

THE UTOPIAN COMMUNISM OF WILLIAM MORRIS

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Anarchists and Marxists have both made efforts to identify William Morris's political views with their own, and in each case Morris's latitude lends some persuasion to the claim. His *Socialist Diary* of 1887, *Commonweal* notes and editorials of the period and vast private correspondence all testify to his many efforts at mediation between Socialist League parliamentarians and anarchists. His theoretical interests ranged from the 'orthodox' Marxism of E.B. Bax, through the indigenous theories of John Carruthers' *The Political Economy of Socialism*, to the ideas of Peter Kropotkin and other contemporary anarcho-communist writers. In this essay we will characterize Morris as a complex but deeply consequential utopian communist, and briefly compare some of his views with those of Marx, Kropotkin, E.F. Schumacher, Raymond Williams and Rudolf Bahro.

I

Affinities with Marx

Perhaps the most vexed issue surrounding Morris's socialism has been his relation to Karl Marx, whom he never met.¹ None of *Das Kapital* was translated into English before 1887, but in 1883 Morris read a French translation of Volume I with great care, and he fully accepted Marx's historical interpretation of economic development and his description of capitalism as a system dependent on the exploited value of human labour. During early 1887

¹ Morris joined the Democratic Federation on 13 January 1883; Marx died in March of the same year, and the two never met. Volume I of *Das Kapital* was not translated into English until 1887 (by S. Moore and Edward Aveling, ed. Friedrich Engels), and until then was only available in a French translation by J. Ray (Paris, 1872-5), which Morris seems to have read in 1883; Volume III was not issued in German until 1894. Early English interpretations of Marx's work had been published by Hyndman and Bax, but Marx disavowed the former, and may have expressed some private reservations about the latter.

The issue of Morris's relation to Marx's writing, doctrines and followers have all been the subject of intense controversy among twentieth-century Marxists and Morrisians of all political shades. Several non- or anti-Marxist memoirists and commentators later attempted to deny Morris's interest in Marx's work and the clear economic basis of Morris's communist ideal. An early example was Bruce Glasier, author of *William Morris and the Early Days of the Socialist Movement* (1921); extensive replies by R. Page Arnot (who published Morris's letters to Glasse and Mahon in 1964), E.P. Thompson in his biography of Morris (1955; 2nd edn., 1977), and Paul Meier's *The Marxist Dreamer* (1978), have amply refuted earlier claims that Morris was hostile or indifferent to Marx's writings. Other recent participants in the debate include Perry Anderson, *Arguments in English Marxism* (London, 1980); John Quail, *The Slow Burning Fuse* (London, 1978); and John Hulse, *Revolutionists in London* (Oxford, 1970).

For a further discussion of Morris's relation to Marx's ideas, please see the introduction to Morris's *Socialist Diary*, *History Workshop Journal*, 13 (Spring, 1982), reissued as *William Morris's Socialist Diary*, ed. Florence Boos (London, 1985).

Morris prepared with Bax his essays on Marx for *Commonweal*. His essays of this period and afterwards (especially 'Monopoly', 'The Society of the Future', and 'Communism') show growing insistence on collective ownership and shared access to the means of production:

Therefore, I say, those raw materials and tools would be the property of the whole community, and would be used by every one in it, on the terms that they should repair the waste in them and not engross undue shares of them. . . . I must add further, that no programme is worth the acceptance of the working-classes that stops short of the abolition of private property in the means of production. Any other programme is misleading and dishonest.²

Elsewhere, Morris adds that communal control need not be repressive of individual desires; common sense and consideration will influence communist decisions about appropriation and distribution:

Private property will of course not exist as a right. . . . though no one will want to meddle with matters that have as it were grown to such and such an individual — which have become part of his habits, so to say.³

By temperament Morris was attracted to some latently moralistic aspects of Marx's 'scientific' analyses of class structure and economic exploitation. Marx had argued that a system which Morris believed oppressive could not survive, and provided Morris with specific analyses of capitalism's basis in political chicanery, imperialism and war. Marx's catastrophic interpretation of the end of capitalism also appealed to Morris, whose interest in dramatic, cyclic renewal appears throughout his literary writings.

