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Author(s): Elizabeth Carolyn Miller

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William Morris, Extraction Capitalism, and the Aesthetics of Surface

ELIZABETH CAROLYN MILLER

While the nineteenth-century socialist movement and environmental movement developed along separate but parallel tracks, critics such as Raymond Williams have identified William Morris as the writer who first “began to unite these diverse traditions” (46). In this paper, I will be less concerned with claims of primacy than with claims of relevance; my goal is not to establish Morris’s originality as an eco-socialist thinker, but rather to trace a history of eco-socialist critique that speaks to the most urgent bedevilements of today.¹ Morris’s political writings, I will argue, exhibit a prescient eco-socialist analysis of extraction capitalism and coal emissions; such an analysis suggests a geocritical dimension to what I will call his aesthetics of surface.

In using the term “eco-socialist,” I suggest not only that Morris married a socialist politics with a concern for the environment, but also that he was an early adopter of the position that capitalism is fundamentally incompatible with Earth’s ecological balance. Such a position challenged the ingrained ideology of classical political

ABSTRACT: William Morris’s literary and political writings offer a prescient eco-socialist analysis of extraction capitalism and coal combustion, suggesting a geocritical dimension to what I will call his aesthetics of surface. An early adopter of the position that capitalism is fundamentally incompatible with Earth’s ecological balance, Morris was attuned not only to the way that the idea of free exchange obscures the market’s remainder of surplus value, but also to the way that the idea of unregulated natural balance denies environmental remainders such as pollution and waste. Morris’s aesthetics favor surface and exteriority over depth, registering a value shift away from excavated underground commodities and toward surface resources such as sunlight and air.

ELIZABETH CAROLYN MILLER (ecmill@ucdavis.edu) is Professor and Chair of English at the University of California, Davis. She is the author of *Framed: The New Woman Criminal in British Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (2008) and *Slow Print: Literary Radicalism and Late Victorian Print Culture* (2013), which was named NAVSA Best Book of the Year and received Honorable Mention for the MSA Book Prize. Her new project concerns nineteenth-century environmentalisms.

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economy, as the very idea of a self-regulating environmental balance was itself liberal-capitalist in origin. As Fredrik Albritton Jonsson has recently noted, “For Adam Smith and his successors in the classical liberal tradition, nature served as a handmaiden for exchange in a double sense. They looked to the natural world for a model of self-regulating balance that justified their faith in market exchange” (125). The key capitalist notion of “exchange” itself, as Theodor Adorno suggests in his essay “Progress,” is premised on a like fantasy of homeostasis: “Exchange is the rational form of mythical ever-sameness. In the like-for-like of every act of exchange, the one act revokes the other; the balance of accounts is null. If the exchange was just, then nothing should really have happened, and everything stays the same.” And yet, “from time immemorial, not just since the capitalist appropriation of surplus value in the commodity exchange of labor power for the cost of its reproduction, the societally more powerful contracting party receives more than the other” (143).

Morris, like all nineteenth-century Marxists, recognized that the idea of free exchange obscured the market’s remainders of profit and surplus value. But he also recognized the ways in which an ideology of natural balance gave the lie to environmental degradation under capitalism, too. He saw no self-regulating balance in the market nor in the market’s relation to the environment, but only asymmetry and unevenness. As he put it in his 1883 lecture “Art under Plutocracy,” “I tell you the very essence of competitive commerce is waste” (80). This suggests an environmental remainder—“waste”—left over from the supposed equilibrium of capitalist exchange. In his 1884 lecture “Art and Socialism,” Morris reiterated that under “the grasp of inexorable Commerce . . . our green fields and clear waters, nay the very air we breathe are turned . . . to dirt; . . . under the present gospel of Capital not only is there no hope of bettering it, but . . . things grow worse year by year, day by day. Let us eat and drink, for to-morrow we die—choked by filth” (116). The ideal of self-regulating balance is here replaced by a vision of steady ecological degeneration under capitalism.

Such arguments resonate at a historical moment when our economic system is responsible for stalling, if not preventing outright, political checks on the release of greenhouse gases into our atmosphere. As Naomi Klein argues in her recent book *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate*, “market fundamentalism has . . . systematically sabotaged our collective response to climate change, a threat that came

knocking just as this ideology was reaching its zenith” (19). “What the climate needs to avoid collapse,” she says, “is a contraction of humanity’s use of resources; what our economic model demands to avoid collapse is unfettered expansion. Only one of these sets of rules can be changed, and it’s not the laws of nature” (21). The relation between climate and market is only beginning to be grappled with on the literary side of the environmental humanities. As Tobias Menely and Margaret Ronda argue in their article “Red,” ecocriticism “has largely ignored the role of the market” in favor of a “preoccupation with the encounter . . . between the thinking subject and the order of nature” (29). They call instead for “a red-inflected green criticism [that] would attend to the free market, under industrial capitalism and in its globalized forms, as the primary agent, the historical absent cause, that organizes human relations to nature in late modernity” (28).

