Claims for a decent life and a true democracy

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Green House think tank is a company limited by guarantee, company number 9657878. Lorton Barn, Lorton Lane, Weymouth, Dorset DT3 5QH, United Kingdom.
+44 (0)1305 816514, thinktankgreenhouse@gmail.com

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It is right and necessary that all men should have work to do which shall be worth doing, and be of itself pleasant to do; and which should be done under such conditions as would make it neither over-wearisome nor over-anxious.
(William Morris from 'Art and Socialism')

The future of work and employment is a major public issue brought on by both rapid technological changes and the inability of capitalism to recover from the economic and financial crisis of 2007-08. What also seems to be noticeable by its absence from many public discussions is the persistent inability and unwillingness of governments and businesses to rectify the massive democratic deficit in work organisations. It is clear that economic recoveries in the recent past have been largely jobless and increasing technological unemployment brought on in the new digital wonderland spearheaded by the Internet of Things, robotisation, automation and Artificial Intelligence is also a distinct possibility (Brynjolfsson and McAfee, 2014; Ford, 2015). Susskind and Susskind (2017) argue that many professionals in education, law and health will be seriously affected too although whether this undermines or reinforces existing forms of managerialism and control is yet to be seen. On the other hand, David Autor (2015; 2016) suggests that many middle-skill jobs cannot readily be performed by machines and maybe increasing as is the case within the health and repair occupations. New jobs are being created too but the primary issue with these particularly in the gig economy is that they are low paid, of poor quality, devoid of employment rights and largely lacking in worker autonomy and control. For Kate Fielding (Fielding, 2017) of Co-operatives UK, the status of being legally self employed workers unintentionally disguises many abuses that renders this sector a potential ally of modern slavery. Elsewhere, hierarchical and autocratic power structures and relationships dominate most work organisations while salaries and wages are at the mercy of manipulated market mechanisms. Job related stress, alienation and general dissatisfaction constitute the norm leading some work psychologists to develop research and consultancy projects that go by the name by the Orwellian name of 'meaningfulness interventions'. If you find yourself unengaged in your job HR can help you see it as meaningful and so make you happy and productive.

Today's problems are systemic, and only a fundamental social and economic transformation will be able to transform the unequal power structures and exploitative relationships inherent in capitalist work organisations.There are now many prescriptions essentially marrying socialist and green ideas which outline what needs to be done (Mason, 2015; Srnicek and Williams, 2015; Bregman, 2017). Neoliberal economic thinking,

a neoliberal *mentalité*[1] and institutions are reluctant to change as elite vested interests like things the way they are particularly if the inequalities of wealth and power remain unchanged or enhanced. What seems like a constant erosion (Reich, 2009) if not hatred of political democracy (Wolin, 2010; Rancière, 2009), is just fine by them as this simply complements the lack of democracy in so many workplaces today. But it does not have to be like this. There have been a number of worthy attempts in the not too distant past, and increasingly in the present, to democratise the economy, the workplace and the wider society. This essay is an exploration of some of those excursions into economic democracy which may be important to a transformative process that is sustainable, equitable and fair. I start with a short trip back the future where the promise of a more libertarian socialism briefly flourished and could possibly do so again (Masquelier, 2014).

How we live and how we might live

William Morris and Edward Carpenter belong to a very select group of people being two of the very few socialists virtually everyone has a good word for. Irrespective of where you are on the political spectrum, whether you are Left or Right, Green or some other colour, Morris and Carpenter are still able to speak to us today. Perhaps they speak to us more loudly now than they did in their own lifetimes and the years following their deaths in 1896 and 1929 respectively. As a poet, Morris drew inspiration from the ancient Nordic sagas and Carpenter from Emerson and Whitman. As an artist, designer and craftsman Morris relished the skill and creativity of the preindustrial middle ages, as a businessman he ran a company that few of his workers ever felt the need or desire to leave and as a prose writer he fashioned a world in *News from Nowhere, The Pilgrims of Hope* and *The Dream of John Bull* that lauded revolutionary change and an anarchistic utopia which remains as inspiring as it is aspiring. More importantly, like others of his time, notably Carlisle, John Ruskin, and Carpenter saw in industrialism and industrialisation all that was wrong with the contemporary world while enjoying, and to a degree sharing, the benefits they produce. Morris, particularly, was by no means averse to using modern technology such as photography as an aid in the design process; he would have bought a power loom except for the fact that his 'his capital can't compass' it, and bought machinery for his Merton Abbey works to do some of the burdensome and tedious work. Although he abhorred the environmental consequences of the railways, his widespread political campaigning could not have been carried out without them. Morris believed that technology should be used to relieve workers of burdensome work and to manufacture some goods, but thought that would never be able to create works of art.

