

William Morris remains a neglected figure. Yet his preoccupations can offer the Left much in its present predicament.

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The Victorian Visionary

WILLIAM MORRIS WAS BORN 150 years ago this month. A man of many talents and activities, and several claims to fame, he is remembered in the labour movement as one of the pioneers of socialism.¹ Morris once described himself, when hauled before the magistrate following incidents at the trial of some comrades, as 'an artist, and a literary man, pretty well known, I think, throughout Europe'.² And so he was. Morris was a major figure in Victorian intellectual and cultural life, a well-known poet, artist and designer-craftsman, who made a major contribution to the development of modern design. He was also a courageous and uncompromising social critic, long before he became involved in the socialist movement.

In 1883, at the age of 50, he joined a socialist organisation, the Democratic (soon to become Social Democratic) Federation, adopted socialist ideas, which he always identified with the concepts of Marx as he understood them, and until his early death in 1896, participated, in a series of organisations, in all the activities of the socialist movement of the period. He argued tirelessly for socialism and communism — a label he espoused to distinguish the sort of socialist he was — at street-corners, in lecture-halls, and in articles in the early socialist press.

Like some other members of this first generation of British Marxists, Morris encountered the ideas of Marx relatively late in life — it would have been extremely difficult to encounter them any earlier. Morris thus assimilated Marx's work through an active and critical dialogue with the literary and aesthetic movements to which he belonged, and a long-standing and uncompromising opposition to the moral and aesthetic squalor of Victorian society. These concerns made Morris a kind of *cultural* materialist, seeing culture and aesthetic experience as linked to social relations, long before he, or anyone else in

Britain, knew the works of Marx. Reading Marx in the light of these interests, Morris was able to develop Marxism in new directions. These directions have, if anything, become more politically significant in recent years. Yet much discussion of themes foreshadowed in Morris occurs without direct reference to his work.

His originality

Morris's 'socialist' writings, which I shall mainly discuss, are only a part of his literary output — the standard *Collected Works* comprise 24 volumes — composed in the last twelve years of an extraordinarily active and creative life. A major figure of Victorian late romanticism, he wrote several long narrative poems during the 1850s, 60s and 70s. These poems evoked medieval and Norse themes to establish distance from the social life and assumptions of his own society. Morris's socialist writings comprise various lectures and articles.³ These are, firstly, lucid and persuasive introductions to the key ideas of Marx; they also, it could be argued, contain flashes of insight that go beyond Marx and develop his ideas significantly. Morris produced two fictional works, directly addressing problems of socialist aspiration and political action, and exploring the links between past, present and future. In A

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Dream of John Ball (1888) the narrator dreams of an encounter with a peasant community during the revolt of 1381, and engages in a long dialogue with the dissident priest and peasant leader John Ball. *News from Nowhere* (1890) is again a dream; the narrator finds himself in a future communist society.⁴

Morris's originality as a Marxist rests on the encounter in his mind between literary and aesthetic concerns, and criticisms of Victorian society expressed through them, and the works of Marx. It is not simply that

this enables Morris to 'add on' ethical and cultural dimensions absent in Marx. Rather, Morris reads Marx in a way that can expand our understanding of 'material production' and social relations. For Morris production always involves the reproduction of a whole culture, sets of values and forms of social relationship, not just the sphere of 'economic' life narrowly understood. His concern with 'how we live and how we might live' (the title of one of Morris's best-known lectures) leads him to question the aspirations and goals of the socialist movement. He saw, very perceptively, that capitalism could well accommodate and assimilate many of the measures which socialists advocated, and use them to perpetuate its domination. To counter this possibility, Morris emphasises, in his speeches and articles as well as in fictional form in *News from Nowhere*, the goal of a communist society, founded on real equality of condition and radical changes in social relations, values and culture.