. . . the new [Marxist] school, starting with an historical view of what had been, and seeing that a law of evolution swayed all events in it, was able to point out to us that the evolution was still going on, and that, whether Socialism be desirable or not, it is at least inevitable. Here then at last was a hope of a different kind to any that had gone before it.⁴

Most important for Morris was Marx's characteristic emphasis on the real, material value of labour as the source of wealth and means to social renewal; to Morris this seemed to make concrete his own ardent valuation of work as the highest embodiment of natural pleasure and human community. Work-ethics

² William Morris, 'Monopoly', in *Collected Works*, ed. May Morris (London, 1910–15) (hereafter, *Collected Works*), Vol. XXIII, p. 253.

³ William Morris, 'The Society of the Future' (1888), in May Morris, *William Morris, Artist, Writer, Socialist* (Oxford) (hereafter *Artist, Writer, Socialist*), Vol. II, p. 460.

⁴ William Morris, 'The Hopes of Civilization' (1885), *Collected Works*, XXIII, pp. 74–5.

were scarcely new to Victorian England or its literature, but Morris's communist variant was, as was his conviction that the pleasures of genuinely 'useful work' (as opposed to 'useless toil') could create and maintain a kind of autocatalysis of social reproduction.

Those who have valued the importance of Marx's influence on Morris's thought also note that Marx, unlike Engels, strongly appreciated poetry; that Engels' 'scientism' represented a divergence from Marx; and that Morris and Marx shared an interest in other implications of the alienation of labour under capitalism than the depression of wages. One should keep in mind, however, that several features of Morris's view—especially his hatred of 'commercialism', his hope for an imminent workers' revolution and his belief in the need for a 'true' society established on new grounds—were present in his first political lectures, which antedated his study of Marx.

These beliefs were also compatible with a pattern which might be called heroic apocalypticism, and which can be traced in Morris's poetry of the 1870s—for example, *Sigurd the Volsung*. In his pre-socialist essays of 1878–82, Morris gradually began to define 'art' in ways which comprehended wider aspects of what we would now call 'quality of life':

The mighty change which the success of competitive commerce has wrought in the world, whatever it may have destroyed, has at least unwittingly made one thing—from out of it has been born the increasing power of the working class.⁵

I cannot choose but be moved to the soul by the troubles of the life of civilized man, . . . to call on you to face the latest danger which civilization is threatened with, a danger of her own breeding: that men in struggling towards the complete attainment of all the luxuries of life for the strongest portion of their race should deprive their whole race of all the beauty of life . . . and thereby enslave simple people to them, and themselves to themselves, and so at last drag the world into a second barbarism more ignoble, and a thousandfold more hopeless, than the first.

Now of those who are listening to me, there are some, I feel sure, who have received this message . . . nor am I telling you to sit down deedless in the desert because between you and the promised land lies many a trouble, and death itself may be.⁶

Compare, however, the more stringent language of an 1883 talk on 'Art Under Plutocracy':

For the fuller development of industrialism . . . while it has taken from the workmen all pleasure in their labor . . . has welded them into a great

⁵ William Morris, 'The Prospects of Architecture' (1881), *Collected Works*, XXII, pp. 134–9.

⁶ William Morris, 'The Beauty of Life' (1880), *ibid.*, pp. 51–2.

class, and has by its very oppression and compulsion of the monotony of life driven them into feeling the solidarity of their interests and the antagonism of those interests to those of the capitalist class; they are all through civilization feeling the necessity of their rising as a class . . . organized brotherhood is that which must break the spell of anarchical Plutocracy . . . a hundred thousand and there is war abroad, and the cause has victories tangible and real; and why only a hundred thousand? Why not a hundred million, and peace upon the earth?⁷