He was immensely talented and quite wealthy, remaining so throughout his life through his own efforts and those of the craftsmen he employed. He believed in useful work and not useless toil, practised a form of profit sharing and worker participation in decision making, and saw in the collective endeavours of the medieval guilds a model for future industrial and economic organisation. He felt that the true realisation of the human

[1] *Mentalités* is derived from the Annales School of History associated with Fernand Braudel, Marc Bloch, Roger Chartier, Jacques Le Goff and others. For the cultural historian Peter Burke (1986) *mentalités* comprise of three elements (1) a stress on collective rather than individual attitudes; (2) an emphasis on unspoken assumptions, on perception and on everyday thought; and (3) the structure as well as the content of beliefs.

potential was through labour which he understood as essentially the same as that of artistic creativity and art itself. The joy of medieval construction from the most magnificent cathedral to the most humble barn was a result of the collective knowledge, skill, artistry and creative capacity of the medieval tradesmen. Consequently, it should come as no surprise that in his lecture 'How we live and how we might live,' he identified four claims, or requirements, which would enable everyone to experience a decent life. These claims were: a healthy body; an active mind in sympathy with the past, the present and the future; an occupation for a healthy body and an active mind; and finally, a beautiful world to live in.

Morris did not have to stray far from his London home, Kelmscott House in Hammersmith, to witness the effects of industrialisation and urbanisation on the health and wellbeing of the majority of Londoners, that 'mass of people employed in making all those articles of folly and luxury, the demand for which is the outcome of the existence of the rich non-producing classes' (Morris, 1915a: 103). Endemic ill health was a product of overwork, undernourishment, disease, squalor, arduous and alienating work, and poor housing conditions. Today, we still seek good health and it still evades the lives of many people and not just those who struggle on less than two dollars a day in the Global South. Many people in the affluent Global North struggle with ill health too which is as much to do with structural economic inequality and oppressive power relationships as it is with a rampant consumerism where many articles of folly and luxury, bread and circuses, are in reach, or actually just out of reach, of the increasingly under- or precariously employed. The work of Wilkinson and Pickett (2010) clearly shows how and why this is so. Stress, psychological depression, diabetes, obesity and paradoxically malnutrition are social ills and products of a global economic system based unashamedly on the private accumulation of wealth, power and profit. Capitalism is with us still, as is History, which - far from having ended - seems to march relentlessly onwards. Marx recognised that capitalism needs to constantly grow to survive, it needs people to consume more and more, and for this to occur everything must become a business opportunity, everything must be commodified - labour, health, fitness, nature, climate change and even death. In such a world, as the young Marx suggested in his early writings, human subjectivity, the human spirit, is alienated from itself, from nature, from the products of human labour, and from whatever is the truth in being truly human. As Morris (1915a: 103) wrote in the essay 'Useful Work versus Useless Toil',

> Wealth is what Nature gives us and what a reasonable man can make out of the gifts of Nature for his reasonable use. The sunlight, the fresh air, the unspoiled face of the earth, food raiment and housing necessary and decent; the storing up of knowledge of all kinds, and the power of disseminating it; means of free communication between man and man; works of art the beauty which man creates when he is most a man, most aspiring and thoughtful - all things which serve the pleasure of people, free, manly and uncorrupted.

For Morris, human beings create themselves, their subjectivity, only through their free and honest labour. If they can't do this they are fatally diminished - slaves of and to an industrialised society that knows the price of everything and the value of nothing. Good

health cannot be attained in a social system where what creates human beings as social beings is itself a commodity to be bought and sold, to be used and used up, and ultimately discarded as a human resource no longer worthy of consideration because the experience of labour as a commodity form has worn away both body and mind. Karl Polanyi argued that labour, like land and money, is both a fictitious commodity and a historical phenomenon - a creation not so much of a market economy but of a marketised society. '[N]ever before our own time,' wrote Polanyi (2001: 71), 'were markets more than accessories to economic life,' because the economic system was absorbed in the social system. For Polanyi, labour is emphatically not a commodity since it 'is only another name for a human activity which goes with life itself, which in turn is not produced for sale but for entirely different reasons, nor can that activity be detached from the rest of life, be stored or mobilized' (Polanyi, 2001: 75). To allow markets to solely determine the fate of human life and the natural environment is to demolish and degrade society. As many critics of neoliberalism have demonstrated, it is a form of power, knowledge and control of both social collectivities and individuals emanates from this market *mentalité*. It shapes patterns of behaviour, modes of thought, regimes of truth, institutional and organisational change to create marketised individuals whose worth is dependent on what they consume and how they themselves function and identify themselves as marketised commodities. Wendy Brown (2015) has drawn on Foucault's conceptions of bio-power, governmentality and biopolitics to show how neoliberalism, the market *mentalité par excellence*, suffuses the very life blood of the contemporary world. She takes maketisation and commodification a step beyond Polanyi and Marx for she believes neoliberalism approaches all aspects of life in the same marketised way. In the process, democratic values have shifted from the political to the economic arena. Freedom is conceived and presented not as political participation but as market freedom - the freedom to compete, the freedom to drive a car and to shop and the freedom from government regulation.