An equal and free society

These are challenging questions, and ones which are increasingly on the agenda in the 1980s. Morris was a very early sceptic about the 'forward march of labour'. Most socialists and Marxists of his day emphasised supposed 'scientific laws' of social change, and an inevitable progression to socialism. This reflected the intellectual climate of the late nineteenth century, in which an ideological appropriation of 'science' filled some of the space vacated by religion; nor should Marx and Engels themselves escape some share of blame for this tendency. Morris's cultural formation, and his combative attitude of active opposition to the aesthetic and moral squalor of Victorian society, made him unhappy about mechanistic visions of 'progress'. He felt uneasy about the potential direction of the socialist and labour movement, especially about uncritical endorsement of a 'quasi-Socialist machinery', which would in effect help stabilise capitalism.

I wish thank Colin Mercer, John Oakley and Roger Simon for helpful comments on Morris in general, or the draft of this article in particular.

Morris emphasised that the 'machinery' of socialism was perhaps a necessary but never a sufficient condition for a truly equal and free society.

'The aim of Communism seems to me to be the complete equality of condition for all people; and anything in a Socialist direction which stops short of this is merely a compromise with the present condition of society, a halting-place on the road to the goal.⁵

By 'complete equality of condition' Morris means above all a society with neither 'masters' nor 'slaves'; the hatred of 'mastership', and the sense that it degrades rich and poor, oppressor and oppressed alike recurs throughout his socialist writings. He is deeply conscious of the

process of reproduction — capital is reproduced and expanded, the wage-labourer is reproduced as a wage-labourer — he does not investigate what occurs in the box labelled 'reproduction of labour-power' in his analytical scheme. With recent developments it has become more and more important to fill that box, and to modify the analytical scheme accordingly. Feminists have raised issues about the relations between the 'formal economy' of full-time waged work and the real processes of sus-

whole organisation of cultural life.

'Nature does not give us our livelihood gratis; we must win it by toil of some sort or degree. Let us see, then, if she does not give us some compensation for this compulsion to labour, since certainly in other matters she takes care to make the acts necessary to the continuance of life in the individual and the race not only endurable, but even pleasurable.'

These compensations take the form of 'hope of rest, hope of product, hope of pleasure in the work itself.'⁷

An all-round transformation

Any real transformation of social relations — as opposed to the mere 'machinery' of socialism — must address every aspect of social and cultural life. Morris uses the term 'communist' to distinguish this project of total transformation from more narrowly based forms of socialist and labour politics. Like Brecht, Morris sees communism as 'the simple thing, so hard to achieve'. He implicitly challenges mechanical and evolutionist views of the attainment of communism, which suggest that the higher stage of communism will be attained automatically, with the development of productive forces and material abundance under socialism. Morris argues that the decisive factor in the transition to a fully communist society is a change in every sphere of social relations and the moral life of society. In *News from Nowhere* the narrator asks how people have come to achieve the freedom and happiness they enjoy in a communist society:

"'Briefly," said he, "by the absence of artificial coercion, and the freedom for every man to what he can do best, joined in the knowledge of what productions of labour we really want. I must admit that this knowledge we reached slowly and painfully."⁸

If *News from Nowhere* has little to say about industrial labour in the familiar sense of the term, and envisages the substitution of smaller-scale self-governing communities for big cities, this is not simply a matter of Morris's own preferences and background — though these are a factor, and one which creates problems, here and elsewhere in his work. It also startles the reader and focuses attention on the character of social relations, rather than the technical conditions

¹ For an account of Morris's life and work, concentrating on the socialist years, see EP Thompson *William Morris* (1955; revised edn 1977).

² *Ibid* p469 (1955 edn), or p397 (1977 edn).

³ For a valuable selection see AL Morton (ed) *Political Writings of William Morris* (1973).

⁴ Both these works are available in AL Morton (ed) *Three Works by William Morris* (1973).

⁵ *Political Writings* p210.

⁶ *Ibid* p152.

⁷ *Ibid* pp86-7.

⁸ *Three Works* p275.



