



# THE FUTURE OF WORK

LESSONS FROM THE HISTORY OF  
UTOPIAN THOUGHT

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## Abstract

This paper aims to contribute towards the development of a political economy of work fit for purpose in a world of social and environmental limits. In order to get beyond today's dominant conceptions of work in a growth-based capitalism, it explores the role of work in historical utopias. First, we look at the Cokaygnian tradition of folk utopias, set in a land where people consume extravagantly and never have to work at all. For some, Cokaygne is a utopian response to overwork, poverty, and inequality: the ultimate land of redistribution. For others, Cokaygne is filled with grotesque imagery that warns of the emptiness of a life without work. Next, we examine the role of work in *News from Nowhere*, William Morris's 19<sup>th</sup> century socialist and romantic utopia. In contrast to Cokaygne, everybody works in *Nowhere*. To realise the romantic ideal of work as art, Morris rolls back the division of labour and the influence of markets. Central to the utopian visions of both Cokaygne and *News from Nowhere* is a critique of economic inequality, and both respond to this by separating consumption from production. This is a provocative challenge to modern understandings of the role of work. However, neither Cokaygne nor *News from Nowhere* has a complete solution. Cokaygne does away with work by rewriting the laws of physics. So, while it represents a hopeful dream of a world built on leisure and equality, it does not provide a way to realise its utopia. *News from Nowhere* offers more concrete solutions: Morris roots his removal of market mechanisms and the division of labour in an economic analysis that remains pertinent to consumer capitalism in the context of environmental limits. In particular his main lesson that we can maintain employment in a shrinking economy by prioritising art and creativity points towards the possibility of a sweet spot of good work. However, Morris is also not without flaws. In particular, he sidesteps the issue of how to coordinate aggregate supply and demand in the absence of markets. We argue that society must draw lessons from both Cokaygne and *Nowhere* and develop them into a new and coherent political economy of work for the 21st century.

## 1 Introduction

In the world's richest countries, people are worried about the future of work. Globalisation and rapid technological change have made employment feel precarious (Auer, 2006, Brynjolfsson and McAfee, 2014, Avent, 2016). People worry that shrinking industries will mean fewer jobs, that they will be undercut by those willing to work for less, or that they will be replaced by machines (Smith, 2016). The latter represents an existential threat, the coming 'robotisation' of work makes for regular headlines as billionaires predict the end of market employment on the grounds that "*robots will be able to do everything better than us.*" (Clifford, 2017). This is a widespread fear: 25% of US-Americans are afraid that 'computers will replace the workforce', while 70% of Europeans believe that 'robots steal people's jobs' (European Commission, 2015, Chapman University, 2017). These fears are most prominent for manual labourers and groups that have historically been marginalised in the labour market (Smith, 2016, McClure, 2017). For many people, the future of work is bleak, and in the face of these fears, re-imagining the future of work is a pressing issue for society.

It is of particular concern for economists: 'work' speaks directly to the main concerns of economics, bringing together production, consumption and our ability to live well in the broadest sense (Jackson, 2017). Yet, most contemporary visions of the future of work ignore the fact that society operates in the context of environmental limits. Even those who reject the 'end of work' and 'rise of the robots' narratives assume that production, and consequently work, can continue to grow indefinitely. This is most obvious in discussions of the job market. For example, in his review of the labour market for the UK Government, Taylor (2017) argues that the automation and digitalisation of work will create new production opportunities, generating additional employment. Taylor sees human and machine labour as complements, and believes that automation will simply expand the production possibility frontier. Robots will not replace humans in the workplace because the economy will continue to grow and new sectors will emerge to employ those people who have been put out of work by machines (see also: Autor, 2015, Gruen, 2017). Such narratives tend to assume that production itself will continue to grow indefinitely and tend to ignore the emerging reality that there are environmental, social and secular constraints on indefinite growth, particularly in high-income countries (Jackson, 2017). In this paper, we aim to contribute to the development of a

political economy of work, which starts from the principle that the economy must operate within environmental and social limits.

When trying to imagine the future it is difficult to see beyond the norms and structures that govern our lives today (Jameson, 2003, Slaughter, 2004). One way to see past today's growth based capitalist paradigm of work is through utopian thought and writing (Levitas 2010). Here we understand utopias as speculative explorations of a better world rooted in critiques of the societies in which they are written (Levitas, 2010, Freeman-Moir, 2011). From this perspective, utopias written in the past can be viewed as visions of the good life as seen from within societies with different structures and norms than our own. By examining the role of work in these alternative notions of the good life we are able to critically reflect on our own ideas of the role of work in the good life.

The rest of this paper is set out as follows. In the analytical sections of this paper, we study the role of work in two utopias. First, we look at work in the Cokaygnian tradition – a broad set of folk utopias that span the 12<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, which are all set in a land of plenty where work is forbidden. Then we look at the concept of work as it emerges in *News from Nowhere*, a late 19<sup>th</sup> century English utopia written by socialist and romantic William Morris. In contrast to Cokaygne, *News from Nowhere* makes work a central route to the good life. Finally, we conclude by comparing the conceptions of work in Cokaygne and *Nowhere*, drawing out lessons for a new political economy of work for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## 2 Cokaygne: Utopia Without Work

Cokaygne<sup>1</sup> is the setting for a long tradition of folk utopias, a fantastical land of plenty where people feast on self-roasting geese and sleep all day. The tradition extends back to at least Ancient Greece, and peaked in popularity in 12-16<sup>th</sup> century Europe (Manuel and Manuel, 1979, Sargent, 2015a, Lochrie, 2016). One of the earliest surviving Cokagnian manuscripts is the French poem '*De Cocaingne*', written as a performance piece in 1250. *De*

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<sup>1</sup> For ease, we use *Cokaygne* as a catch all term for Cokaygnian utopias. However, we should point out that this is the English term. The French term is *Cocaingne*, or *Cucagna*; the Spanish is *Jauja*; the German is *Schlaraffenland*; and *Luilekkerland* is the Dutch term (Lochrie, 2016). There are also numerous variations on the spelling of these terms, and other names outside of Europe.

*Cocaingne* establishes numerous Cokaygnian tropes, including linking idleness to monetary reward, and animals that cook themselves. Slightly later comes ‘*The Land of Cokaygne*’, a Middle English poem written in Ireland sometime around 1300. ‘*The Land of Cokaygne*’ takes the imagery of *De Cocaingne* and sets it in the context of a monastery. Finally, an example of Cokaygne from later in this period (1567) is ‘*The Land of Cockaigne*’, a painting by the Flemish artist Pieter Bruegel the Elder, reprinted in Figure 1. Readers interested in detailed analyses of the origins of the poems, should consult Parsons (2015) for *De Cocaingne*, and Kelly (2001) and Garrett (2004) for *The Land of Cokaygne*. However, very little can be said with certainty about the origins of either poem. Even their genre and audience are debated – something that will be a central concern when we turn to our discussion of Cokaygnian themes.