This *mentalité* is currently hegemonic. Everything is now a subject of, and subjected to, market metrics. Many theories, policies and practices relating to sustainability and sustainable development are not excepted. The very notion of ecosystem services comes with a dollar sign attached and sustainability practitioners, and many sustainability educators, evaluate human potential in terms of it being manifestations of social and intellectual 'capital'. The market *mentalité* is clearly evident in the way education, particularly higher education, has developed in recent years. A good education is one in which a student can effectively become a desirable commodity rather than a knowledgeable person or responsible citizen (Blewitt, 2013). Consequently, the market *mentalité* has decentred the human subject from itself rendering the idea, and indeed the practice of democracy, surplus to requirements. Democracy simply gets in the way which suggests for some, such as Douglas Rushkoff (2009) in his *Life Inc,* that there is a totalising aspect to neoliberalism, made manifest by the institutional dominance of corporations, which seemingly shares a common heritage and certain qualities with (Italian) fascism. There is that similar desire to order society on a particular (scientific) understanding of human nature, today based on the philosophical template derived from the concept of *homo oeconomicus;* a similar political alliance between the state and the corporate sector; a similarly expansive use of public relations and propaganda techniques to nurture consent; and a similarly deep suspicion of free human beings. Wendy Brown sees this neoliberalism

as having its roots in liberalism and in turn, the Israeli scholar Ishay Landa (2014), argues that economic liberalism was clearly a constituent intellectual foundation for fascism. And it is undoubtedly the case that economic liberalism today, the commodification of labour and the hegemony of the market *mentalité*, is quite compatible with political autocracy. Indeed, Ludwig Von Mises (1978: 51) writing in 1927, praised Fascism for saving European civilisation, or more exactly private property and capitalism, from Communism, winning for itself merit that 'will live on eternally in history'.

Art, Work and Nature

The world as it is now is not the world as it has always been. It was different in the past and can, and will, be different in the future. Morris's medievalism enabled him to take the long view. His teachers are both Nature and History. The art of the craftsman entails the pleasure of making and the pleasure of buying and selling of goods at a fair price. Fairness, creativity and equity structures feeling and perception, a way of living and being. For Morris, human beings must not be immersed in and encumbered with bad work, sham work, and the waste of luxury and greed. We must not fill our homes with 'tons upon tons of unutterable rubbish' or produce goods which satisfy mere fashion or the mere desire for more - more stuff, more status or simply just more. Have nothing in your house that is neither beautiful nor useful he entreated. 'I beg you' writes Morris (1914a: 23), 'to remember both as a remedy against this, and as exactly explaining what I mean, that nothing can be a work of art which is not useful; that is to say, which does not minister to the body when well under command of the mind, or which does not amuse, soothe, or elevate the mind in a healthy state'.

The world we create must itself be beautiful and can only be so if the free creative labours of human beings find expression and sustenance. Otherwise, we will have a world characterised by pollution, waste, ugliness, environmental destruction and toil. For Morris the nineteenth century was both 'the Century of Commerce' and 'the Century of Nuisances' where rich industrialists professed their love of art by purchasing grand houses and expensive artworks while simultaneously allowing their factories to subject their workers to wage slavery and their dwellings to 'dense clouds of smoke' (Morris, 1914b: 71). Only art can redeem but, he feared (Morris, 1914b: 72),

> I suppose 'tis early days in the revival of the arts to express one's disgust at the daily increasing hideousness of the posters with which all our towns are daubed. Still we ought to be disgusted at such horrors, and I think make up our minds never to buy any of the articles so advertised. I can't believe they can be worth much if they need all that shouting to sell them.

Only art made by the people and for the people, as a joy to the maker and user, can help educate us to seek a new, better way where the complete equality of condition for all and the collective authority of society, that is commonly agreed rules of conduct, would not be based on a rational utilitarian calculus but on 'the conscience of the association voluntarily accepted' (Morris, 1889 reprinted in Morton, 1973: 212). Given this, as his contemporary and fellow socialist Edward Carpenter (1920: 56) wrote in his remarkable

Civilization: its Cause and Cure, 'the true Democracy has yet to come'. We must restore the unity of our nature through eating healthily, taking regular exercise, undertaking productive and satisfying work, and in the process beautify Nature rather than render it hideous as human beings are too often wont to do. Carpenter, like Morris, is frequently perceived as an early eco-socialist and feminist. He believed that in a true Democracy the farms, fields, workshops and cities people create will perfect the land 'giving voice to the desire of the mute earth'. Communal life would be near to nature and, as a consequence, people would experience 'far more humanity and sociability than ever before' (Carpenter, 1920, 66). His view of the future was as romantic and as poetic as that of Morris. Carpenter writes (1920, 66-67),

> Mutual help and combination will then have become spontaneous and instinctive: each man contributing to the service of his neighbour as inevitably and as naturally as the right hand goes to help the left in the human body - and for the same reason. Everyman - think of it! - will do the work which he *likes*, which he desires to do, which is obviously before him to do, and which he knows will be useful, without thought of wages or reward; (...); out of the endless variety of human nature will spring perfectly natural and infinite variety of occupations, all mutually contributive; Society at last will be free and the human beings after long ages will have attained to deliverance.

Morris echoed such sentiments too but as a businessman he also recognised that in any society there would still be the need for some hard and dirty work to be done. This, of course, would be shared out fairly and equally. Where possible technology would be developed and engaged to lift the burden of necessity from the people themselves. Technology would provide humanity with genuine benefits where the contemporary relationship between men and machines would be reversed. As Carpenter (1920: 68) noted, it will therefore be man that becomes the master of all contemporary appliances not the reverse: 'man will use them, instead of their using him. His real life will lie in the region far beyond them'.