Human relations to nature in late modernity are, of course, dominated by the overhanging threat of climate change, and climate change itself is largely a result of what is sometimes called “extraction capitalism,” a process by which enormous profits are generated through the extraction of finite resources (coal and oil, for example) from beneath the surface of the earth. Morris was deeply familiar with this mode of wealth generation, given that his family’s fortune came from shares in the Devon Great Consols copper mine. As Florence Boos and Patrick O’Sullivan have established in their research on Devon Great Consols, Morris not only inherited family wealth derived from this source, but was also a shareholder until 1877 and a member of the mine’s Board of Directors until 1875. As he moved toward a socialist analysis of society, Morris divested himself of shares in the mine and withdrew from the board—reportedly sitting on his top hat to mark the occasion—but, as a result of his family’s long-term involvement in Devon Great Consols, he had firsthand experience of mining as what Boos and O’Sullivan call “an especially exploitative as well as extractive” form of capitalism (25).

The idea of “extraction capitalism” is particularly useful here because it underscores the unbalanced—which is to say un-self-regulating—relation between nature and the market. As Klein puts it, extractivism is “a habit of thought that goes a long way toward explaining why an economic model based on endless growth ever seemed viable in the first place” (169). The mining industry is in this sense the perfect metonym for the broader economic system in which it functions. Several

historians have, indeed, made the case for coal mining as the key factor in the rise of industrial capitalism, an economic system that emerged first in coal-rich Britain. Jean-Claude Debeir, Jean-Paul Deléage, and Daniel Hémerly argue that “capitalism signaled a radical break with all previous energy systems known to humanity” (87), and “what emerged in this new energy system was the central role of the fossil fuel coal, which, by destocking the geological reserves of accumulated solar energy, provided a remarkable elasticity to the supply of industrial products” (102). Andreas Malm calls Britain “the birthplace of the fossil economy” (17), and Kenneth Pomeranz argues that industrial capitalism emerged from “the new energy” that “came largely from a surge in the extraction and use of English coal” (207). With ironic circularity, more coal fed more coal extraction: coal-fired steam engines “permitted a huge expansion of coal-mining” in Britain, and output grew “by almost 500 percent” from 1750 to 1830 “as steam engines for mining became both more numerous and more effective” (61).

Extraction does not last forever, however, and once a lode has been depleted, a new source of profit must be found elsewhere. In the case of Devon Great Consols, the mine’s copper supply began to run out by the late 1860s; at this time the venture shifted to mining arsenic, which was also present at the site. As Boos and O’Sullivan describe, “by 1870, Devon Great Consols was already supplying half the world’s arsenic,” and by 1880 the mine’s annual output of arsenic “overtook [its] copper production” (15). Given that the mining industry typically generated enormous surplus value for owners and shareholders, that it was based on an extractive process that would expire when a mine’s resources were depleted, and that (in the case of Devon Great Consols’s arsenic mining) its effect was to bring poisonous material to the surface of the earth, Morris could hardly have had better preparatory training for a burgeoning eco-socialist analysis.² Indeed, I would suggest that his early education in extraction capitalism and poisonous underground commodities perhaps prompted the prescient attention to coal pollution and its damaging environmental effects that we see across his work.

Morris did not, of course, have the tools to conceptualize the ways in which fossil fuel emissions were changing Earth’s climate, but he did understand that coal combustion pollutes the air. The pervasive fog permeating the atmosphere of Victorian fiction was, indeed, the result of such pollution: it was understood at the time, according to Peter Brimblecombe, that “high levels of pollution do aid the formation of fog,” and

in nineteenth-century Britain the fogs “were thicker, more frequent and of a different colour from those of the past” (109). Meteorological records suggest that the “fog frequency appears to have reached a peak in the 1890s” (111), after which point legislation and regulation such as the London Public Health Act of 1891 finally started to reverse the visible effluvium of coal combustion (163). Morris’s friend Edward Carpenter—another early eco-socialist—wrote an 1890 article titled “The Smoke-Plague and Its Remedy” that described coal pollution’s damaging effects on the health and mortality of the poor. Like Morris, he blamed capitalism for the pollution of coal combustion: “After a hundred years of commercialism we have learned to breathe dirt as well as eat it” (204). Because of coal smoke, “the climate of England is not so fair as it used to be,” he wrote, and “we have made it so” (207). The smoke had caused a “funereal colour” to settle over England’s cities (205), where “dark-clothed populations go their obscure way through dirty streets under a dirty sky” (206).