*The Land of Cockaigne, Pieter Bruegel, 1567. Source: wiki commons / public domain*

First, though, it is worth noting that (despite peaking in popularity several centuries ago) the Cokaygnian tradition still survives in more modern cultures. Perhaps the most established modern Cokaygne is *The Big Rock*

*Candy Mountain*<sup>2</sup> a folk song describing a hobo<sup>3</sup>'s paradise, a land filled with cigarette trees and whisky lakes (Raulerson, 2013). The song was first brought to prominence in 1928 by the singer Harry McClintock, but it was written in 1905 based on earlier oral traditions (Raulerson, 2013, Sargent, 2015a). Since McClintock's version, *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* has been re-recorded multiple times and makes periodic appearances in popular culture. In the early 2000's *The Big Rock Candy Mountains* appeared in the film *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* and a Burger King advert (Raulerson, 2013).

More recently still, Hardstaff (2016) connects Cokaygne to the apparent utopia of 'The Capitol' in Suzanne Collins' (2008, 2009, 2010) trilogy *The Hunger Games*. As the seat of power in 'Panem', The Capitol is supplied with food, energy and goods from other areas of the country. As a result, the citizens of The Capitol live a life of leisure. In this way, The Capitol is a futuristic Cokaygnian utopia set within an exploitative, dystopian society.

The thread connecting medieval French literature to modern Hollywood blockbusters is a land where the link between labour and production has disappeared. In some Cokaygnian narratives work is expressly forbidden, while others simply play with common intuitions regarding work and reward (Pleij, 2001). For example, in *De Cocaingne*, "the more you sleep the more you earn" (Parsons, 2015 lines 26-28). Alternatively, the American hobo Cokaygne *The Big Rock Candy Mountains* does away with the means of production – "there are no short-handled shovels, no axes, spades or picks" – presumably these were disposed of when the residents "hung the jerk/That invented work" (Raulerson, 2013 Verse 3 lines 6-7). In *The Hunger Games*, work has not disappeared, but in the Capitol there is very little of it taking place. Residents of the Capitol are wealthy, and primarily spend their time styling themselves, attending parties, and watching reality television. The vast majority of production (including food, luxury goods, and energy) is performed by workers many miles from the Capitol itself, hidden from view of its citizens. A key element in all forms of Cokaygne, from the 13<sup>th</sup> to the 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, is the disposal of human labour – either by removing it completely or rendering it unseen.

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<sup>2</sup> Harry McClintock's polite version can be heard at [youtube.com/watch?v=IqowmHgXVIQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IqowmHgXVIQ) and Raulerson (2013) includes lyrics for several renditions. Unless otherwise stated, we refer to McClintock's polite version.

<sup>3</sup> In this context Hobo should be understood as the name for a North-American subculture defined by a transient nature and a commitment to work. See Raulerson, (2011).

But the lack of workers does not mean that Cokaygne is a place of poverty or material restraint. Rather, Cokaygne is a land where everything is produced apparently without labour. As a result, consumption is spectacular (Davies, 1981, Parsons, 2015, Lochrie, 2016). In the Medieval Cokaygnes it is common to find rivers, lakes and streams “*Of oil and milk, honey and wine*” (Millett, 2003 line 46). More modern Cokaygnes have “*lemonade springs... And a gin lake too.*” (Raulerson, 2013 verse 1 line 6 and verse 4 line 6). So it is unsurprising that we don’t find any dairy farmers or distillers. Likewise, in Cokaygne there are no cooks, but they aren’t missed because the animals of Cokaygne prepare themselves to be eaten. *De Cocaingne* has “*Fat geese, turning/All by themselves, and fully ready*” (Parsons, 2015, lines 38-39); Bruegel’s *The Land of Cockaigne* features a roast pig walking around with a knife strapped to its side, and in *The Big Rock Candy Mountains* the hens lay soft boiled eggs. Similarly, the preparation of places to feast happens with no waiters or servants in sight. Katniss Everdeen, the protagonist of *The Hunger Games*, watches as a citizen of the Capitol presses

*“a button on the side of the table. The top splits and from below rises a second tabletop that holds our lunch. Chicken and chunks of oranges cooked in a creamy sauce laid on a pearly white grain...rolls shaped like flowers...a pudding the colour of honey”*(Collins, 2008, p. 64).

Similarly, In *De Cocaingne* (Parsons, 2015, lines 41-44),

*“...at all times  
In the streets and in the lanes  
You find tables already laid  
And spread over with white cloths”*

In short, Cokaygne is a land where no-one ever appears to work but where everyone consumes extravagantly.

## 2.1 Between Utopia and Moral Instruction

This extravagant consumption most likely started life as a satirical take on various paradise myths. Manuel and Manuel (1979) and Kumar (1991) both argue that the roots of Cokaygne are in satirical mockings of the Ancient Greek myth of the Golden Age:

*“If Plato’s is the utopia of the soul these long, turgid discourses are a repository of fantasies of the appetites”* (Manuel and Manuel, 1979, p. 78).

Similarly, it is no accident that later Cokaygne's have been named the 'Poor Man's Heaven' (see Morton, 1969, in particular). Medieval Cokaygne's are found somewhere on earth, for example, *The Land of Cokaygne* lies "To the west of Spain". This is in line with biblical interpretation at the time: "Medieval maps bear witness to the widespread conviction that there was an actual place called terrestrial paradise" (Manuel and Manuel, 1979, p. 60). Moreover, like the Greek satirising of the Golden Age myth, medieval Cokaygnes often mocked the relative poverty of the Judaeo-Christian paradise. It is worth quoting *The Land of Cokaygne* (Millett, 2003, lines 5-8) at length on this point, as its opening lines explicitly set itself up as an improved version of heaven:

*"Though Paradise is fair and bright,  
Cockaygne is a finer sight.  
In Paradise what's to be seen  
But grass and flowers and branches green?"*

The poet then goes on to contrast the sparseness of heaven, with the comparative luxury of Cokaygne (Millett, 2003, lines 9-17):

*Though paradisaic joys are sweet,  
There's nothing there but fruit to eat;  
No bench, no chamber, and no hall,  
No alcoholic drink at all.  
Its inhabitants are few,  
Elijah, Enoch---just the two;  
They must find it boring there  
Without more company to share.  
But Cockaygne offers better fare,*

As Manuel and Manuel (1979) point out, typical Judaeo-Christian portrayals of heaven around the time *The Land of Cokaygne* was written offered little more than water to drink, an offering that pales in comparison to Cokaygne's rivers of oil, milk, honey and wine. But Cokaygne's extravagance is not only there to mock pious but sparse heavenly paradises.