But Carpenter and Morris were not simply dreamers - idle singers of an empty day - but worked vigorously to make their essentially political dreams a practical reality. Morris envisaged work being undertaken for livelihood and pleasure and not for profit. He envisaged factories standing in grounds surrounded by beautiful gardens lovingly and co-operatively tended by the factory workers themselves, as indeed was the garden around his own workshop complex in Merton, south of London. Furthermore, places of work would have to be constructed artistically and soundly, incorporating facilities within them such as libraries, dining areas, schools and other places of learning and development. All this could be afforded easily for everyone as it was already for the privileged few - members of the capitalist class. Similarly, a family dwelling should be furnished well and beautifully if art and simplicity was the rule rather than the continual accretion of shoddy rubbish, useless toys and tat. Work would not be directed towards the production of 'degrading follies' for profit. There would be no Black Fridays or 'two for the price of one' or a complete fetishisation of commodities to keep the wheels of industry

turning in Morris' world. In an article in *Justice* in 1884 Morris wrote (Morris in Salmon, 1994: 39),

> Nor will work turn out trash; there will be no millions of poor to make a market for wares which no one would choose to use if he were not driven to do so; everyone will be able to afford things good of their kind, and as will be shown hereafter, will have knowledge of goods enough to reject what is not excellent...

Harmful luxuries for the rich and 'disgraceful make shifts' for the poor will be a thing of the past. Technology will enable the working day to be shortened to perhaps as little as a four hours. Work would be an educative experience and everyone would learn not only how to work but also how things should be and how they can be made. The workplace will be a co-operative enterprise internally and externally. It will be part of society not apart from it. With the abolition of 'profit grinding,' competition and markets, new institutional structures, mentalities and patterns of behaviour will be enabled and will emerge through the free activities and labours of free people.

Putting Morris into practice

In the years prior to and immediately following the First World War, a great deal of attention was paid to how these ideas could be realised in practice, just as one hundred years later economic, political and ecological crises combined with shape shifting digital technologies have served to focus the attention of society in similar ways. For G.D.H.Cole, himself directly inspired by Morris and Carpenter, the future had to be one where state collectivism, the 'free' market and the commodification of labour gave way to a participatory democracy and institutional arrangements based on functional attributes and necessities. In a series of books, articles and pamphlets Cole outlined a comprehensive yet flexible set of proposals known as Guild Socialism. Believing that the key to capitalist inequality, profligacy and exploitation was the commodity form of labour his starting point was its abolition and the establishment of a series of 'commonwealths' or guilds of workers to determine, organise and oversee the production and distribution of goods and services. Although the market would retain a relatively minor role in Cole's proposals his emphasis was firmly on fashioning a participatory economic and political democracy. The producers organised in their guilds would discuss, negotiate and decide in co-operation with similarly organised consumers what needed to be produced, in what quantities, how it was to be distributed and at what cost. Capital, that is wealth-producing property, would be socialised rather than lodged with the State or a capitalist class. The State, or some other central authority, variously called either a Commune or Congress, would be the functional expression of the common will. When necessary, it could act as a guarantor of equity and adjudicator in any disagreements or disputes. In being part of these commonwealths or guilds individual men and women would realise their freedom. Cole's intellectual debts were as much to Rousseau as to Morris or Marx. His concern for freedom and true democracy took precedence over that of economic efficiency. He writes (Cole, 1918, 219-220),

> Democracy may be competent or incompetent; the point is that it is right. (...) When I say "democracy," I want to be clearly understood. Democracy does not mean forcing on people the sort of reforms you want; it means setting people free, to determine what it is they want. What they want may seem to you to be very nasty; but it is nonetheless your business to help in setting them free.

Like Morris, Cole believed that if men and women were to be set free from economic necessity they would set about creating 'the good life,' an art in itself combining in a single form both utility and beauty. Only in free creation, Cole asserts, can joy be found in work and only in free and co-operative association at work and in the community can men and women act together to control both small and great affairs and thereby create the world anew. Thus, this freedom to create, to produce, to co-operate, would in its turn create a desire and predisposition to participate democratically in all other spheres of life. It would help nurture a collective sharing *mentalité* in the same way as the experience of democratic decision making in workplace co-operatives and in participatory budgeting today fashions an appetite and the skills for extending democracy, self-determination or self-government in other spheres (Greenberg, 1986). For Cole (1950: 98), 'democracy excludes too much tidiness, too much order, too much having everything taped'. Democracy involves having 'a sense of comradeship, friendship, brotherhood (...) loving your neighbours', and of having 'a physical glow of sympathy and love' for anyone honestly in need of help and support. He continues (Cole (1950: 98-99),

> But - and here's the point - you can't feel that glow about people - individual people, with capacities for doing and suffering - unless and until you know them personally. And you can't know, personally, more than a quite small number of people.

