
How William Morris Became a Socialist

BY

BENJAMIN SCHACHT

The critique of capitalism was central to William Morris's vision of an arts and crafts movement in the Victorian era. Against the alienation and exploitation of a rapacious industrialism, he advocated for a conception of art capable of restoring creativity to everyday life.

Review of *How I Became a Socialist* by William Morris, edited by Owen Holland, introduction by Owen Hatherley and Owen Holland (Verso Books, November 2020).

"Apart from the desire to produce beautiful things," declared William Morris in his 1894 essay "How I Became a Socialist," "the leading passion in my life has been and is hatred of modern civilization."

As his characteristically bold assertion suggests, Morris cast a skeptical eye on his era's triumphant claims to social and technological progress. Born in 1834 on the cusp of the Victorian age, Morris pursued his leading passions in a dazzling array of literary and artistic endeavors.

Before embracing socialism in the early 1880s, he was a painter and a respected poet, a prolific designer of household goods at his firm Morris and Co., and a campaigner for the protection of ancient buildings. Late in life he founded the Kelmscott Press, which showcased his mastery of typography and enabled him to publish a series of prose romances which proved influential on the subsequent development of fantasy literature.

While socialism remains an enduring aspect of Morris's legacy, his reputation today is based mainly on his artistic accomplishments, in particular his enchanting wallpaper and textile designs, and his role as a founding figure of the Arts and Crafts movement, a tendency in the decorative arts that rejected mass

production and the industrial organization of labor in favor of the traditional handicraft techniques of the past.

Given Morris's avowed hatred of modern civilization and his artistic immersion in the subjects and materials of bygone ages, it might be tempting to wave away his socialism as little more than a nostalgic denunciation of industrial progress in the name of an idealized depiction of the medieval craftsman. In reality, however, Morris's socialism was rigorous, revolutionary, and fully engaged with the issues of his day.

His politics were at least as informed by Marx as they were by John Ruskin and Thomas Carlyle, the two Victorian critics from whom he learned to doubt his epoch's reigning ideology of progress. Far from anachronistic, Morris's vision of socialism as a globe-spanning cooperative society based on freely undertaken, creative, ecologically sustainable work remains an urgent alternative to the present system of overwork, environmental destruction, and nationalist rivalry that currently threatens our health, sanity, and indeed our very existence.

Fortunately, Morris's socialist ideas have never been more accessible, thanks in part to the publication of a new volume of his political writings. Borrowing its title from the aforementioned essay, *How I Became a Socialist* contains seventeen lectures, essays, and articles by Morris arranged chronologically from the early 1880s to 1896, the year of his death.

In addition to offering readers a broad selection of Morris's socialist activities, the volume, which is part of Verso's "Revolutions" series, includes detailed notes by Owen Holland and substantial introductions by Holland and Owen Hatherley that elucidate Morris's context and legacy.

Art and Society

For the reader new to Morris's political writings — or the reader whose interest in Morris is rooted primarily in his art and design — the best place to begin is the title essay, which Morris contributed to the newspaper *Justice* in 1894. Here, Morris tries "to briefly, honestly, and truly" give an account of his socialist convictions, explaining how his passion for beauty led him to conclude that socialism is a necessary condition for the flourishing of art.

Aside from Ruskin and Carlyle, it is Marx who is singled out as the key influence. Morris's understanding of art as an activity intimately interwoven with the conditions of everyday life is indeed consonant with Marx's materialist conception of culture and his scathing criticisms of wage labor as an institution that alienates workers from their creative capacities and robs them of their personality.



Honeysuckle design by William Morris, 1876.

“Surely any one who professes to think that the question of art and cultivation must go before that of the knife and fork,” proclaims Morris, “does not understand what art means, or how that its roots must have a soil of thriving and unanxious life.”

This theme is further developed in the collection’s first essay, “Art Under Plutocracy,” which Morris delivered as a lecture at Oxford in 1883. Here Morris distinguishes between the decorative and the intellectual arts, and laments that the former had lost their vigor, leaving only the latter as a reified vestige of a once thriving popular artistic culture. Morris pleads for a more expansive definition of art in which its meaning is extended

beyond those matters which are consciously works of art, to take in not only painting and sculpture, and architecture, but the shapes and colors of all household goods, nay, even the arrangement of the fields for tillage and pasture, the management of towns and of our highways of all kinds; in a word, to extend to the aspect of the externals of our life.

