

TWO UTOPIAN VIEWS OF LABOR, LEISURE, AND CREATIVITY

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William Morris and B. F. Skinner each presented views of utopian societies in their respective books, News From Nowhere, and Walden Two. Each proffered what was imagined as a society better than what existed at the time—one where life can be enjoyed not just occasionally, but fully and completely in a cooperative setting. Their views on the functions and interrelatedness of labor, leisure, and creativity helped define how they pictured their respective utopias. Comparing and contrasting these two views allows us to reflect upon our own world to see how it compares in terms of fairness, equality and happiness.

In both of the fictional utopian societies, individuals were allowed to gravitate towards activities and work that interested them. Since people naturally have different interests, it was deemed best to encourage them to do what they liked because they would proudly put greater effort into their respective tasks. Frazier, Skinner's character who created the Walden Two society, said that the community would realize much greater productivity if people worked doing what they liked, and fewer hours would be required to accomplish their tasks. Thus, people were encouraged to explore their greatest interests.

Improvements in labor and fewer work hours meant greater periods of time for leisure, which led to broader levels of creativity during those times of leisure. Leisure also allows time for inward reflection. When one doesn't have to worry about work, he or she can learn for fun and be creative with their leisure time. Also, when people did work that they valued, it meant that they would more likely add a creative element to it. In Morris's utopia, machination and industrialization had been largely abandoned in favor of a hands-on approach. The old system of forced labor acted as master over the workers, many of who were tantamount to automatons, and who did not value themselves or their labor. In Morris's utopia, the workers themselves were the

masters of labor, and the reward of labor was the reward of creation (79).

Morris was much more likely than Skinner to believe that almost all forms of automation were corruptive or degrading. He believed that a problem with machination from the pre-utopian era was that it required minimal intelligence on the part of the worker, thereby stifling creativity, productivity, and self esteem. Another problem with labor that Morris noted from the “old days” was that when the poor had to improve and adorn the lives of the rich, creativity itself was marginalized and eventually “... died out amongst men” (166). Besides losing the desire for creativity, another problem with the poor having to work for the rich was that their leisure time was more often filled with laziness rather than with creativity.

There was a more utilitarian approach to labor in Skinner’s novel and his utopia included some pragmatic level of automation. For example, they had a process in place that mass-produced furniture, another that mechanized looms, and yet another system of machinery that helped clean dishes in the kitchen of the dining hall. In Skinner’s utopia, they made the efforts of mass production available to everyone as a pragmatic *consequence* of cooperative living (43).

In both books, the collective consciousness of cooperation improved personal values which resulted in a stronger sense of communal ethics. As a result, crime became virtually nonexistent in both societies. As these two utopian societies developed without the burden of crime, it became clear that there were some jobs that were no longer needed (e.g., police; prison guards) while other jobs became more needed (e.g., nurses; art instructors).

Doing work that is enjoyable encourages one to value his or her role in society. While both authors stressed the benefits of work, one difference was that Skinner stressed the importance of physical labor for all individuals. Physical labor strengthened the individual externally with improved musculature and better health, and it improved the individual internally

with increased self esteem and a steadfast perseverance. As each individual's self-value became stronger, their improvement reflected upon their interaction with the community at large.

Therefore, each individual's improvement also improved the society collectively.

Both authors presented a similar idea suggesting that the more that people valued work, the more they valued the creative element of life. Opulent decoration of the homes of the wealthy was no longer valued in Morris's utopia, especially since the ornamentation was likely completed by the poor working class. Even existing buildings with attractive facades were likely to be modestly decorated inside. The new countryside, with landscaping and vegetation where buildings once stood, was more a work of art since there was a better natural balance between human construction and the bucolic. In Morris's book, opulent ornamentation was not prized, except if it was done willingly by the worker and with pride and pleasure. In contrast, creativity expressed through architecture in Skinner's utopia was more modest and more practical in design.

Creativity in both utopias also expressed itself through problem solving. While Morris's utopian system was more established after over a century in existence, both societies valued the creative use of human faculties for improving upon the status quo. In Skinner's utopia, for example, the people were encouraged "to view every habit and custom with an eye to possible improvement" (25). Doing so meant adopting incremental refinements as the societal systems improved. They therefore were encouraged to have an experimental attitude toward everything.

Another way that creativity was expressed in Skinner's book was through apparel. Since the fashion industry didn't directly influence those at Walden Two, people, especially women, were no longer at the whim of commercial designers who "manipulated change" each and every season. By having more creative latitude, individuals maintained wardrobes of broader styles and

therefore had *more* to choose from. Variety was encouraged, thereby lending a cosmopolitan air to the society (Skinner 29). Both utopias valued creative dressing, and both valued variety for the sake of the expression of personal creativity. What was slightly different in Walden Two was that the citizens kept older styles not only for the purposes of creatively adorning themselves, but also to avoid being wasteful as styles changed in the outside world.

What was different in each society regarding labor was in how jobs were apportioned. Both societies encouraged people to work at things that interested them, but Morris's seemed *more* utopian in that regard. In Skinner's utopian world, not all jobs that were needed for an effective society were equally desirable. The most unpleasant or strenuous jobs were given greater payment credits. The value of each job was made suitably equitable based on *pay*. In Morris's world, jobs seemed to be fairly distributed based on *desire*.

In Skinner's utopia, physical work was required from all people. Frazier thought that without physical labor, a non-productive class would develop. He also believed that the truly intelligent individual would not want anyone else doing their work (50). This expansion of the definition of intelligence to include the concept of valuing physical labor for everyone was common in both books. In both pre-utopian worlds, intelligence had meant the devising of less active involvement in manual labor through the reliance on machinery.

The character Burris, who had gone to visit his old friend Frazier at Walden Two, was initially irritated with the idea that only hard work could prevent boredom. What he failed to grasp at the time was the social aspect of work. Hard work and active involvement were performed by all citizens in an effort to *strengthen* the sense of communal awareness.

Morris distinguished between leisure and idleness, the latter which he likened to a disease. Idleness, with nothing interesting to occupy the mind, leads to boredom and lack of

productivity. But if the element of creativity accompanies leisure, then genius may develop. Skinner wrote that for an artist's craft to fully develop, much leisure time is needed for its maintenance and maturation (80). Art evolves through an unburdened free mind.

Morris's utopia seemed to be a more perfect utopia in the sense of the purity of its idealism. Individuals in his world seemed more contentedly detached from materialism than those at Walden Two, and would even willingly give up their homes to others who might enjoy living there for a while. Skinner's utopia seemed more pragmatic, and it was a project in cooperative socialism that could theoretically be successful in our "real world." In Skinner's utopia, domestic, behavioral, and social engineering had been the tools that were refined over time to improve all facets of the society.

Skinner thought that mankind's greatest original sin was that each of us has interests that conflict with the interests of everyone else in society (95). If the individual can recognize his or her part as being valuable to society, that society is strengthened, thereby reinforcing the vigor of the individual. It becomes a circular process, but it must start with the individual, and then subsequently be reinforced by society through its operations.

For any utopia to work, a psychological change must occur in the individual. Additionally, from the perspective of the collective group, mutual trust is imperative. Labor, leisure and creativity were all intertwined by both authors, and what benefited one aspect benefited the other two. One primary benefit of both books is that it makes us realize what we can do *now* to improve our own lives. In Morris's utopia, life was one "... of repose amidst energy; of work which is pleasure and pleasure which is work" (176). If people are productive and happy, they are much more likely to be valuable members of society, regardless of whether they live in utopia or in a world such as ours.

Works Cited

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Skinner, B. F. Walden Two. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1976.