Democracy works best, works truly, in a devolved and decentralised manner. He supported the establishment of workshop and neighbourhood groups as the 'basic and natural units of democracy'. The experience of discussing and dealing with local affairs their attention would not necessarily be confined to the local for their role was also one of 'democratic education and awakening' and of 'ensuring a democratic vigilance the length and breadth of the great society' (Cole, 1950: 110). Scratch the surface of a true democrat, Cole concludes, and you will find a bit of an anarchist underneath. A principal task then is for the worker to gain control over his own labour and to abolish the wage system and its attendant exploitations (Cole, 1972). The system of Guild Socialism will do this if the experience of those participating in it is real, genuine and effective. Cole writes (1920: 49),

> The freedom of the particular factory as a unit is of fundamental importance, because the object of the whole Guild system is to call out the spirit of free service by establishing really democratic conditions in industry. This democracy, if it is to be real, must come home to, and be exercisable directly by, every individual member of the Guild. He must feel that he is enjoying real self-government and freedom at his work; or he will not work well and under the impulse of the communal spirit. Moreover, the essential basis of the Guild being

> associative service, the spirit of association must be given free play in the sphere in which it is best able to find expression.

And to the extent that the guild system was able to operate principally in construction in the few short years after World War One, it worked and worked quite well. Building Guilds were formed in London, Manchester and Yorkshire, and contracts were negotiated by the National Guild with the local authorities to build a number of desperately needed new homes 'fit for heroes'. The Treasury was to meet the residual cost of local authority housebuilding with some help from the local ratepayer. Private builders and suppliers immediately upped their prices as the Government would be paying, but these new organisations of workers agreed to build houses on a cost-price percentage plus a percentage to cover overheads and a fixed allowance enabling them to pay workers on a continuous basis in a sector which was notorious for its uncertainty. By the summer of 1921, 1200 houses had been completed at an estimated cost of £1,000,000 (Joslyn, 1922) - far less costly than if the construction had been organised by privately owned firms. In addition, guild workers enjoyed good pay even when laid off between jobs. Local building guilds were consolidated into one body, the National Building Guild, and a National Council was formed to spread the guild idea. Contemporary observers noted that the control, self-management, equality and comradeship existing within the building guilds ensured that the workmanship was generally of a very high standard and job satisfaction equally high (Selley, 1921; Cox, 1921). Alexander Bing (1921: 170), an American builder who visited a guild construction site in Walthamstow, (north London) was most impressed, writing,

> During the past summer I visited Walthamstow and a number of Guild operations in Manchester. At the same time I inspected many other buildings in the same localities in the course of construction by private employers. On all of the Guild contracts the men were doing a substantially better day's work than on all but one of the operations of private builders. Most of the workmen spoken to were class conscious socialists. They stated that they felt this to be their opportunity to get away from the profits of the private contractor. They spoke of the advantages of working under a foreman of their own selection and of the benefits of continuous pay. They admitted that there was a great deal of slackness in the men's work throughout the trade, and said that they would certainly work harder for their own organisation than they would for the ordinary builder. My own impression, that the Guildsmen, as a matter of fact, are doing a better day's work than their fellow craftsmen in the employ of private contractors (...).

The success of the Building Guilds inspired guilds to be set up in other trades and localities. Furniture and furnishing guilds were established in Manchester, London, Warrington and Bristol; a slate quarriers' guild was established in Oswestry in North Wales and guilds of tailors were formed in London, Manchester and Glasgow. The guild concept even spread to Germany, Austria, Italy, the United States and New Zealand. Aiming to realise the aim of organising industry for service rather than for profit, all this

was clearly too good and too dangerous to last. The Building Guilds' short life came to an end as a result of extensive lobbying from the private sector to local and central government, stating that the guilds would undermine private business and control of labour. Government wanted new houses to be built as cheaply as possible and in 1921 changed the subsidy system, which meant local authorities would be responsible for a far greater part of the housing bill than before. The contract system was changed too, which meant contractors could charge costs and an overheard percentage only up to a fixed total and the interim payment system was altered forcing contractors to have access to a larger amount of working capital for the same amount of work. The Guilds, short of working capital, could not secure further loans from the Cooperative Wholesale Society's Bank and looked to private banks and the trade unions for the necessary finance. The unions responded by stating they were trade unions not trading bodies and the banks' conditions were prohibitive. The building guilds were unable, or did not try, to leverage finance locally relying on the National Guild to negotiate at a national level with capitalist institutions essentially hostile to their Guild interests.

What is significant about Guild Socialism is the social and moral values being articulated. Although, as Ostergaard (1997: 76) states, the Building Guilds were only 'partial escape from "wage-slavery"', they represented a step towards free labour and economic democracy. Less enamoured of the Collectivist State than the Fabians Beatrice and Sydney Webb and many others in the Labour Party, guildsmen placed a far greater emphasis on freedom and autonomy. The guildsman, critic and journalist Ivor Brown argued that whereas state socialists like the Webbs wished to put socialism on a *business* basis, Guild Socialists wanted to put it on a *working* basis citing William Morris, whose 'passion for democracy was beyond reproach,' as its primary inspiration. In the second edition of his *The Meaning of Democracy* Brown (1920: 147) wrote,

> History has, for the moment, passed Guild Socialism by, but the theory contains a principle so vital [self-expression through self-government] that it is certain to emerge again with its formulae adapted to the new environment.