Indeed, Cokaygne's excess has also been used to satirise excessive consumption itself. Pleij (2001) and Lochrie (2016) describe how Cokaygne became increasingly moralised as the middle ages progressed, shifting from an image of desire to a warning of the emptiness of base materialism. In this understanding, Cokaygne starts off as a utopia and ends up as a moral lesson. For Lochrie, Bruegel's painting (Figure 1) is the culmination of this

transition. The lifeless figures that are the focal point of the picture serve to warn us away from Cokaygne's life of excess. Similarly, in *The Hunger Games*, "the Capitol is associated with laziness and greed" (Hardstaff, 2016), and the leisure-filled lifestyle of its residents is depicted as empty and repellent. Katniss (who spends hours "combing the woods for sustenance") wonders "What do they do all day, these people in the Capitol, besides decorating their bodies[?]... The whole rotten lot of them is despicable" (Collins, 2008, p. 65). However, for Parsons (2015) this narrative is only partially correct – Cokaygne hasn't become a moral lesson, it has *always been* a moral lesson. Discussing *De Cocaingne* (written three centuries prior to Bruegel's painting, and nine centuries before Collins' novels) Parson's notes that two out of the three original manuscripts are found alongside poems that have moral intent. Based on this and what he terms its "grotesque imagery" (p. 173), Parsons concludes that Cokaygne "is in essence an exercise in *reductio ad absurdum*, taking the belief that happiness can be attained in the material world to its most ridiculous possible extreme in order to direct its reader towards more spiritual ends" (p. 180).

However, this view is far from settled – where Parsons sees grotesquery, others see a 'carnival spirit' (Kendrick, 2004). In this view, rather than being a warning to avoid a life of materialism and leisure, Cokaygne is seen as depicting a desirable life. This utopian reading sees Cokaygne's combination of fantasy and comedy as expressions of desire that overwhelm any moral intent. There is some contextual evidence to support this idea: one early copy of *De Cocaingne* is introduced as and included alongside several French fabliaux, known for their obscene humour rather than moral instruction (Parsons, 2015, Lochrie, 2016). However, the utopian case for Cokaygne is more usually based on its imagery and content. Most authors who see a utopia in Cokaygne do not argue against its satirical origins, but maintain that this is undermined by the use of rich imagery and a fundamentally appealing central concept. As Kumar (1991, p. 7) puts it, the satirists might have set out to ridicule base material urges,

*"but in doing so they delineated a hedonistic paradise that might very easily be taken over by popular tradition as something to dream about and, in popular carnivals, such as the Saturnalia or Feast of Fools, something to actually live for a drunken day or two"*

The argument here is that many writers of Cokaygnian tales unwittingly thwart their own intentions. Though Cokaygnian writers may intend their fantastical imagery and comedic scenes to be satirical, they more often end

up with an image that conveys playfulness and fun rather than emptiness and despair. Manuel and Manuel (1979, p. 79) suggest that this comes about because many of the writers of Cokaygne were too close to their audience to simply “dismiss their vulgar aspirations with philosophical contempt”. Rather, they harboured a “certain sympathy for them.” The result is that even if Cokaygne started life as a cautionary tale of excess, the writer got so caught up in the imagery that things “quickly got out of hand, and the satire was swallowed up in the Utopia” (Morton, 1969, p. 17). This may be truer in some Cokaygnes than others – it is hard to argue that *The Capitol* is taken by many teenager readers as a utopian vision. But it is equally hard to deny the appeal of most Cokaygnes which, at bottom, are lands free from material poverty and scarcity.

## 2.2 Cokaygne as Social Critique

Of course, seeing a utopia in Cokaygnian images depends to a large extent on the perspective of the audience, and the utopian reading of Cokaygne is facilitated by the assumption that Cokaygne belongs to those who have worked long hours and lived in material poverty. In this vein, Cokaygne is seen as “the people’s utopia” (Morton, 1969, p. 11); the utopia of “those at the bottom of the social hierarchy” (Sargent, 2015a, p. 21). The idea here is that utopias are an expression of desire for a better way of living. Therefore, a utopian vision is one free from the struggles that most plague its audience. From this perspective, Cokaygne – the land of abundance and idleness – makes sense as a utopia for those who are burdened with arduous work and poverty. Following this logic, Medieval Cokaygnes are often considered peasant utopias, because in Medieval Europe a large proportion of population were peasant farmers, who are assumed to have worked long hours and experienced material hardship (see, for example, Levitas, 1990, Pleij, 2001, Mackenbach, 2005, Nugent and Clark, 2010). Similarly, Sargent (2015a) argues that in the USA the Cokaygnian tradition was taken up by those groups that lived in poverty: African-American slave communities, Native Americans (after colonisation), and the unemployed of the Great Depression (hoboes). As with medieval peasants, Cokaygne makes sense as utopia for these groups because “for people who were constantly hungry, with little or no chance of earning money to buy food, and dependent on handouts, these images [of Cokaygne] have an obvious appeal” (Sargent, 2015a, p. 32).

Because of its basis in appealing imagery, the Cokaygnian utopia is often interpreted as little more than a naïve compensatory fantasy (Parsons, 2015, Lochrie, 2016). However, the view that Cokaygne’s audience is primarily the

overworked and marginalised poor also lends itself to a more critical utopian reading. This interpretation does not dispute the base pleasures of Cokaygne’s materialism or idleness, but it argues that alongside this is a critique of inequality and injustice (Morton, 1969, Kendrick, 2004, Lochrie, 2016). In contrast to the real world, in Cokaygne people have everything they need regardless of their wealth or status. For example, *The Land of Cokaygne* states that “*All is common to young and old/To strong and stern, to meek and bold.*” (Millett, 2003, lines 63-64). Similarly, in *De Cocaingne* (Parsons, 2015, lines 45-56):

“*You can drink, and eat as well,  
As much as you want with no problem,  
With no challenge, and no refusal.  
Anyone can take what the heart desires,  
...  
Nor does anyone have to pay the bill  
After he eats, for no-one keeps count:  
That’s how it’s done in this country*”

The explicit recognition in this passage that consumption has nothing to do with the ability to pay, can be seen as a critique of the way that actually existing economies of the time distributed goods in ways that excluded the poor. As Lochrie (2016, p. 64) puts it,

“*The supplanting of economic restrictions or marketplace compulsions in Cocagne with a generalized principle of largesse represents a deliberate co-optation and expansion of the ideal of generosity beyond its typical medieval orbit of aristocratic and courtly culture.*”

With this interpretation, Lochrie directly roots Cokaygne’s utopianism in a critique of economic inequality – Cokaygne takes the lifestyle of the aristocracy and makes it available to the poor.