William Morris (at top) with the Morris and Burne-Jones families.

poverty of aspiration of the working class, concerned to foster the desire and the capacity for self-government. The vision of communism as a 'society of equals' is closely linked to Morris's concern with the nature of work and aesthetic pleasure. 'No one will be able to impose degrading forms of labour on others; if such work exists it must be shared.'⁶ Morris is not necessarily suggesting that all work will somehow become pleasant and creative, but that both pleasure and drudgery should be equally the lot of all; in these circumstances, conscious decisions about what is or is not worth producing, and for what purpose would become a regulating principle of social life.

Politics of reproduction

The concern with pleasure in work can be linked to interpretations of Marx that emphasise the 'production and reproduction of material life' in the broadest sense of the term. While Marx discusses the process of production as necessarily also a

taining life in the unwaged world of the home. Changes in occupational structure associated with the growth of employment in public services and other 'non-productive' sectors of employment and the consequent recomposition of the working class have also posed challenges. The balance between productive labour, as traditionally understood, in capitalist industry, and the overall process of social reproduction — in the home, in social services and the leisure industries — has been shifting. The 'politics of reproduction', addressed in the women's movement and to some extent in campaigns around health, education and social services, are now a crucial area for the Left.

Theoretical debates around these themes have occurred largely without reference to Morris. But his view of the relations between labour and aesthetic pleasure — or the lack of it — in fact poses the whole question of social reproduction. The forms of labour are related to its actual or anticipated rewards, which are defined by the

of production. A conscious process of cultural and ethical transformation is a necessary element of the struggle to achieve communism.

Morris's unease before the prospect of 'state socialism' or 'semi-demi-socialism' and his assertion that 'true and complete Socialism' is 'what I should call Communism' suggests that this is not simply a matter to be postponed to a post-revolutionary, post-capitalist future. The 'machinery of Socialism' may lead on to a society of equality, or to a deadlocked compromise in which 'the Society of Inequality might . . . accept the quasi-socialist machinery . . . and work it for the purpose of upholding that society'. The outcome depends on 'how such reforms were done; in what spirit; or rather what else was being done . . . which would make people long for equality of condition'.⁹

These ideas have, if anything, become more relevant with the intervening years. If they have not been more widely assimilated into the theoretical culture of the Left this is because, as with any major writer, Morris produces texts which are uneven, hinting at developments he does not follow through. It is also because of other barriers which are a function partly of our inability to interpret aspects of Morris, partly of his own limitations.

Utopianism

Morris's writing reflects the literary sensibilities and conventions of the world of the late romantics, in which his own attitudes and style were formed. The evocation of the Middle Ages and the use of an apparently archaic language — in fact, a self-conscious literary device — are aspects of this. Morris also uses the literary device of a dream — eg, in both *John Ball* and *News from Nowhere* — to establish distance from our familiar world and present the vision of a different society. Morris's 'Utopianism' and his 'medievalism' can operate as barriers and obscure the significance of his work.

One problem with Utopian literature is that details, which may or may not command the reader's assent, can get in the way. Everyone will have her or his personal quarrel with aspects of the world portrayed in *News from Nowhere*.¹⁰ For example Morris takes as his standard for free and creative labour his own work as a craftsman-designer. Whereas everything else is transformed, this remains remarkably similar, although inserted into different economic relations and universalised through the society. But these disagreements with Morris partly miss the point.



Design for 'Artichoke', an embroidered hanging for Smeaton Manor.

The imagined world is a *personal* vision, and is presented, within the story itself, as such. To describe such a vision, characterised precisely as a dream, is not necessarily to indulge in 'Utopianism' in the pejorative sense castigated by Engels and by the subsequent Marxist tradition. The ability to conceive of a better world is surely at the heart of revolutionary politics, and it is this that Morris wants to elicit from his readers. Imagination and vision, and the ability to communicate them have not always been present in left politics, and it has been a damaging absence.