Economic Democracy

Although the idea of Guild Socialism never had a great deal of purchase within the British labour and Socialist movement, it never completely died out, and forms of economic democracy including producer and consumer co-operatives have survived and indeed prospered in many parts of the world during the twentieth century. The anarchist cultural heritage, its values and philosophies, have been important to the co-operatives experiments in Spain and Italy. The experience of worker self-management and labour-managed market economies in Communist Yugoslavia have also provided a number of both positive and negative lessons regarding the practical workings of economic democracy (Vanek, 1970; Lebowitz, 2015). More recently, Michael Albert (2004), Gar Alperovitz (2011), Robin Hahnel (2005; 2012a; 2012b) and others have developed an extensive and quite sophisticated account of how economic democracy actually works in some places and how it could work more broadly in the future. Even interest in Guild Socialism has seen a modest revival (Wyatt, 2013). The financial crash of 2007-8 and the

consequent global economic depression combined with the brief flourishing of the Occupy movement in the US and Europe has added some impetus to this revival of interest in alternative economic and political arrangements. To this end, Hahnel (2012) has usefully identified four basic principles that must inform a democratically planned and organised participatory economy. These are:

> *Economic democracy* - decision-making power in proportion to the degree a person is affected by a decision.
>
> *Economic justice* - economic reward commensurate with effort, sacrifice and need.
>
> *Solidarity* - concern for the wellbeing of others achieved without sacrificing economic efficiency or diversity in economic life.
>
> *Environmental Sustainability* - production and consumption that respects ecological limits and serves to promote intergenerational equity.

Michael Albert (2004) has explored the labour process and has argued for the need for balanced 'job complexes' echoing Morris's recognition that some less than desirable tasks will need to be shared and that empowerment in the workplace requires a more rounded experience of work tasks, knowledge and skills including those of decision-making, giving and taking orders. In this way, each worker in a participatory economy will inhabit a particular set of work based and work related tasks and responsibilities. He also offers answers to those critics who say that participatory decision making simply takes too much time and can become tedious and unexciting by suggesting that the experience of participation is in itself both motivating and inspiring and far more so than simply working continuously on the treadmill of production whether digitally enhanced or not. Consumer wants can never be satisfied being constantly fuelled by incessant marketing, advertising, necessary digital updates and planned product obsolescence.

Significantly, Hahnel (2013) also argues that producing a given amount of wellbeing through private consumption is usually more environmentally damaging than producing the same amount through public consumption. The bias against collective consumption in capitalist, and certainly neoliberal, economies contributes to the fact that increases in labour productivity and economic efficiency do not always lead to a significant decline in material throughput. And given that increased productivity does not always lead to increases in leisure either but rather more consumption and consumerism, it is no wonder that our capitalist economies are still over-exploiting the planet's natural resources. The dream of a natural capitalism and green growth remains a dream, or even a delusion, for a central problem is also one of time and time scales. Thus, the privatisation and private exploitation of natural resources - the planet's own commonwealth - will lead to over exploitation if the rate of profit accrued is favourable over time. In other words, if the decision about how fast to extract natural resources is left to private corporations, they will do so at too fast a rate leaving little for future generations. In doing this, capitalist economies are 'warping' human development now and in the future. To counteract this,

new and different institutions, not based on the short-term goals of maximising profitability and the private accumulation of wealth, will need to be fashioned to enable individuals to readjust their preferences, values, patterns of behaviour and desires. Hahnel concludes that the failure to do this now under market conditions and from within a neoliberal *mentalité* is therefore not exclusively due to people being ignorant of environmental benefits or the true value of ecosystem services which can be rectified with a proper dose of sustainable education. Rather, the problem lies deep within the *mentalité* of the private enterprise market economy itself which encourages people to consume more rather than to optimise their wellbeing. Given the choice, many people do not currently seek to increase their leisure time or develop their preferences for public goods which would pollute less and exploit natural resources less intensely. They seek more and more follies, luxuries and makeshifts. As Morris noted in his own time, it is invariably far cheaper and more efficient for property developers to clear a site of all trees and shrubs, creating a landscape as bare as a pavement, than to build sensibly around them and to fill the dwelling only with artefacts that have both beauty and utility. For Morris, Carpenter and Cole there is surely art and beauty in reversing this. It will take time but will be worth the effort. Gar Alperovitz (2011a; 2011b) acknowledges that fundamental social and economic change in the workplace, in the economy and in the wider society cannot happen overnight, even if they should, but there are nonetheless clear examples of what can be done and what can be built upon more broadly. He writes (Alperovitz, 2011b: 61),

> Consider the Evergreen Co-operatives in Cleveland, Ohio, an integrated group of worker-owned companies, supported in part by the purchasing power of large hospitals and universities. The co-operatives include a solar installation company, an industrial scale (and ecologically advanced) laundry, and soon a greenhouse capable of producing more than five million heads of lettuce a year. The Cleveland effort, which is partly modelled on the nearly 100,000 person Mondragón co-operatives in the Basque region of Spain, is on track to create new businesses, year by year, as time goes on. However, its goal is not simply worker ownership, but the democratisation of wealth and community-building in general in the low-income Greater University Circle area of what was once a thriving industrial city. Linked by a nonprofit corporation and a revolving fund, the companies cannot be sold outside the network; they also return 10 percent of profits to help develop additional worker-owned firms in the area.