In contrast to these “dirty streets under a dirty sky,” an emphasis on cleanliness runs through Morris’s environmental critique. While his focus on clean air and clean water has sometimes been interpreted as a form of environmental aestheticism, or as evidence of a naive ideology of natural purity, I would suggest that, given the level of visible coal pollution in Victorian England, this theme of cleanliness also serves to bring fossil fuels’ effects on the atmosphere to the forefront of discourse. The prologue to Morris’s long poem *The Earthly Paradise* (1868–70), for example, begins:

Forget six counties overhung with smoke,
 Forget the snorting steam and piston stroke,
 Forget the spreading of the hideous town;
 Think, rather, of the pack-horse on the down,
 And dream of London, small, and white, and clean,
 The clear Thames bordered by its gardens green. (I: lines 1–6)

True, the passage asks us to “forget” the smoke and to “dream” of a clean London, and in this sense seems to posit an escapist speaker, “the idle singer of an empty day” described in the poem’s apology. And yet, in asking us to “forget” the smoke hanging over the city, Morris is really calling the smoke to the reader’s attention. Given the diffusive nature of air and air pollution, the effect of the passage is to bring effluence forward that might otherwise literally recede into the atmosphere.

Morris's socialist utopian novel *News from Nowhere* (1890) focuses likewise on the cleanliness of an idealized environment in the absence of fossil fuel pollution. On the opening page of the novel, William Guest leaves a London meeting of the Socialist League and takes the underground railway home, "using the means of travelling which civilization has forced upon us like a habit. As he sat in that vapour-bath of hurried and discontented humanity, a carriage of the underground railway, he, like others, stewed discontentedly" (53). Guest is heading toward Hammersmith, so we know he is taking the Metropolitan Line, which was still using steam engines underground at the time Morris was writing. There were countless complaints about smoke, steam, and pollution in the tunnels, and the line switched to electric carriages in 1906 (Halliday 22–23). Morris's novel starts, then, with an underground setting, filled with coal smoke, a virtual hell of discontented humanity. No wonder that when Guest wakes in the socialist future the next morning, back on the surface of the earth, the cleanliness of the environment is one of the first things he notices: "How clear the water is this morning!" (56), he says of the Thames to Dick, whom he takes to be a young waterman. Dick, too, is "as clean as might be" (57). Later, in touring *Nowhere*, Guest passes a workshop where glass and pottery are made, and observes that he can see no smoke coming from the kilns and furnaces. "Smoke?" Dick asks. "Why should you see smoke?" (94).

As we learn a few chapters later, *Nowhere* has experienced an event described as "the great change in the use of mechanical force" (116), an event that parallels the society's other so-called "great change"—its socialist revolution. Unlike the socialist "great change," which is described in copious detail in a long chapter at the center of the novel, the "great change in the use of mechanical force" remains somewhat mysterious. Mainly, it seems to have entailed a drastic reduction in the use of fossil fuels. Hammond, Guest's primary informant, describes it as a change of "habits." Some coal is still mined in *Nowhere*, but on a much reduced scale: "whatever coal or mineral we need is brought to grass and sent whither it is needed with as little as possible of dirt, confusion and the distressing of quiet people's lives" (116). In Guest's tour of *Nowhere*, he sees no fossil fuel combustion, but he does witness the use of some clean and unpolluting source of power, which propels the "force-barges" on the river, "going on their way without any means of propulsion visible to me." Guest reasons that these "'force-vehicles' had taken the place of our old steam-power carrying," but he doesn't ask about them, since he is

sure that “I should never be able to understand how they were worked” (203). Here, Morris relies on the magic of the romance genre (as well as the ignorance of his narrator) to point toward a problem for which he does not yet have an answer: how to wean society from fossil combustion.