Morton (1969) and Sargent (2015a) offer similar takes, with Morton arguing that *The Land of Cokaygne* (written ~1300) shows a burgeoning class consciousness. Both Morton and Lochrie interpret the way that Cokaygne disrupts the work-production relationship as a kind of redistribution, taking the lifestyles of the wealthy and making them available to all. For example, *De Cocaingne*’s maxim ‘the more you sleep, the more you earn’ can be seen as a reflection of the lives of medieval European aristocracy writ large. In Medieval Europe, almost all economic surplus was taken from peasant farmers by the aristocratic class (Hilton, 2003, Milanovic et al., 2010). By

contrast, in Cokaygne everybody has access to material comfort (Lochrie, 2016). In fact, Morton (1969) goes a step further than this, arguing that rather than distributing goods to everybody, Cokaygne excludes the rich and distributes goods only to the poor. To make this point Morton argues that rich people cannot access Cokaygne. The same case is put forward by Sargent (2015a) who points out that in the final stanzas of several Cokaygnian texts, we learn that to get to Cokaygne the traveller has to endure trials that reflect everyday experiences of peasants but would be completely alien to the upper classes. To get to *The Land of Cokaygne*, for instance, a “Gentlemen, well-bred and kind”(Millett, 2003 line 183) must spend seven years wading “*through pigshit to his chin*” (Millett, 2003 line 181). Likewise, to get to Luilekkerland, (the Dutch Cokaygne) it is necessary to eat your way through a three mile mountain of buckwheat porridge – a staple of the Dutch peasant diet (Pleij, 2001, Sargent, 2015b). For Morton (1969, p. 24), the meaning of these images “*is clear enough: the land of Cokaygne is, like the Kingdom of Heaven, harder for a rich man to enter than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle.*”

### 3 News from Nowhere - Work as Prosperity?

Written by William Morris, *News from Nowhere* is a late 19<sup>th</sup> century utopia. Morris takes us into ‘Nowhere’ through the eyes of a narrator, ‘William Guest’, who one-day finds himself in a post-revolutionary England. Guest tours this strange new land and finds that communist revolution has transformed England into classless, stateless and moneyless utopia populated by artisans. Morris was an active socialist when he wrote *News from Nowhere*, but his critique of work was first formed in the Romantic tradition, and *News from Nowhere* blends these two elements of Morris’s worldview. E.P. Thompson (Morris’s biographer, as well as a Marxist historian) argues that this combination of romance and socialism makes *News from Nowhere* a uniquely “*Scientific Utopia*”:

*“The science lies ... in the wonderful description of “How the Change Came”, the mastery of historical process, the understanding of the economic and social basis of Communism... And yet it is still a Utopia, which only a writer nurtured in the romantic tradition could have conceived.” (Thompson, 1977, p. 695)*

At the heart of *News from Nowhere* is a theory of work as a key element in human wellbeing – a position that has been re-emphasised recently in

relation to prosperity (Jackson 2017, Foster 2017). Throughout his travels in Nowhere, Guest meets people engaged in various forms of work (mending roads, studying mathematics, blowing glass). Although much of this work has obvious instrumental value, it is clear that people undertake it primarily because they derive something from the work itself. When Guest confesses that he has never worked in road maintenance before, his travelling companion (a man called Dick) expresses pity because “*it is good work for hardening the muscles, and I like it*” (Morris, 1890b)<sup>4</sup>. However, the true value of work in Nowhere goes beyond enjoyment to something more profound (Shaw, 1990, Davis, 2009). This is most explicitly illustrated in an exchange between Guest and ‘Hammond’ (another resident of Nowhere),

“*how do you get people to work when there is no reward of labour, and especially how do you get them to work strenuously?*”

‘*No reward of labour?*’ said Hammond, gravely. ‘*The reward of labour is **life**. Is that not enough?*’”(Morris, 1890b emphasis in original)

Hammond goes on to tell Guest that people work in Nowhere in order to create, and the reward of creation is “*the wages which God gets*” (Morris, 1890b). Through this and other interactions we learn that in *Nowhere* people find meaning through their work.

However, Morris’s theory of work in *News from Nowhere* should not be read as an endorsement of the reality of work in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Rather, the theory of work as prosperity is one of the most utopian elements of *News from Nowhere*: Morris saw most work in late 19<sup>th</sup> century England as “*useless toil*” characterised by a lack of pleasure (Morris, 1884d, Breton, 2002, Davis, 2009). More specifically, Morris felt that the economic conditions of capitalism transformed work from good to bad. Work, Morris argued, is inextricably linked to the general “*conditions of life at the present day*” (Morris, 1884a). Consequently, in *Nowhere* the economy is completely reimagined such that there is no consumerism and production is motivated by art and need rather than profit (Shaw, 1990, Breton, 2002). This is necessary because Morris believed that capitalist dynamics undermined the conditions of work by pushing the division of labour (that is, the

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<sup>4</sup> Quotes from Morris’s works are taken from the editions made freely available by the Marxists Internet Archive: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/morris/works/>. Consequently, they do not have page numbers.

simplification of tasks, and specialisation of workers) to its extreme, and through the production of unnecessary goods.

### 3.1 Markets, the Division of Labour and Work as Art

Morris's principle argument against the division of labour is that it takes creativity and variety out of work. This argument draws heavily on the work of his mentor John Ruskin. In particular Morris was influenced by Ruskin's (1853/2009) discussion of the division of labour in *The Nature of Gothic*, a chapter in *The Stones of Venice* (Harvey and Press, 1995). Ruskin's key argument here is that the division of labour is de-humanising. For Ruskin, the division of labour increased productivity by reducing the complexity of work. This took all thought out of work, and in this way removed the possibility of human error in production:

*"You can teach a man to draw a straight line, and to cut one; to strike a curved line, and to carve it; and to copy and carve any number of given lines or forms, with admirable speed and perfect precision; and you find his work perfect of its kind: but if you ask him to think about any of those forms, to consider if he cannot find any better in his own head, he stops; his execution becomes hesitating; he thinks, and ten to one he thinks wrong; ten to one he makes a mistake in the first touch he gives to his work as a thinking being."* (p. 161)

But for Ruskin, thought is not only the process by which we make mistakes in work, it is also the process which makes us human. Consequently, he argues that the loss of productivity is justified because when you give a worker the freedom to think, you make *"a man of him ... He was only a machine before, an animated tool"* (p. 161).

Morris's interpretation of Ruskin was that work would be good when made so creative that it became art (Davis, 2009, Kinna, 2010). Indeed, this is the core idea that runs through work in *News from Nowhere*. In 1892, through his printing house *Kelmscott Press*, Morris reprinted *The Nature of Gothic* as a standalone essay (Ruskin, 1892). In the preface to this edition he wrote: *"the lesson which Ruskin here teaches us is that art is the expression of man's pleasure in labour"* (Morris, 1892). In fact, by 1892, Morris had repeated this lesson several times in his own writing: in the late 1870's he gave a series of lectures (collected in 1882 as *Hopes and Fears for Art*) in which he described art as the *"expression of man's pleasure in successful labour"*, and elsewhere he defines art as *"the beauty produced by the labour of man"* (Morris, 1884b). Moreover, Morris held that this meant 'art' was not restricted to conventionally artistic endeavors *"like pictures, statues, and so forth, but has*

*been and should be a part of all labour in some form or other*” (Morris, 1888). In *News from Nowhere*, Morris realises this ideal: in *Nowhere*, there is no longer a word for art “*because it has become a necessary part of the labour of every man who produces*” (Morris, 1890b).