Not exactly the libertarian socialism advocated by Morris, Carpenter and Cole, but certainly an example of genuinely progressive change and economic justice. The notion that only private enterprise, market competition and the profit motive can inspire innovation is shown by Alperowitz and others to be a nonsense. Reinforcing this view, Pat Devine (2002) clearly shows that participatory planning and negotiated co-ordination, that would not have been unfamiliar to the Guild Socialists, can generate variety both in the forms and products of enterprise. The choice and selection of innovative possibilities for research, development and investment would be both efficient and democratic if based on socially determined criteria that recognise the inherent uncertainty in innovation and clearly offer public avenues for feedback, revision and learning which are not constrained

totally by the pursuit of private profit. Such a process would draw on the tacit experience and knowledge of all those who care to be involved. It would also enable democratic oversight and control to prevent any socially valuable innovation being hijacked by and harnessed to private interests. The open source software or freeware movement attempts to realise their principles and benefits in its own practice and the successes of many of the worker-recovered companies in Argentina, following the economic meltdown there, may be cited as significant social, workplace and ideological innovations in a political and legal environment that has not been particularly helpful. Ozarow and Croucher (2014) have shown how this workers' democracy or self-management in Argentina has been institutionally embodied and has ended the former fragmentation of workers and to a large extent their alienation from each other. A new moral economy has consequently emerged as many social goals promoted by these worker recovered enterprises - dignified work, higher wages and community based social projects - have been realised. Work is now frequently perceived by these co-operators as 'free' and the former hierarchical organisation of work as degrading rather than natural or inevitable. A new non-marketised and communal *mentalité* is developing with the idea of 'companies without bosses' being effectively 'naturalised'. This key element of economic justice invariably dovetails with examples of gender and racial justice too. Many poor communities, and in the US many poor black communities, have for decades experienced too little of either. Jessica Nembhard (2014) has documented how some communities of colour have drawn on and developed their own alternative political economy based, of necessity, on cooperation, self-help and mutualism that pays due respect to W.E.B Du Bois' 'co-operative commonwealth' and the Grassroots Movement of Malcolm X that strove to rebuild the declining economy of Jackson, Mississippi, through co-operative enterprise. Some decades earlier, the leading black economist Abram L. Harris suggested that the experience of running co-operatives could enable a form of Guild Socialism to be feasibly established in Black America, especially if consumers demanded control over corporate cartels and if the 'co-operative movement among the Negro as a means of self-help [is] prepared to see it [the cartels] wiped out' (Harris quoted in Nembhard, 2014: 106).

Closer to home, Preston's Labour Council committed itself to a co-operative initiative in 2011 and used the experience of Cleveland Ohio as a model for its own locally driven economic reconstruction. Councillor Matthew Brown has since worked with six local 'anchor' institutions - including local colleges, the Constabulary, Lancashire County Council, and a large tenant led co-operative housing association - to facilitate the local procurement of more of their goods and services. Between 2012 and 2015 Preston Council doubled its own procurement from local businesses from 14% to 28%. The Council has also worked to create new worker-owned businesses and has set up a scheme encouraging employee buyouts of existing companies on the retirement of their owners. As Brown told *Renewal* (O'Neill and Brown, 2016: 75):

> The centralised state by itself can't lead to the kind of social outcomes we want. We've got to have a mixture of ownership models, whether that's co-operatives, employee-owned businesses, whatever, that we want to move towards a genuinely socialist economy. We've got to take an approach that's democratic and that devolves power. (…) Public ownership should be about devolving

> things to the local level, and involving the people actually working in these businesses and industries, and service users, as well as the people you vote for.

Apart from co-operatives there are also charities, community interest companies, a credit union and social enterprises, some of whom operate on co-operative lines, working with the Council. Matthew Brown hopes that some social enterprises and charities will change their status to co-operatives in order to bid to anchor institutions for supply contracts initially involving food. Such transformation is not always easy or feasible. Unfortunately, the law has been reshaped by successive neoliberal governments in its own interests and this must be rectified if initiatives like in Preston are to be replicated easily elsewhere. Consequently, as Davies (2013) has argued, a new architecture of social law facilitating economic democracy needs to be created with the same dedication as neoliberals have exhibited in the past to fashion the system we all know has failed.