Nevertheless, as an advocate of revolution, Morris eventually chose *not* to ally himself in practical decisions with Marx's parliamentary British followers — Engels, Hyndman, Aveling, E. Marx and Bax — whom he considered too reformist. He also criticized many contemporary socialist positions or factions, but especially those of the German social democrats and other parliamentary and municipal socialists. He considered himself a *communist*, and enjoyed emphasizing the word:

between complete Socialism and Communism there is no difference whatsoever in my mind. Communism is in fact the completion of Socialism: when that ceases to be militant and becomes triumphant, it will be Communism.⁸

On the other hand, Morris took pains to declare his disagreement with individualist-anarchist doctrine. He wrote John Glasse before the 1887 Socialist League Conference:

All this has nothing to do with the question of Collectivism or Anarchism; I distinctly disagree with the Anarchist principle, much as I sympathize with many of the anarchists personally, and although I have an Englishman's wholesome horror of government interference and centralisation which some of our friends who are built on the German pattern are not quite enough afraid of I think. (May 23rd)⁹

In 1894, he commented:

Such finish to what of education in practical Socialism as I am capable of I received afterwards from some of my Anarchist friends, from whom I learned, quite against their intention, that Anarchism was impossible, much as I learned from Mill against *his* intention that Socialism was necessary.¹⁰

⁷ William Morris, 'Art Under Plutocracy', *Collected Works*, XXIII, pp. 187, 191.

⁸ William Morris, 'Communism', *ibid.*, p. 271.

⁹ Robert Page Arnot, *William Morris: The Man and the Myth* (London, 1964), p. 83.

¹⁰ William Morris, 'How I Became a Socialist', *Collected Works*, XXIII, p. 278.

The contexts of these remarks should be borne in mind. In the first case Morris was emphasizing to someone with mild electoral leanings that, though strongly anti-parliamentarian, he was not an anarchist. In the second he was writing for the SDF's paper, *Justice*. Against these general disavowals must be weighed Morris's decision in 1887 and 1888 to *work* with anarchists, rather than exclude them from the Socialist League. He took this step despite deep misgivings and forebodings, and at the cost of becoming more remote from the incipient labour movement. It may have seemed more necessary to clarify differences with those with whom he did work, rather than with those with whom he didn't.

In any case, he expressed open irritation at the possibility that British Marxists might demand subordination to the 'pedantic tyranny' of a (principally German) Social Democratic party line. An 1887 socialist conference in Zurich provoked the following:

I am in hopes we shall yet turn our backs on our quarrels; only there is one not back but Bax who is being steeped in the Marxite pickle over at Zurich who I fear will want some sitting upon when he returns. It would be very foolish to let him embroil everything again merely to get a compact adherence to the German Social Democrats.¹¹

. . . also there is a danger ahead in a kind of informal Conference now going on at Zurich, which I fancy has for its object an attack on the 'Anarchists,' i.e., all who will not swallow the German 'Social-Democrat' doctrines whole. I think that you will agree with me that this work of pedantic tyranny must be resisted.¹²

These scarcely seem the words of someone likely to become a loyal social democrat (even in lower-case). Morris's rupture with Hyndman in 1885 was occasioned by an incident in which Hyndman accused Andreas Scheu of 'anarchist tendencies', when the latter had disagreed with one of his policies, and Morris defended Scheu heatedly. Morris's offhand remark quoted by Bruce Glasier, 'I do now know what Marx's theory of value is, and I'm damned if I care to know',¹³ should be taken in a similar light. Morris knew well enough what the labour theory of value was — he shared it — but he was 'damned' if he was going to engage in pious testimonials to an authorized version.

Other of Morris's criticisms of the English tendencies described as 'state socialism' and 'reliance on social-democratic measures' are probably identifiable as attacks both on Fabianism and the SDF:

¹¹ Letter to Mahon, 14 October, quoted in Arnot, *William Morris*, p. 74.

¹² Letter to Glasse, 23 September, quoted in Arnot, *William Morris*, p. 86.

¹³ Bruce Glasier, *William Morris and the Early Days of the Socialist Movement* (London, 1921).