To create this condition in *Nowhere*, Morris limits the division of labour, but does not do away with it all together. Residents of *Nowhere* are typically artisans who move between occupations as they please, often in quite radical shifts (Kinna, 2000). Early in *News from Nowhere*, we are introduced to this idea through Bob “*a weaver from Yorkshire, who has rather overdone himself between his weaving and his mathematics*” because both are “*indoor work*” (Morris, 1890b). Consequently, Bob has decided to spend time working as ferryman: outdoor work. But despite having the freedom to practice multiple occupations, the residents of *Nowhere* are not self-sufficient. Consequently, there is still a substantial division of labour. For example, Bob the weaver has several different jobs in addition to rowing and weaving, but all have an element of specialism:

*“besides the weaving, I do a little with machine printing and composing...have taken to mathematics; and also I am writing a sort of antiquarian book about the peaceable and private history, so to say, of the end of the nineteenth century”*

Likewise, some residents of *Nowhere* (the ‘*obstinate refusers*’), decline to take part in the annual harvest, instead working at their craft. Most notable amongst the refusers is the only master craftsman that we meet in *Nowhere* – Phillipa. Not only a carver, Phillipa is described as ‘*our head carver*’, indicating subdivisions of labour within specific tasks, based on gradations of skill and with implications of authority. In essence Morris is describing not a complete removal of the division of labour, but what he sees as the ideal level of specialisation. This is closely modelled on his view of early medieval craft guilds (albeit with more freedom to move across trades), based on equality of opportunity in work:

*“At the end of the fourteenth century, there were no journeymen in the guilds; every worker in them was certain to become a master if he only did his duty fairly; and the master was not the master in our sense of the word, he was the man who had learned his craft thoroughly, and could teach the apprentices their business, and all sorts of restrictions were laid on him to prevent him becoming a capitalist, i.e., forcing men as good as himself to pay him for his privilege of providing them with work.”* (Morris, 1890a)

So, in *News from Nowhere* the division of labour is limited to that found in feudal Britain, which was dominated by artisans. And, because the medieval artisan was largely autonomous, (Thompson, 1963, Breton, 2002), the division of labour is limited to a level which still allows substantial variety and creativity in work.

To understand how Morris limits the division of labour in this way in *News from Nowhere*, it is useful to first look at his historical analysis of the transition from feudal society to industrial capitalism (most clearly laid out across Morris and Hyndman, 1884, Morris and Bax, 1886-1888, and Morris, 1890a). In large part, Morris's analysis falls under what Wood (2002, p. 12) calls 'traditional commercialisation' accounts, where "*capitalism represents not so much a qualitative break from earlier forms as a massive quantitative increase: an expansion of markets and the growing commercialization of economic life.*" For example, in the early medieval period (i.e. before medieval craft guilds introduced journeymen) Morris (1890a) argues that "*Capitalism does not exist ... there is no great all-embracing world-market; production is for the supply of the neighbourhood, and only the surplus of it ever goes a dozen miles from the door of the worker*". This changes with the rise of a "*a new plague ... the pest of Commercialism*" (Morris, 1890a), and a turn to "*foreign commerce*" (Morris and Hyndman, 1884). Morris argues that the quest for profit and the rapid expansion of overseas markets encouraged land holders to take land used to produce non-market goods and turn it over to the production of goods for export:

*"the landed nobility... so got hold of the lands and used their produce, not for the livelihood of themselves and their retainers, but for profit. The land of England, such of it as was used for cultivation, had been mostly tillage where tillage was profitable; it was the business of the land thieves to turn this tillage into pasture for the sake of the sheep, i.e., the wool for exportation."* (Morris, 1890a)

This rapid expansion of markets and the giving over of land to the production of goods for profit, was the key to the rise of industrial capitalism and the extreme division of labour.

Specifically, Morris believed that market expansion led to the breakdown of the artisan guilds, and it was this breakdown that enabled increasing specialisation. On the one hand, the displacement of peasants from their land meant that "*the towns were flooded by crowds of the new free labourers*" (Morris, 1890a) thus creating the potential for the division of labour in the

craft guilds through the introduction of journeymen. Simultaneously, Morris argued that the expansion of the world market required greater productivity gains thus rewarding the further division of labour:

*“The miserable state of the internal communications forced Englishmen more and more into foreign commerce... To keep pace with this growth of commerce wider organisation of labour was needed, and, therefore, as already stated, the group of workmen toiling under the superintendence of the master, with a more and more regulated division of labour, supplanted the old handicraft. Workshops grew larger and larger, small factories were formed in certain trades.”* (Morris and Hyndman, 1884)

For Morris, these processes took place during the seventeenth century; by the 18<sup>th</sup> century the world market had been established. The consequences of this are outlined through Hammond in *News from Nowhere*. Under the World-Market:

*“it became impossible ... to look upon labour and its results from any other point of view than one - to wit, the ceaseless endeavour to expend the least possible amount of labour on any article made ... To this ‘cheapening of production,’ as it was called, everything was sacrificed: the happiness of the workman at his work, nay, his most elementary comfort and bare health, his food, his clothes, his dwelling, his leisure, his amusement, his education... The whole community, in fact, was cast into the jaws of this ravening monster, ‘the cheap production’ forced on it by the World-Market.”* (Morris, 1890b)

For Morris, this is the final and most fundamental consequence of the expansion of markets: the re-conceptualisation of labour into a form of economic capital to be squeezed through the extreme division of labour.

This historical analysis is important because it frames the solutions that Morris proposes in *News from Nowhere*. In order to limit the division of labour Morris scales back of the geographical scope of production, and removes market exchange altogether. Hammond tells Guest of both of these elements:

*“men make for their neighbours’ use as if they were making for themselves, not for a vague market of which they know nothing; and over which they have no control... [and] there is no buying and selling”*

By the time Guest meets Hammond, however, the point about buying and selling hardly needs restating – Guest already has first-hand (embarrassing)

experience of shopping without paying, bartering or exchanging. This is best illustrated in his interaction with a young girl when he attempts to buy a pipe:

*“She disappeared again, and came back with a big-bowled pipe in her hand, carved out of some hard wood very elaborately and mounted in gold sprinkled with little gems...*

*I took it out of her hand to look at it, and while I did so, forgot my caution, and said, “But however am I to pay for such a thing as this?”*

*Dick laid his hand on my shoulder as I spoke, and turning I met his eyes with a comical expression in them, which warned me against another exhibition of extinct commercial morality; so I reddened and held my tongue, while the girl simply looked at me with the deepest gravity, as if I were a foreigner blundering in my speech, for she clearly didn't understand me a bit.”*

In short, having identified the expansion of markets as the ultimate degrader of working conditions, Morris does away with them altogether in *News from Nowhere*. Under Morris's historical analysis, there can be no profit if there is no exchange, and there is no need to gain productivity if there is no pressure to supply an expanding world market. So, by getting rid of these mechanisms, Morris removes what he sees as the key drivers of the extreme division of labour. In doing so he attempts to create the conditions under which work can become art, and Ruskin's ideal of creative labour could be realised.