Medievalism

Morris's interest in the Middle Ages likewise represented — long before he became involved in socialist politics — the possibility of a radically different society. Whatever they meant for other middle class Victorians — including readers of

his verse — the Middle Ages meant for Morris the implicit hope that, since things had been different in the past, they might again be different in the future. This is much more than pure 'escapism'. Morris was a 'cultural materialist' long before his encounter with Marx. The medieval world he evokes in *The Earthly Paradise* (1868-70), his most widely read work among the 'respectable' reading public, is characterised by its variety, sensuousness, and richness of colouring and texture. And this richness is presented as the product of human labour.

'And pointed jars that Greek hands toiled to fill,
And treasured scanty spice from the far sea,
Florence gold cloth, and Ypres napery.'¹¹

The world of *News from Nowhere* is similarly varied, rich and coloured. At the beginning of the *Dream of John Ball* Morris evokes the colouring and texture of medieval dress: 'a broad red leather girdle round my waist, on one side of which hung a pouch embroidered very prettily . . .'¹² Morris uses such detailed description to distance us from the world we normally inhabit; but it is a critical distance, not an escapist one.

Morris uses these forms in an attempt to address what he always sees as the crucial issue of the connection between the imagined vision of a better society and immediate struggles: 'free as thou wouldst have them, when thine hope rises the highest, and thou art thinking not of the king's uncles and poll-groat bailiffs, and the villeinage of Essex, but of the end of all, when men shall have the fruits of the earth and the fruits of their toil thereon, without money and without price', the narrator (a modern socialist) addresses John Ball.¹³ Both the political essays and the two short novels are written from an experience of frustration, hope deferred and bafflement at the difficulty of establishing such connections.

Notion of the state

While Morris was prescient in seeing the dangers of an uncritical endorsement of state socialism, his response to this is uneven. Nor, probably, could it have been otherwise, given the context in which he thought and acted. At times he hints at a strategy of active intervention and struggle, on the terrain of reforms: 'the ultimate good of it, the amount of progressive force

⁹ *Political Writings* pp228-30.

¹⁰ Cf P Anderson *Arguments within English Marxism* (1980) pp166-9.

¹¹ A Briggs (ed), *William Morris: selected writings and designs* (1962) p.68.

¹² *Three Works* p38.

¹³ *Ibid* pi 10.

that might be in such things would, I think, depend on *how* such reforms were done'.¹⁴ He also suggests that reforms can give the workers crucial organisational and administrative experience: 'and I hope that no one here will assert that they do not need such training, or that they are not at a huge disadvantage from the lack of it as compared with their masters . . .'.¹⁵ This analysis would seem to imply organised working class intervention to infuse reforms with an egalitarian and democratic 'spirit' and to use the spaces they open up to develop the capacity to govern society.

Some such strategy seems to foreshadow current discussion on the Left. Yet Morris himself did not develop these implications; to expect him to do so would be to read him out of his historical context. In common

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with most Marxists of his time, he sees the state as an 'executive power' set above society, a fortress to be captured, whether by insurrection or a more gradualist electoral strategy. He thus overlooks the capacity of the state to build links with society and bases of popular support — a feature of that very extension of the 'machinery of socialism' he envisaged — and the new areas of struggle created by this process. Morris at times advocated an 'abstentionist' approach — the view that the task of socialist organisations was to 'make socialists' and presumably anticipate some future revolutionary confrontation, meantime avoiding entanglements in electoral politics and the machinery of the existing state. At other times, and especially in his last writings when he was seeking to construct a 'broad left' from the various fragmented and bickering socialist organisations, he accepted electoral activity as a necessary but distasteful stage. He seems always to have considered armed confrontation, in whatever combination with other forms of activity, as a likely feature of the socialist revolution.