News from Nowhere has been Morris’s most lasting legacy to eco-socialist discourse, but arguably his lectures and essays were more influential in his own day, and they too are full of condemnations of dirty air and coal pollution. In “The Lesser Arts,” a lecture that was first presented in 1877 (before his full conversion to socialism but after his divestment from Devon Great Consols), Morris thundered: “Is money to be gathered? Cut down the pleasant trees . . . blacken rivers, hide the sun and poison the air with smoke and worse, and it’s nobody’s business to see to it or mend it; that is all that modern commerce . . . will do for us” (53). Morris here describes the phenomenon of “externality,” a term from political economy defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as a “side-effect or consequence (of an industrial or commercial activity) which affects other parties without this being reflected in the cost of the goods or services involved.” Morris goes on to ask about science. Shouldn’t it be easy for scientists to “say for example [teach] Manchester how to consume its own smoke”? Absent a profit motive, he sees little hope for improvement, “unless people care about carrying on their business without making the world hideous” (53). A few years later, Morris officially identified himself as “one of the people called Socialists” in his 1883 lecture “Art under Plutocracy,” and again, pollution figures prominently in his case against capitalism: “To keep the air pure and the rivers clean . . . is it too much to ask civilization . . . ?” (63). The polluted atmosphere here represents the inherent imbalance, the fatal remainder or externality in the economic system: “Whole counties of England, and the heavens that hang over them,” he says, have “disappeared beneath a crust of unutterable grime” (64).

This unutterable grime came, of course, from beneath the surface of the earth, from the extraction and combustion of coal. At the time Morris was writing, economists feared coal exhaustion because they had underestimated the amount available underground, but their response to this ostensible scarcity was typical of extraction capitalism: as Jonsson writes, “In 1865, [William Stanley] Jevons saw no clear alternative to coal fuel and no benefit to greater efficiency in consumption. He was resigned to the notion of British coal stock as a temporary

bonanza that should be used up in a rush of glory. . . . ‘We have to make the momentous choice between brief but true greatness and longer continued mediocrity’” (205). Morris’s aversion to coal perhaps stemmed, in part, from such attitudes. The aversion was strong enough, indeed, that Morris once told a group of Scottish miners, while on a propaganda visit to Coatbridge, “For myself, I should be glad if we could do without coal, and indeed without burrowing like worms and moles in the earth altogether; and I am not sure but we could do without it if we wished to live pleasant lives, and did not want to produce all manner of mere mechanism chiefly for multiplying our own servitude and misery” (qtd. in Glasier 81).

This stance toward coal, and toward mining more generally, provides a geocritical context for what we might call Morris’s surface aesthetic: his oft-noted tendency toward exteriority and ornamentation, what Julie Carr has described as “Morris’s depth problem” (151). Accounts of the natural environment in Morris’s work are characterized by a focus on surface beauty. In *News from Nowhere*, Hammond famously tells William Guest that “The spirit of the new days, of our days, was to be delight in the life of the world; intense and overweening love of the very skin and surface of the earth on which man dwells, such as a lover has in the fair flesh of the woman he loves” (174). This focus on the “skin” of the earth, which Morris compares to the “flesh” of the beloved, might productively be juxtaposed with the extractive process of mining, which is largely obsolete in the future society. In keeping with such an above-ground aesthetic, Morris’s lecture “Useful Work Versus Useless Toil” defines wealth in terms of surface rather than chthonic resources: “Wealth is what Nature gives us . . . the sunlight, the fresh air, the unspoiled face of the earth” (91).

“Unspoiled face of the earth” again accentuates the surface of the world, the flesh of the planet, registering a significant shift in the conception of wealth away from underground treasures exhumed by delving into the earth (diamonds, gold, coal, minerals) and toward surface resources such as sunlight and air—resources that are being observed or polluted by underground commodities and their extraction. Morris’s surface aesthetic reorients age-old conceptions of wealth that date at least as far back as Hades and Pluto, the Greek and Roman gods of the underworld who were also gods of wealth. For Morris, the beautiful is not that which needs to be excavated or disinterred, but that which is all around us on the surface of the world. As Morris put it

in his 1881 lecture “Art and the Beauty of the Earth,” “surely there is no square mile of earth’s inhabitable surface that is not beautiful in its own way, if we men will only abstain from wilfully destroying that beauty” (91).

University of California, Davis

NOTES

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1. For more on Morris as eco-socialist, see Boos; Gagnier; Kent; and O’Sullivan, “Morris the Red.”

2. Green pigments containing arsenic were used in Morris & Co.’s wallpapers, as was common at the time, and an ongoing debate concerns the extent to which Morris knew (or cared) about the potentially poisonous effects of such pigments. I am grateful to Eddy Kent for raising this point after my talk at NAVSA and subsequently providing references. Although there is not space to enter the debate here, the basic conflict concerns whether arsenic pigments in wallpaper actually posed a health risk, and whether Morris’s failure to entertain the potential risk was related to his family’s arsenic-derived fortune. See Meharg; and O’Sullivan, “William Morris and Arsenic.”

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