### **3.2 Over-Production, and Over-Work.**

At this point, it is worth comparing Morris's views on the division of labour with those of two other influential thinkers in the economic history of the division of labour: Plato and Adam Smith. Plato and Smith lay the groundwork for the division of labour in modern economic thought, both seeing it as necessary to increase material wealth. In his *Republic* Plato (360 BCE, Book II)<sup>5</sup> argues that *“all things are produced more plentifully and easily and of a better quality when one man does one thing which is natural to him and does it at the right time, and leaves other things”*. This leads Plato to imagine a city-state with not inconsequential divisions of labour:

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<sup>5</sup> As with Morris's essays, we use freely available online versions of both *The Wealth of Nations* and *Republic*. We use the version of *The Wealth of Nations* made available by the Marxists Internet Archive. We use the translation of *Republic* from <http://classics.mit.edu>, this version does not have Stephanus numbers.

*“Then more than four citizens will be required; for the husbandman will not make his own plough or mattock, or other implements of agriculture, if they are to be good for anything. Neither will the builder make his tools - and he too needs many; and in like manner the weaver and shoemaker.”*

Likewise, Smith (1776)<sup>5</sup> in the opening lines of Book I of the *Wealth of Nations* argues that:

*“The greatest improvement in the productive powers of labour and the greater part of the skill dexterity and judgement which is anywhere directed or applied seem to have been the effects of the division of labour”.*

He goes on to say that it is the division of labour that makes material wealth available to everyone:

*“It is the great multiplication of the productions of all the different arts, in consequence of the division of labour, which occasions, in a well governed society, that universal opulence which extends it to the lowest ranks of the people.”* (Smith, 1776, Book I, Chapter I)

In short, both Plato and Smith see the division of labour as necessary for (1) plentiful and (2) high quality production.

The fundamental difference between Morris and both Plato and Smith is that where the latter see a need for increased levels of production, Morris believed that in 19<sup>th</sup> century England production levels were already too high. In fact, Smith and Morris come surprisingly close in terms of the negative ways specialisation affects humanity. Like Morris, Smith believed that the division of labour had negative impacts: For Smith (1776, Book V, Chapter 1), the division of labour improved work specific skills, but *“at the expense of his intellectual, social, and martial virtues”*. But where Smith believed that this was justified on the grounds that production needed to continue to grow, Morris believed production was already too high. Consequently, Smith is interested in how to improve the productivity of labour in order to support growth while Morris is more interested in stopping what, in *News from Nowhere*, Hammond calls *“painful and terrible overwork”* (Morris, 1890b).

In fact, in much of Morris’s writing he is railing against what he sees as the wastefulness of an emergent consumer capitalism. Consumer capitalism can be understood as an economic system that seeks growth and profits by expanding the role of consumption into ever more areas of life, attempting to subsume all other wants into the desire for new and immediate pleasures

that lack wider social value (Cushman, 1990, Fisher, 2009, Jackson, 2017). We see all of these themes in Morris's writing. For example, Morris thought that production for profit had led to most production being socially useless (Manuel and Manuel, 1979, Kinna, 2000). Speaking to Leicester Secular Society in 1884, Morris argued that in order to get and maintain profits, capitalists must sell a "*mountain of rubbish...things which everybody knows are of no use*". In order to create demand for these useless goods, capitalists stirred up

*"a strange feverish desire for petty excitement, the outward token of which is known by the conventional name of fashion—a strange monster born of the vacancy of the lives of rich people"* (Morris, 1884c).

In *News from Nowhere*, Morris restates this position through Hammond, who says that most production in 19<sup>th</sup> century England was designed to meet "*sham or artificial necessities, which became...of equal importance...with the real necessities which supported life*" (Morris, 1890b, p. 79). By contrast, in *Nowhere*, nobody makes goods "*on the chance of their being wanted; for there is no longer any one who can be compelled to buy them. ... Nothing can be made except for genuine use*" (Morris, 1890b). Although he never uses the term, Morris's description of a production system driven by the consumption of novel goods in a vain attempt to foster personal wellbeing has strong parallels with modern descriptions of consumer capitalism.

Here we can also find Morris's objection to the idea that the division of labour improves quality. Indeed, Morris was so concerned with quality that in 1894 he wrote that the leading motivation in his life was "*the desire to produce beautiful things*". In *News from Nowhere*, Morris extrapolates this desire to the general population through pride: Hammond speaks of rising standards of excellence in production because "*no man enjoys turning out work which is not a credit to him*". But for Morris this is not possible under capitalism because of its extreme division of labour. Hammond illustrates this point, talking about the quality of production under industrial capitalism:

*"Quality!...how could they possibly attend to such trifles as the quality of the wares they sold? The best of them were of a lowish average, the worst were transparent make-shifts for the things asked for which nobody would have put up with if they could have got anything else. It was the current jest of the time that the wares were made to sell and not to use"* (Morris, 1890b)

At the root of Hammond's indignation is a critique of the idea that under capitalism any labour saving initiative could improve the quality of goods. Hammond elaborates this critique with reference to "*labour saving machines*", but the point applies just as well to any labour-saving initiative:

*"They were meant to 'save labour' (or, to speak more plainly, the lives of men) on one piece of work in order that it might be expended - I will say wasted - on another, probably useless, piece of work. (Morris, 1890b)*

Morris's core argument here is that because capitalists want to maximise profits any productivity gains would not be used to improve quality, but would be used to expand production further, thus creating more work without improving quality.

In relation to the goodness of work, Morris also objected to increases in the level of production on the grounds that they prevented workers from taking adequate rest. Morris (1884d) believed that there is "*some pain in all work*", so work that is fulfilling must allow for rest. All work requires energy and Morris (1884d) argues that to enjoy work we must have time to recover this energy. Moreover, he stresses that rest is only adequate when "*it is long enough to allow us to enjoy it*" and it is not "*disturbed by anxiety*" (Morris, 1884d). However, just as Morris believed that the capitalist need for profit prevented labour productivity gains from being channelled into increased quality, he also believed that it prevented workers gaining adequate rest. In order to create profits, Morris argued, capitalists had to sell as many goods as possible. Consequently, any labour productivity gains were simply a reason to produce more, with the implication that workers would be pushed "*so hard that they may be said to do nothing else than work*" (Morris, 1884d).

To solve this problem in *News from Nowhere*, Morris removes the exchange process. Morris's reasoning for this is best illustrated in a short passage from *Development of Modern Societies*. Here, Morris shifts his emphasis from the quantitative expansion account of the rise of capitalism and identifies what for Wood (2002) is the defining feature of capitalism: the compulsory participation in markets in order to survive. In pre-capitalist societies, Morris (1890a) writes,

*"every freeman has the use of land to support himself on, so that he does not depend on the caprice of the market for his bare necessities, and whether employer or employed, he neither sells himself, nor buys others, in the labour market under the rule of competition, but exchanges labour for labour directly with his neighbour, man to man and hand to hand"*

In *Nowhere*, Morris attempts to return to these features of pre-capitalist society. He does not give every resident of *Nowhere* a smallholding, but instead cuts the link between an individual's production and their right to consume. In doing so, Morris removes the economic pressure to work. With no need to exchange anything in order to consume, there is no imperative for a worker to sell their labour. This gives residents of *Nowhere* the ability to achieve a high quality of rest because they are in absolute control of their working lives. Consequently, they are able to decide their work schedules and often take long absences from their work, to “live in the forests through the summer”; visit friends for festivals; or take a pony for an afternoon's ride across the pasturelands (Morris, 1890b). This kind of control is only possible because they do not depend on working to be able to consume, because, in *Nowhere*, everything is freely given not exchanged.