For the rest, I neither believe in State Socialism as desirable in itself, or, indeed, as a complete scheme do I think it possible. Nevertheless, some approach to it is sure to be tried, and to my mind this will precede any complete enlightenment on the new order of things.¹⁴

Perhaps some of our friends will say, what have we to do with these matters of history and art? We want by means of Social-Democracy to win a decent livelihood, we want in some sort to live, and that at once . . . Yet it must be remembered that civilization has reduced the workman to such a skinny and pitiful existence, that he scarcely knows how to frame a desire for life much better than that which he now endures perforce.¹⁵

The balance of Morris's attitudes may be struck by the following brief remark in a letter apparently written in June 1887 to Henry Charles: 'As to Anarchism, I am not an Anarchist as I understand the word, though I dislike the pedantry of the Collectivist leaders.'¹⁶

It would of course be no great surprise if Morris appreciated Marx most when the latter's views seemed to confirm his own. Morris showed no interest at all in economic theorists such as Arthur Jevons, whose ideas could be used to support gradualist aims, or who saw other bases of value than human labour. But neither did he feel obliged to uphold any sort of 'orthodoxy' when his own tactical preferences seemed to diverge from those of Marx—any more than he would have to the moral or ethical injunctions, say, of Carlyle or Ruskin, although he referred to both as his literary 'masters'.

He did comment with interest on at least one alternate critique of capitalism, John Carruthers' *Commercial and Communal Economy* (1884), which also advocated a complete communalization of the means and result of production. Morris's interest was understandable: at times, Carruthers' views strikingly resemble his own:

The system must be abolished at once . . . we must not wait until factories are burning and capitalists are being shot . . . A very few years will show the men how mistaken is their trust in strikes, and they will then, without delay or warning, turn to violence, the only weapon left to them, in order to wring from the State the rights to which they are justly entitled. No one can fortell when this may happen; it may be in fifty years, it may be next year, and even to-day an eloquent man could raise a tumult in England that no human force could quell.¹⁷

¹⁴ William Morris, 'Where Are We Now?' (1890), in *Artist, Writer, Socialist* (London, 1921), Vol II, p. 517.

¹⁵ Morris, 'How I Became a Socialist', p. 281.

¹⁶ Autograph, Houghton Library.

¹⁷ John Carruthers, *Commercial and Communal Economy* (London, 1884), pp. 355–6.

Morris's *Socialist Diary* of 1887 also notes with approval Carruthers' often-repeated argument that capitalism treats workers as machinery. Presumably Morris liked Carruthers' kindred directness and anti-reformist hopes for deep social transformation. Later, in an 1894 pamphlet 'Socialism and Radicalism', Carruthers argued against agitation for Radical demands:

it is inevitable that every Socialist who begins to agitate for Radicalism shall become a Radical. Therefore I hold, it is better for us who are Socialists to continue to preach our doctrines, but not to take part in political quarrels unless we can do so independently of existing parties who, however much they may differ in other matters, are agreed in deadly hatred of Socialism.¹⁸

Carruthers also shared Morris's hope that greater working-class boldness would lead to an imminent collapse of the class structure, and in turn satisfy lesser goals:

It is not, however, a question of half a loaf or no bread, for it is just as easy to get the whole of the loaf as the half of it, if only we could make up our minds that we really wanted the whole.¹⁹

II

Morris's Vision of Communist Society

As we have seen, Morris's values and priorities led him to prefer the label 'communist' to any of its alternatives (collectivist, anarcho-communist, socialist). The socialist commonwealth would be a communion of individuals in societies of shared resources. Essential to Morris's political vision of this unalienated commune is the assumption that there need be no conflict between collective and individual humanity. Morris's visions of a future society in the political essays and in *News from Nowhere* try to harmonize personal freedom and social fellowship: 'variety of life is as much the aim of a true Communism as equality of condition, and . . . nothing but an union of these two will bring about real freedom.'²⁰ People will someday realize that the deepest human joy derives from love of one's fellows and the earth, and the active and intelligent exercise of one's energies. Only then will labour be fully pleasurable to the worker and valuable to others:

Men would follow knowledge and the creation of beauty for their own sakes, and not for the enslavement of their fellows, and they would be rewarded by finding their most necessary work grow interesting and beautiful under their hands without their being conscious of it.²¹

¹⁸ John Carruthers, 'Socialism and Radicalism', Hammersmith Socialist Society (1894), p. 8.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 4–5.