What is currently taking place in Preston and Cleveland has clear affinities with the Guild Socialism promoted by G.D.H.Cole and beyond that the mediaeval guild system praised and reimagined by William Morris. The pre-capitalist guilds of the fourteenth century sought to ensure that production was largely controlled and regulated by associations of producers themselves. Prices, wages and the quality of goods were set so as to prevent customers from being exploited, with the local municipal authority either practically or nominally guaranteeing the process. When the Medieval craft guilds were at their peak in the fourteenth century the economy operated predominantly at a local level. Very soon, emergent capitalism would shift the emphasis towards the national and international spheres. Many guildsmen argued that Guild Socialism ought to operate predominantly locally too with producer guilds being in close dialogue with consumer councils to ensure needs were met equitably and efficiently. Cole believed Guild Socialism would help fashion an associative and decentralised political and economic democracy based principally on function and balance. The localist agenda promoted by the green movement today in many ways echoes these earlier practices and experiments (Norberg-Hodge and Read, 2016). Morris, looking back to an earlier time for inspiration and guidance, perceived the guilds as creating the towns and their civic spirit and it was this localised spirit of association that feudalism could not crush but which capitalism over the centuries has done its best to. Writing in 1890, Morris (1914: 388) stated,

> If the leading element of association in the life of the mediaeval workman could have cleared itself of certain drawbacks, and have developed logically along the road that seemed to be leading it onward, it seems to me it could scarcely have stopped short of forming a true society founded on the equality of labour: the Middle Ages, so to say, saw the promised land of Socialism from afar, like the Israelites, and like them had to turn back again into the desert. For the workers of that time, like us, suffered heavily from their masters: the upper classes who lived on their labour, finding themselves barred from progress by their lack of relation to the productive part of society, and at the same time holding all political power, turned towards aggrandizing themselves by perpetual war and shuffling of the political positions, and so opened the door to the advance of bureaucracy, and the growth of that thrice-accursed spirit of nationality which

so hampers us even now in all attempts towards the realization of a true society.

Conclusion

This essay has suggested that economic democracy requires fundamental shifts in how we manage our economy, do business, undertake work, enjoy the benefits of what we produce, and how we ensure technology is controlled by us to our individual and collective benefit rather than to the benefit of Morris' profit-grinders. This means organising ourselves politically and socially at a variety of spatial scales in such a way as to optimise our freedom, autonomy and creativity. Co-operatives UK has argued that workers in the gig economy can address their precarious employment status and rewards by forming co-operatives and securing trade union representation based on a Union Coop model that has operated successfully in India, Italy and parts of the USA (Conaty, Bird and Ross, 2016). The problem with this solution is one William Morris and G.D.H.Cole would be quick to identify. It leaves too much to the market. For Cole, Guild Socialism was a means of bypassing the market determination of pay and prices and for Morris, although co-operatives could 'teach workmen how to manage their own affairs', they left the capitalist wage system, private ownership and harmful competition virtually intact. Co-operatives need to act just like any other capitalist organisation although this may be partially compensated for by a supportive and enabling local state and anchor institutions that negotiate and contract directly with them. Importantly, the experience of the Building Guilds in the 1920s offers a salutary reminder of the intolerance of capitalism to any threat to its 'profit grinding' and control of labour. For Morris and Cole, the key component of a genuine socialist transformation was the abolition of labour as a commodity form, which meant creating a series of co-operative and equitable commonwealths - or guilds - and thereby abandoning the market model of social and economic organisation, labour exploitation and its totalising rationalities and *mentalities*.

In striving to change the world human social beings change themselves. As Foucault (2008) noted, biopower and biopolitics are not always as effective or as secure as their progenitors would wish. Resistance is always present to some extent and change is always a possibility as the historical record shows. The world of work is entering a period of serious uncertainty as digital technology creates new opportunities but devastates many well established professional and non-professional job roles and as the Internet brings together supply, energy, labour and future production at near zero marginal cost. It is imperative that the benefits of production and future economic and social wellbeing are shared equitably and democratically. This can only occur if the decision-making process at every scale and in every sphere is democratically organised, inclusive and participatory. The lessons from history and from contemporary initiatives attempting to create a solidary and social economy show that the world can change if people wish it. Markets can be tamed and perhaps even abolished. That was Morris' hope. We must 'make socialists', he insisted, for if we don't, or can't, then inequality, exploitation, degraded work and waste will stifle us all. Morris (1915b: 193) writes,

> The wonderful machines which in the hands of just and foreseeing men would have been used to minimise repulsive labour and to give pleasure - or in other words added life - to the human race, have been so used on the contrary that they have driven all men into mere frantic haste and hurry, thereby destroying pleasure, that is life, on all hands: they have instead of lightening the labour of the workmen, intensified it, and thereby added more weariness yet to the burden which the poor have to carry.

Socialism implies a different *mentalité* to the one currently dominant. However, as Edward Carpenter (1918: 55), an advocate of a co-operative economy, environmentalism and Guild Socialism, noted in his essay 'Industry as an Art',

> If production became free then nearly everyone would work in that spirit. And in order that production *should* become free the conditions are also extraordinarily simple - the only condition being that people generally should *desire* it to be free.

The wonderful machines that many write of today with both enthusiasm and trepidation are so important to our future that we must not automatically dismiss them but it is essential for us to face up to their potential dangers, occluded by the seductive ideology of unbridled technological progress and the technological fix. We must also simultaneously face up to a number of interconnected environmental challenges such as climate change and environmental degradation, which are a direct consequence of the capitalist mode of production. In losing touch with ourselves as creative and skilful workers we are losing touch with our capability of fashioning our own lives, decent living and working environments, our health and the health and beauty of our planet. In the companion piece to this essay, I will explore Morris' views on the environment and how they may help us understand the ecological affordances of new technologies, of useful work and of practical action.

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