#### **4 Towards a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Political Economy of Work**

Having reviewed how work is dealt with in the Cokaygnian tradition and in *News from Nowhere*, we can now turn to discussions of the future of work. Heading into the future, we can identify at least three basic fears around work. The first two are linked to the fear of the loss of work. On the one hand this is a scary prospect because work provides access to goods and services. So without work, how will we obtain the means to live? The second reason people fear the loss of work is the role it plays in our individual and social lives. For example, stable market employment is linked to greater levels of social engagement and integration, and work is often bound up with our identity (Taylor, 2004, Brand, 2015). These things mean that even when out of market employment, people may take-up *unpaid* work. Their motivations for doing so are varied: because work is so central to the lives of many people the decision to work outside of the market cannot be pinned down to just one thing. Taylor (2004, p. 42), recounts the experience of two interviewees who volunteer as carers: “Although they are both retired, they both explain, almost in unison, ‘but you’ve got to live haven’t you’ since for them ‘living’ means ‘working’.” If living is working, it is unsurprising that people are anxious at the prospect of a future where there is no work. Finally, our third fear is not linked to the loss of work, but loss of the good parts of work today. The fear is that working conditions will degrade, and there will be no *good* work (Klitgaard, 2017, Taylor, 2017).

The upshot of all three of these fears is that people want work. More specifically, they want good work. The challenge is to address these three fears for the future of work. But how do we provide good work for all within planetary boundaries? Both Morris and the critical utopian reading of Cokaygne propose one central solution to the problems faced by work in capitalist economies: the removal of all market mechanisms. As a proposal, this illustrates many limitations of current debates around the future of work, and modern attempts to address many anxieties around work. But how realistic and scalable is this as a solution? Does it provide the basis for a political economy of work in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?

One of the key reasons that Cokaygne and *News from Nowhere* do away with market mechanisms, is that both embrace the utopian ideal of unconditional access to goods and services. As such, neither society considers an individual's production to be relevant to their consumption. Goods and services are abundant, and available to anyone who wants them. In *News from Nowhere*, the loss of work for an individual would not prevent them from accessing the things they need to live, as they can just take the things produced by others. In *Nowhere*, there is an abundance of production, so no one has to go without. However, to create this abundance, Morris relies on an assumption that under the right conditions, people will enjoy their work so much that they will produce more than is desired (something we return to later in our discussion). If everyone chooses to stop working, people would have to stop consuming in *News from Nowhere*. On the other hand, Cokaygne is able to break even this basic link between consumption and production: in Cokaygne work is not linked to production at all, and so the loss of work completely would not place anyone in material hardship. In both utopias, an abundance of goods means there is no need for exchange, and thus the loss of work need not be associated with poverty. On this point, the critical distinction between the two utopias is in how they create abundance.

Cokaygne creates an abundance of goods by violating the laws of physics and wishing away limits to production. As Levitas (1990, p. 190) puts it, Cokaygnian fantasies of streams of alcohol and cigarette trees are “*theoretically and practically impossible – in other words they are not possible worlds*”. Short of imagining Star Trek style futures, complete with replicators and unlimited resources (as in Frase, 2016), Cokaygne seems to have little relation to reality. Perhaps it is, as Sargent (2015a) would have it, nothing more than the fantasy of people who have given up all hope of affecting real

change. In fact *The Hunger Games* warns us that one way this could be achieved would be through highly exploitative, dystopian, means. There is a lesson in the utopian Cokaygne: any political economy of work should aim to provide the means of achieving a comfortable life to all people, regardless of their employment status. But Cokaygnian texts leave us none the wiser as to how we might do this.

Morris does not resort to thermodynamic impossibility, but in creating abundance, he does somewhat duck the issue of how to coordinate supply and demand. Morris's creation of abundance is based on his assumption that demand will fall by more than production. On the one hand, Morris argues that demand will be reduced in a post-capitalist society by appealing to the idea of sufficiency. Fundamental to Morris's economic analysis is the argument that capitalism fosters demand for goods which aren't really needed. The transformation of work in *News from Nowhere*, is possible because it implies a reduction in consumer wants. In this way *News From Nowhere* imagines a future society that operates along the principles of Sahlins' (1972) 'original affluent society'. In *Nowhere*, people are affluent because they desire little (Manuel and Manuel, 1979, Davis, 2009). However, this is not quite the complete picture.

Nothing is rationed in *Nowhere*, and there appears to be no way to restrict access. Consequently, Morris relies on there being an abundance of goods for the taking: supply must outstrip demand in every area. Indeed, coupled to a reduction in wants, Morris does on one occasion appear to advocate an increase in the level of production: Hammond tells Guest: "*it seems as if there were less done, though probably more is produced*" (Morris, 1890b). This contradiction from his other arguments against over work and over consumption apparently comes about because of work-pleasure: people work for the sake of the enjoyment the work brings them. In this way Morris invokes Marx's famous (1875) vision of the 'higher phase' of communist society:

*"after the enslaving subordination of the individual to the division of labor, and therewith also the antithesis between mental and physical labor, has vanished; after labor has become not only a means of life but life's prime want; after the productive forces have also increased with the all-around development of the individual, and all the springs of co-operative wealth flow more abundantly -- only then can the narrow horizon of bourgeois right be crossed in its entirety and society inscribe on its banners: From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs!"*

However, this represents a fairly unsatisfactory evading of the question of how to balance supply and demand beyond Morris's hope that, absent consumer capitalism, our natural inclinations will be to consume less than we produce.

Nonetheless, we can find the beginnings of a 21<sup>st</sup> century political economy of work in *News from Nowhere*. In essence, that we can reduce the level of production, and maintain employment by making labour less productive. Recall that one of Morris's key arguments was that capitalism turned labour into an economic factor of production and squeezed it so hard that workers did nothing else but work. Consider, also, how Morris describes in *News from Nowhere*, a world in which things that used to be done by machine are now done by hand—if there is pleasure or art to be gained in doing it this way. Similar arguments have been made by others. For Klitgaard (2017), for example, the quality of care work is diminished in the current economy because workers are under pressure to do an adequate job in a short amount of time, rather than a good job over a much longer period of time. But perhaps the closest match to Morris's vision of production is Kate Fletcher's (2007) articulation of slow fashion:

*“Time is just one factor of production, along with labour, capital and natural resources that get juggled and squeezed in the pursuit of maximum profits. But fast is not free. Short lead times and cheap clothes are only made possible by exploitation of labour and natural resources...Slow fashion, with the shift from quantity to quality, takes the pressure off time.”*

The same shift in emphasis from quantity to quality is perhaps the central mechanism used by Morris in *News from Nowhere*, to ensure plentiful employment while producing only useful goods in a pleasurable way. This is because concern for quality of the work process limits the division of labour which means labour is less productive (Jackson and Victor, 2011). A job that once took one person now requires two, and physical production can halve without reducing employment.