“Art,” according to the view Morris inherited from Ruskin, “is man’s expression of his joy in labour.” It follows from this definition that an unartistic society is one in which labor has been deprived of its joyful and artistic qualities: “Now the chief accusation I have to bring against the modern state of society is that it is founded on the art-lacking or unhappy labour of the greater part of men.”

In Morris’s view, the problem with modern society is not just a lack of beauty and aesthetic accomplishment but a fundamental disregard for the working conditions of the vast majority: “All that external degradation of the face of the country of which I have spoken is hateful to me not only because it is a cause of unhappiness to some few of us who still love art, but also and chiefly because it is a token of the unhappy life forced on the great mass of the population by the system of competitive commerce.”

One might conclude from all his vituperation against modern society’s ugliness that Morris traces the decline of art to the advent of mass production by machinery. To borrow the language of Walter Benjamin — to whom Hatherley alludes in his introductory essay — perhaps Morris laments that the work of art’s aura withers in the age of mechanical reproduction.

But Morris introduces this possibility only to reject it: “What has caused the sickness? Machine-labour will you say? Well, I have seen a quoted passage from one of the ancient Sicilian poets rejoicing in the fashioning of a water-mill, and exulting in labor being set free from the toil of the hand-quern in consequence; and that surely would be a type of man’s natural hope when foreseeing the invention of labor-saving machinery.” (As Holland observes in his meticulous and informative endnotes, Morris likely learned of this passage from Marx.)



In his influential essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," German philosopher Walter Benjamin analyzed the effects of mass production on traditional understandings of art.

Similar to Benjamin's embrace of mechanical reproduction as potentially democratizing, Morris embraces machinery's ability to create more leisure time for people to cultivate themselves and their talents. But just as Benjamin warns that in the absence of political action, mechanical reproduction will end up serving fascism, so too does Morris stress that the use of machinery is ultimately a political-economic question.

As he writes in another one of the volume's most rewarding essays, "How We Live and How We Might Live" (first delivered as a lecture in 1884 at the Hammersmith branch of the Social Democratic Federation),

At present you must note that all the amazing machinery which we have invented has served only to increase the amount of profit-bearing wares; in other words, to increase the amount of profit pouched by individuals for their own advantage, part of which profit they use as capital for the production of more profit, with ever the same waste attached to it; and part as private riches or means for luxurious living, which again is sheer waste.... So I say that, in spite of our inventions, no worker works under the present system an hour the less on account of those labor-saving machines, so called. But under a happier state of things they would be used simply for saving labor, with the result of a vast amount of leisure gained for the community to be added to that gained by the avoidance of the waste of useless luxury.

As he sums up the issue elsewhere, "It is not this or that tangible steel and brass machine which we want to get rid of, but the great intangible machine of commercial tyranny, which oppresses the lives of all of us."

"How We Might Live"

Reading Morris' texts today, one is immediately struck by their resolute internationalism. Morris devoted his energies to the Socialist League, and along with Eleanor Marx, Karl's youngest daughter, Morris helped to steer the organization toward internationalism, a principle articulated in its manifesto, which appeared in the first issue of the *Commonweal*, the League's print organ, in 1885:

For us neither geographical boundaries, political history, race, nor creed makes rivals or enemies; for us there are no nations, but only varied masses of workers and friends, whose mutual sympathies are checked or perverted by groups of masters and fleecers whose interest it is to stir up rivalries and hatreds between the dwellers in different lands.

Morris's internationalism abounds in such pieces as "How we Live and How we might Live," in which he declares that "our present system of Society is based on a state of perpetual war":

As nations under the present system are driven to compete with one another for the markets of the world, and as firms or the captains of industry have to scramble for their share of the profits of the markets, so also have the workers to compete with each other — for livelihood; and it is this constant competition or war amongst them which enables the profit-grinders to make their profits, and by means of wealth so acquired to take all the executive power of the country into their hands.

Racial and nationalist rivalries only serve to hinder the unity of the working class, in Morris's view, distracting from the principal antagonism between capital and labor. This point is especially clear in his writings on the Irish and Italian movements for national independence, "Ireland and Italy: A Warning."

"For my part," writes Morris, "I do not believe in the race-hatred of the Irish against the English: they hate their English *masters*, as well they may; and their English masters are now trying hard to stimulate the race-hatred among their English brethren, the workers, by all this loud talk of the integrity of Empire and so forth." He concludes with the general advice: "Your revolutionary struggles will be abortive or lead to mere disappointment unless you accept as your watchword, WAGE-WORKERS OF ALL COUNTRIES UNITE!"