²⁰ William Morris, 'Looking Backward', in *Artist, Writer, Socialist*, II, p. 507.

²¹ Morris, 'The Society of the Future', p. 467.

I will try to give you a more concise and complete idea of the society into which I would like to be reborn.

It is a society which does not know the meaning of the words rich and poor, or the rights of property, or law or legality, or nationality: a society which has no consciousness of being governed; in which equality of condition is a matter of course, and in which no man is rewarded for having served the community by having the power given him to injure it. . . . It would be divided into small communities varying much within the limits allowed by due social ethics, but without rivalry between each other, looking with abhorrence at the idea of a holy race.²²

And with equality of condition assured for all men, and our ethics based on reason, I cannot think that we need fear the growth of a new authority taking the place of the one which we should have destroyed, and which we must remember is based on the assumption that equality is impossible and that slavery is an essential condition of human society.²³

In an essay of this period Morris remarked that his intelligence was not analytical but constructive.²⁴ Faced with the cumulative evidence of dystopia, he tried to free himself by fashioning as fully-realized an alternative as he had the power to construct. As a possible political future, the society of *News from Nowhere* has implausible aspects, and is as often dismissed as praised. Nevertheless, its psychological evocations of dream romance, childhood memory and contemporary journey are obliquely clarified by several of his directly political essays on the new society, and by two chapters, 'Socialism Militant' and 'Socialism Triumphant', in *Socialism: Its Growth and Outcome*, which Morris co-authored with Ernest Belfort Bax, and issued in revised form in 1893. This book has been surprisingly little cited by most Morris critics, perhaps because they discount a work co-authored with Bax. The chapters on the future of society, however, gather and integrate many suggestions dispersed in Morris's other essays. The authors are careful to represent the views of other socialists, and indicate when the views are their own: 'we are not dogmatizing, but only expressing our opinion of what will probably happen, which is of course coloured by our personal wishes and hopes.'²⁵

Socialism will not interfere with private life, Morris and Bax assert, but will concern itself only with 'administration of things'.²⁶ A socialist ethic will be one of conscious responsibility to others: 'socialistic religion would be that

²² *Ibid.*, p. 466.

²³ *Commonweal*, 22 June 1889.

²⁴ *Artist, Writer, Socialist*, II, p. 447.

²⁵ William Morris and Ernest Belfort Bax, *Socialism: Its Growth and Outcome* (London, 1893) (hereafter, *Socialism*), p. 289.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

higher form of conscience that would impel us to actions on behalf of a future of the race, such as no man could command in his ordinary moods.'²⁷ Personal life will be unrestrained by law, marriage will shed its economic base, and sexual ties may be voluntary. (The issue of childrearing, however, is conveniently avoided: either its genuinely feminist implications were too controversial, or Morris and the virulently antifeminist Bax differed, or both.) Local and occupational federations would join in a world federation and socialist council.

Morris's idiosyncrasies appear in an assertion that architecture will be the chief art and one of the major occupations of the new society:

Architecture, which is above all an art of association, we believe must necessarily be the art of a society of co-operation, in which there will certainly be a tendency towards the absorption of small buildings into big; and it must be remembered that of all the arts it gives most scope to the solace of labour by due ornament.²⁸

The other most common pursuit will be music, which 'is on the executive side largely dependent on co-operation',²⁹ as is drama. Clothes will be reformed to a more natural style, an expression of Morris's view that Victorian costume caricatured the human body. Factories and railway stations would somehow be kept clean, industrial waste carefully controlled and most towns (re)built along one of the following patterns: (i) as now, but with the population carefully limited in each section; (ii) after the pattern of university quadrangles (compare Morris's memories of Oxford); or (iii) in small centres, public buildings of which would be surrounded by gradually more separated houses.