Morris thus argues that the 'spirit' in which reforms are implemented is crucial. But he does not develop the implication that this must become an arena for active intervention by the popular forces. The vision of communism tended to be reduced to a matter of propaganda, of fostering some hope of 'the change beyond the change', as he puts it in a memorable phrase in *A Dream of John Ball*. Disconnected in this

way from any strategy that could bridge the gap between the present situation and an imagined future, *News from Nowhere and A Dream of John Ball* are poignantly sad, as well as deeply inspiring books. In both works the dream form sets up a kind of screen between the narrator and the life he witnesses; he knows he cannot fully share in the struggles of the medieval peasants or the happiness of the people of the future society.

Morris and today

If Morris remains important, it is above all because a politics that addresses 'how we live and how we might live' is now at the top of any serious agenda for socialism. The successful initiative of Thatcherism can, after all, be seen as a response to the crisis of that very arrangement — the operation of some of the 'machinery of Socialism' to reinforce the 'Society of Inequality' — which Morris identified so accurately. Responses in the labour movement — across a spectrum from so-called 'moderates' to the militant Left — have often been defensive and backward-looking, an attempt to restore the class compromises that have broken down, or to install a vision of socialism much like the prosperous capitalism of the 1960s, only without the nasty bits. Such perspectives lack popular credibility. On the other hand, the more open political styles of the women's and peace movements, renewed concern in the unions with problems of internal democracy and an outward-going, alliance-building approach, and the interest in 'cultural politics', are areas of resilience and determination in the face of Thatcherism.

The political challenge of the 1980s is to construct a vision of the immediate to medium-term future, with the persuasive power to inspire and mobilise a broad alliance against Thatcherism. Despite Morris's focus on more instant goals, his work can contribute to this. He exemplifies the importance of imagination and vision in the political struggle, and the need to address social relations, culture and values in every sphere of life. And he makes a stubborn and persistent effort to pose the issue of the connections between immediate struggles and the goal of a free and equal society. Morris was often baffled and rebuffed in his search for such connections; the aim of communism gets pushed towards propaganda and Utopian fiction. The political agenda now is very much about forms of organisation and political practice that can bridge the gap between aspiration and reality. Morris uses a phrase

about the 'making of socialists' which has been much quoted, often out of context. This has now to be seen in terms of the making of socialism itself, given that social values are bound up with material social relations. Socialists are to be made, not just in the inner life of political organisations, but in forms of popular organisation and participation that demonstrate in practice the attractive power of socialist values, even to people who do not, and perhaps never will want to, see themselves as socialists. Some of the framework for that process is provided by the massive extension of the state Morris saw on the horizon. In extending itself in this way the state does not simply increase its power; it also creates new popular aspirations, new spaces in which to struggle for a different society.

A communist future

Morris — and this is a tragic element in his situation but also a measure of his stature as a Marxist — constantly resists the pressure to marginalise the issue of a communist future, even though he could not always articulate the grounds of his resistance. So far as he was concerned the communist society of equals was the only aim worth struggling for; the alternative was despair. There is an active and insistent aspect of Morris's communism that was in

Morris was prescient in seeing the dangers of . . . state socialism

an unresolved tension with the limitations of the socialism he found around him. The root of the matter is the capacity of the working class to govern society and to live without masters:

' . . . all but a very small minority are not prepared to do without masters. They do not believe in their own capacity to undertake the management of affairs, and to be responsible for their life in this world. When they are so prepared, then Socialism will be realised; but nothing can push it on a day in advance of that time.'¹⁷

That question remains today, as it was a century ago, the most important one of all for Marxists. It has, if anything, become more pertinent as the 'semi-demi-socialism' Morris envisaged disintegrates in disarray, faced with economic crisis and the political challenge of Thatcherism.

¹⁴ *Political Writings* p228.

¹⁵ *Ibid* p233.

¹⁶ See eg Eric Heffer *Marxism Today* Dec 1983 p51.

¹⁷ For the original phrase see *Political Writings* p226.

¹⁷ *Political Writings loc cit*.