A Victorian Environmentalist

Morris was also a prescient observer of capitalism's ecological destructiveness. Although the selections contained in this volume do not exhaust Morris's writings on natural beauty (Holland mentions the additional lectures "Art and the Beauty of the Earth" and "Under an Elm Tree; or Thoughts in the Countryside" in his introduction), the reader will nonetheless encounter Morris's profound environmental consciousness in this volume.

Born into the dawning of the age of Fossil Capital, Morris was among a group of radical Victorian authors and artists who called attention to the environmental degradations of industrial capitalism. He was also one of the first to articulate the connection between overwork, the waste created by the drive for profit, and pollution, and was keenly aware of the environmental risks posed by unregulated industrial development. "It is profit," he writes in "How We Live and How We Might Live," that wraps "a whole district in a cloud of sulphureous smoke; which turns beautiful rivers into filthy sewers."

As a revolutionary socialist, Morris was wary of parliamentary politics. In "The Policy of Abstention," he argues that socialists ought not to engage in parliamentary politics but should instead agitate among the masses and organize an alternative labor parliament.

In "Whigs, Democrats and Socialists" he cautions that while it may be permissible for socialists to enter parliament for purposes of disrupting it, they must resist being seduced into the business of parliament and enacting palliative measures which only serve to perpetuate capitalist class rule by making it marginally more tolerable.

These essays may strike the contemporary reader as a historical curiosity. After the experience of fascism, it is clear that our diminished socialist movement will not beget the triumphant open struggle that Morris anticipated. While a less conciliatory ruling class may make the predatory nature of the system more palpable, there are no guarantees that the mass resentment thereby engendered will take the form of socialism.

ly optimistic ial of erge from epredations

Moreover, if the last several years are any indication, socialists have more influence when we make electoral politics a terrain of struggle than when we retreat into small groups that uncompromisingly advocate extra-parliamentary revolution as the one true path toward socialism.

Even in his own day, Morris was not immune to what E. P. Thompson in his biography of Morris refers to as “purism.” Just what attitude socialists should adopt toward electoral politics was indeed a contentious issue within the Socialist League, and Morris often sided with its anti-parliamentary faction.

This refusal to countenance parliamentary means led Engels to remark, “You will not bring the numerous working class as a whole into the movement by sermons.” That being so, Morris is surely right to insist that extra-electoral organization of the working class is necessary to attain socialist goals, and that socialists must beware of the pressures exerted by electoral and parliamentary politics within the constraints of a system dominated by powerful capitalist interests.

But Morris was, in retrospect, wildly optimistic about the potential of revolution to emerge from laying bare the depredations of capitalism. As he wrote in “Signs of Change,” an essay that is not included in this volume: “A few years of wearisome struggle against apathy and ignorance; a year or two of growing hope — and then who knows? Perhaps a few months, or perhaps a few days of the open struggle against brute force, with the mask off its face, and the sword in its hand, and then we are over the bar.”

In passages like these, Morris envisages a dramatic rupture with capitalism that today appears somewhat far-fetched. In light of the hegemony of global capitalism in the twenty-first century and the discrediting of the twentieth century’s revolutionary alternatives, such a sudden rupture seems less plausible to us than it might have seemed to Morris.

A transition to socialism seems likely to take a different form today — such as Erik Olin Wright’s suggestion of eroding capitalism by undermining the coercive power of the capitalist labor market and erecting “real utopias” based on alternative economic institutions.

Whatever criticisms one might make of his strategy for advancing socialism, Morris’s critique of capitalism endures because of his intense focus on alienated work, which remains as potent a source of mental, physical, and ecological destructiveness today as it was in Morris’s times. (According to E. P. Thompson, Morris is indeed “our greatest diagnostician of alienation.”)

It therefore seems logical to pursue a radical transformation of work — reducing compulsory labor as much as possible while democratizing what remains — as a way of carrying his legacy forward.

What must be remembered, however, is that eroding the power of the capitalist class to dictate the terms on which we labor will require the kind of collective action and heroic fellowship consistently advocated by Morris, because the forces of conservatism, reaction, and property will not give an inch without a fight.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Benjamin Schacht is an independent scholar and freelance editor. He holds a PhD in comparative literature from Northwestern University.

FILED UNDER

WORK / ART / HISTORY