The most significant feature of the new world is the nature of its work. Repellent work has (somehow) been socialized, or has simply disappeared, a hope which Morris also developed at some length in his 1888 essay 'The Society of the Future': '[Endeavour] would be set free from the sordid necessity to work at what doesn't please us, which is the besetting curse of civilization.'³⁰ There would nevertheless be no servants; persons freed from desire for vicarious pleasure will do their own work:

First you must be free; and next you must learn to take pleasure in all the details of life: which, indeed, will be necessary for you, because, since others will be free, you will have to do your own work. That is in direct opposition to civilization, which says, Avoid trouble, which you can only do by making other people live your life for you.³¹

²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 298-9.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 307-8.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 310.

³⁰ *Artist, Writer, Socialist*, II, p. 463.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 459.

Somehow, work that no one desired to do would simply vanish:

Now, as to occupations, we shall clearly not be able to have the same division of labour in them as now: vicarious servating, sewer-emptying, butchering, letter-carrying, boot-blackening, hair-dressing, and the rest of it, will have come to an end: we shall either make all these occupations agreeable to ourselves in some mood or to some minds, who will take to them voluntarily, or we shall have to let them lapse altogether.³²

Machines will be refined toward this end, and to eliminate the monotony of labour, but they themselves will not be the objects of creativity or the expression of a sense of beauty. Earlier, Morris writing separately argued that:

Machinery will probably to a great extent have served its purpose in allowing the workers to shake off privilege, and will I believe be much curtailed. Possibly the few more important machines will be very much improved, and the host of unimportant ones fall into disuse.³³

In 1893 with Bax, Morris asserts that machinery must create freedom, not profits:

We should say that machinery will be used in a way almost the reverse of the present one. Whereas we now abstain from using it in the roughest and most repulsive work, because it does not pay, in a socialist community its use will be relegated almost entirely to such work, because in a society of equality everything will be thought to pay which dispenses the citizen from drudgery.³⁴

Something of Morris's own temperamental dislike survives in an offhand remark that 'Machinery having been perfected, mankind will turn its attention to something else'.³⁵

At any rate, human work would for the first time be freed from anxiety and drudgery, and become a complementary form of pleasure:

But in a social condition of things, the gains that would lie before the exercise of one's energies would be various and wide indeed; nor do I in the least in the world believe that the possibility of mere personal use would, or indeed could, limit people's endeavor after them; since men would at last have recognized that it was their business to live, and would at once come to the conclusion that life without endeavor is *dull*.³⁶

³² *Ibid.*, p. 460.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 461.

³⁴ *Socialism*, p. 306.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 307.

³⁶ *Artist, Writer, Socialist*, II, p. 463.

When the protestant-ethic and its ally the spirit of capitalism are both broken, immense energies will be released:

I demand a free and unfettered animal life for man first of all: I demand the utter extinction of all asceticism. If we feel the least degradation in being amorous, or merry, or hungry, or sleepy, we are so far bad animals, and therefore miserable men. And you know civilization does bid us to be ashamed of all these moods and deeds, and as far as she can, begs us to conceal them, and where possible to get other people to do them for us. In fact, it seems to me that civilization may be almost defined as a system arranged for ensuring the vicarious exercise of human energies for a minority of privileged persons.³⁷

. . . no one would be ashamed of humanity or ask for anything better than its due development.³⁸

Only real work, not drudgery or indolence, can bring rest, and it will do so without artificial inducements: 'And amidst this pleasing labour, and the rest that went with it, would disappear from the earth's face all the traces of the past slavery.'³⁹ Productive labour will be not Adam's original curse, but nature's most significant gift:

For Nature bids all men to work in order to live, and that that command can only be evaded by a man or a class forcing others to work for it in its stead; and, as a matter of fact, it is the few that compel and the many that are compelled . . . Here, then, is your remedy within sight surely; for why should the many allow the few to compel them to do what Nature does herself compel them to do?⁴⁰

What is it then makes people happy? . . . the pleasurable exercise of our energies.⁴¹

I say, Socialists ought to say, Take trouble, and turn your trouble into pleasure: that I shall always hold is the key to a happy life.⁴²

The fusion of sensual and intellectual life would at last heal the deep division which 'civilization' has driven between nature and humanity:

But from this healthy freedom would spring up the pleasure of intellectual development, which the men of civilization so foolishly try to

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 457-8.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 466.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 467.

