News from Nowhere (1891) has remained the most original and enduring utopian fiction of nineteenth-century Britain. Its author William Morris (1834-96) was a poet, designer, social activist, translator of Icelandic sagas, writer of prose romances, founder of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, a pioneer in book and furniture design, as well as tapestry-weaving and other decorative arts. Morris saw many of these undertakings as efforts to realize collegial and communitarian ideals, early manifestations of which included the “Oxford Brotherhood”, his design-work for the “Firm”, his active role in “Antiscrape” (The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings), and his pioneering collaboration with Emery Walker at the Kelmscott Press. However, the deepest and most enduring expression of Morris’ communal ideals, by common consent, was his work on behalf of the Socialist League, an anarchist-Socialist organization which he helped to found and in whose periodical Commonweal his utopian romance News from Nowhere first appeared in 1890. In this work, Morris alluded to his friends’ and comrades’ gathering places and a police riot they had endured together in Trafalgar Square. Close ties with them and strong desires to see an ideal of communal fellowship guided his hand as he wrote.

The feasibility or infeasibility of Morris’ hopes for popular art and artisanal practices as well as the details of Nowhere’s marriage, governance, child-raising, voluntary labour and informal penal codes have been examined and re-examined many times. In this essay, I will not dwell so much on the specific features of the work’s semi-agrarian anarchist-Communism but on the elusive yet evocative ideals that underlie it, and his holist convictions that human fellowship is an intrinsic part of a larger flux of natural interrelations. As an example of this, consider the passage in which Guest, Nowhere’s twenty-first-
century revenant, asks his guide why Nowhereans take a keenly naïve interest (“like children”) in such a “recurring and consequently commonplace matter as the sequence of the seasons”. His guide intently replies that:

‘I can’t look upon it as if I were sitting in a theatre seeing the play going on before me, myself taking no part of it .... I mean that I am part of it all, and feel the pain as well as the pleasure in my own person. It is not done for me by somebody else, merely that I may eat and drink and sleep; but I myself do my share of it.’

In what follows I will first canvass some of the deeper personal, aesthetic, communal and egalitarian convictions Morris expressed in News from Nowhere and essays such as “Monopoly” (1887), “The Beauty of Life” (1880), “The Socialist Ideal” (1891) and “The Society of the Future” (1887). Afterwards I will consider some traces and variants of Morris’ ideals for the transformation of everyday consciousness in the writings of twentieth-century Socialists and Marxists such as Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, Henri Lefebvre and Ernst Bloch.

Desire and displacement in News from Nowhere
In “The Society of the Future”, Morris remarked that:

There are ... two groups of mind with whom Social Revolutionists like other people, have to deal, the analytical and the constructive .... And one thing I must confess from the beginning, which is that the visions of us visionaries or practical people differ largely from each other ... ; whereas the theories of the analysts differ little from each other, and they are hugely interested in each others’ theories – in the way that a butcher is interested in an ox – to wit, for cutting up ... I want to tell you what it is I desire of the Society of the Future, just as if I were going to be reborn into it.

1 William Morris, News from Nowhere and Other Writings, edited with an introduction and notes by Clive Wilmer, Penguin, 1998, 225. All subsequent references are given in the text.