, *LaJornada* to speculation by Cargill, the grain-trading corporation. It was announced in the same issue of the paper that the Agricultural Union threatened a general strike.

William Morris called his future place "Nowhere" and his account "some chapters of a utopian romance." The author of *Warner 2140* describes his book despairingly as "a message in a bottle" cast out to sea. How are these two works of fiction with so much in common to be read? Their inspiration and genesis is the same. But today the imagination has no value. It is not, as in Blake's and Shelley's time, of political use. It was an instrument of rebellion. Now it is out of fashion. It is absent outside of literary fiction, and certainly one doesn't find it in serious nonfiction: critical theorizing aims at the root causes of things, protesting and investigative journalism is about fact. William Morris had another purpose in mind, it was to provide freshness. To open things up and to bring fresh air into the weighty debates of the Socialist Leagues' meeting hall. For Roy Morrison, Industrialism is as much as anything, a mindset. Ours is a totalitarian culture. What is not serviceable is marginalized. The terms are set, even the language specified. Out of habit we allow it to define "Reality" for us.

If the goal is transformation, there are other modes to describe it. One of them is the playful.

The future, if it appears, will not be a surface wiped clear of history. When it comes, it will be made up as much of the past as the future. There are arts and technologies which will have dependably survived, human inventiveness and ingenuity that, too, for the political and social, and the old stubbornness, will not surrender our democratic institutions such as they are. Both books seek to persuade us that we can look to these to survive and gladly. Even in a time of miserableness and gloom.