We can bring these arguments together with a concern for environmental limits and begin to form a coherent seed for a new political economy of good work, based around the idea of a ‘sweet spot’ of good work (Jackson et al., 2016, Jackson, 2017). Work in the sweet spot would be characterised by a high quality of output, a good quality of working life, and a low environmental impact. Moreover, work meeting these criteria that is also

characterised by low productivity (growth), points to a future with high levels of employment in good jobs.

If we now turn to the issue of working conditions, we find that *News from Nowhere* and the critical utopian reading of Cokaygne share the view that economic conditions are key to ensuring work is good, or meaningful, or at least not solely painful. (Though they differ in as much as Morris, while acknowledging the pain, also praises it as being a productive experience in personal and social terms). For Morris, the pressures placed on work by the capitalist need for profit, with its resulting competition and the division of labour exacerbates the pain in work, while the critical Cokaygnian utopia emphasises distributional inequality. Again, both reform the economic system to solve the problem of pain in labour. Cokaygne by removing work from the economy and *News from Nowhere* by changing the economic conditions that shape work. These proposals share much with modern arguments about the need to re-introduce humanity into labour markets if good work is to be possible (e.g. Skeggs, 2017, Taylor, 2017).

For example, it is often argued that market values degrade work by over-emphasising the profit and efficiency motives (Noonan, 2010, Klitgaard and Krall, 2012). Consequently, in the current system, paid work may be unable to facilitate anything more than our most basic needs. In some cases it fails even at this level. One obvious example is in clothing supply chains, where many workers do not earn enough to live a decent life (Mair et al., 2017) and face high risk of death at work (Zamani et al., 2016). These conditions are the result of the drive to maximise efficiency and profit by minimising economic costs. This is illustrated by the Rana Plaza disaster, the collapse in 2011 of a Bangladeshi garment factory where 1,100 people died and 2,500 were injured. Goods produced at Rana Plaza were sold in affluent countries by international corporations and Bangladeshi politicians feared that enforcing building regulations would increase production costs and cause international companies to source clothes from elsewhere, taking jobs with them (Taplin, 2014). Moreover, the same dynamics operate at every level of the modern economy. Noonan (2010) argues that in universities we see an ongoing attempt to reduce creativity and autonomy and replace it with a more 'efficient' managerialism. Similarly, both Klitgaard (2017) and Skeggs (2017) argue that making care services more efficient (in terms of profit), has degraded working conditions, reducing both the experience and output of the work. We see, then, that providing good work requires a either new

market ethic that prizes good work over and above profit or, as in *News from Nowhere* and Cokaygne, we must remove work from the market altogether.

Again, this is a challenging conclusion, and not one to which Cokaygne and *Nowhere* have complete answers. By and large, we currently rely on markets as the way to structure work, both in terms of the kind of work carried out (through consumer markets for goods and services), and in how that work is distributed (through the labour market). The fundamental lesson of the two utopias remains: the use of markets to structure work is extremely problematic. Consequently, any post-capitalist political economy of work must be critical of markets. We might suggest, however, that being critical of markets as the sole (or dominant) way in which work is organised is different from advocating getting rid of markets altogether. Instead, looking at how markets might be linked to ‘non-economic’ motivations may be a useful path forward. A good starting point for such an investigation would be looking at how pre-capitalist societies engaged with markets – including, of course, the ways in which extra-market forces were used as means of exploitation. What Cokaygne and *News from Nowhere* offer is guidance on how to critically reflect on, and critique, existing economic analyses of work.

## 5 Conclusions

In this paper, we have explored the role of work in the Cokaygnian tradition and in *News from Nowhere*. Cokaygne is a fanciful land where labour has been taken out of the production process: so, no-one ever works. But whether this is a utopian or a dystopian lesson is disputed. The disagreement is largely over the interpretation of Cokaygne’s imagery. For those who see Cokaygne as a moral lesson its imagery is an obvious caricature of consumption and reveals the emptiness of a life without work. On the other hand, the utopian interpretation of Cokaygne points to the very real hardships endured by the presumed audiences of Cokaygne. Utopian readers suggest that what was intended as a moral lesson could look like a utopian dream to overworked and poverty-stricken peasants. Some interpretations of Cokaygne go further, taking Cokaygne out of the realm of fantasy by grounding it in a critique of economic inequality. This perspective views Cokaygne as the ultimate land of redistribution – a land where everyone lives like the one percent.

*News from Nowhere* differs from Cokaygne in that it sees work as the proper route to fulfillment, and is fairly critical of the kind of consumption that Cokaygne depicts. Morris, following Ruskin, argued that work could be meaningful and creative and *News from Nowhere* is his attempt to set out a society in which work fulfills these roles. However, *News from Nowhere* and the utopian reading of Cokaygne are not entirely at odds. Both recognise that in the real world, work can be painful. Where they differ is in their solutions to this problem. Morris understands that although there is pain in work, work is also valuable in personal and social terms. Consequently, he focuses his utopia on transforming work into something good. He argues that this requires the removal of pressures to produce low quality goods that have no social purpose. He also argues that when production is slowed down, and useless products no longer produced, people will have time and freedom to work in ways that are fulfilling.

Both Cokaygne and *News from Nowhere* have lessons for a political economy of work in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The utopian reading of Cokaygne and *News from Nowhere* recognise the economic hardships people without work face in a society where consumption depends on work. Consequently, they both separate consumption from production and, in doing so, they free workers from the economic pressure to work. Similarly, Cokaygne and *News from Nowhere* recognise that there is pain in work and so speak to modern fears that work is getting worse. Cokaygne's solution is to do away with work, but *News from Nowhere* offers an alternative path: taking work out of the market place and rolling back the division of labour. In doing this, Morris is trying to create a space in which work can be motivated by art and social good rather than profit.

These solutions are provocative, but incomplete. Cokaygne ultimately rests on fantasy, and defies the laws of thermodynamics. On the other hand, Morris does provide pointers towards the ways in which we may be able to provide good work for all within planetary boundaries. In particular we suggested that combining Morris's ideas of good work with a concern for environmental limits points toward a political economy of work, built on the central idea of a 'sweet spot' of good work, where through prioritizing art and creativity and reducing labour productivity we create plentiful high value employment that reduces environmental harm. However, fully developing this idea must not sidestep the question of how to coordinate aggregate levels of supply and demand, or ignore the laws of physics. The challenge for modern economists engaged with issues of work, is to take the

lessons from Cokaygne and Nowhere, and try to find ways to develop them into a new and coherent political economy of work for the 21st century.

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