⁴⁰ *Collected Works.*, XXIII, p. 245.

⁴¹ *Artist, Writer, Socialist*, II, p. 456.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 459.

separate from sensuous life, and to glorify at its expense . . . Nor would he who took to heart the piping of the wind and washing of the waves as he sat at the helm of the fishing-boat, be deadened to the beauty of art-made music. It is workmen only and not pedants who can produce real vigorous art.⁴³

Morris's fullest attempts to define the potential value of human activity came after a life of unusually prolific labour, and were written during and after a period in which he had pondered and wrestled with a full range of political and social contradictions: the misery of most of those who worked; the inability of many who desired work to find it; the repellent quality of the work imposed; the degradation of those who were of value to society, and exaltation of those who were not; and the fulfilment he saw in his own labour. Morris's vision of a future society is therefore the imaginative construct of an active man, who assumed that camaraderie and craftwork could, if universalized, suffice to provide for all social needs. One of his vision's chief limitations seems the extent to which it assumes that others, like himself, are strongly impelled to physical exertion, and the creation of objects or artwork as ends in themselves. Unconsciously he tended to assume that others, like him, would condemn palliative measures in favour of a complete social revolution; or, as in *News from Nowhere*, that they would choose manual labour, craftwork and artistic creation above, for example, medical, mechanical or scientific discovery.

III

Parallels with Kropotkin

A significant intellectual affinity was observed some years ago by John Hulse in *Revolutionists in London*:⁴⁴ the kinship between some of Morris's ideas and those of Peter Kropotkin. Morris and Kropotkin met often, and shared many platforms during this period. Both Morris and Kropotkin distrusted parliamentarianism, and envisioned a society of decentralized industries, handicrafts and agricultural work, whose small towns would be scattered through the countryside. Both foresaw reformed treatment of criminals, fusion of intellectual and manual labour, and education of children through activity more than books. Kropotkin later interpreted medieval history along rather Morrisian lines to support his contention that mutual aid was the natural condition of society, and Kropotkin's confidence about population-density and belief in the abolition of money suggests corresponding aspects of Morris's ideal society in *News from Nowhere*.

Above all both men believed that the impulse to form communities for mutual benefit was natural, but suppressed by the conditions of nineteenth-century capitalism and nationalism. Morris envisaged international federations of regional associations in the co-authored *Socialism: Its Growth and*

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 467.

⁴⁴ John Hulse, *Revolutionists in London* (Oxford, 1970), pp. 90 ff.

Outcome (1893), and strongly tended to emphasize government by voluntary federation. In an 1887 lecture 'The Policy of Abstinence', he differentiated communists (with whom he allied himself) from socialists, as follows: 'the Communists, though they are not clear as to what will take the place of that in the meanwhile, are at least clear that when the habit of social life is established, nothing of the kind of authoritative central government will be needed or endured.'⁴⁵ In his lectures on the society of the future he often dwelt on the dispersal of its administration:

in my opinion there would be far less centralization than there is at present, a board of officials, a parliament, or any such-like body should not attempt to administer the affairs of people living a long way off, whose conditions and surroundings they cannot thoroughly understand: surely it is always and everywhere good that people should do their own business.⁴⁶

. . . it will be necessary for the unit of administration to be small enough for every citizen to feel himself responsible for its details, and be interested in them.⁴⁷

Nevertheless Morris directly rejected the cardinal tenet that no majority may impose its will on a minority, in a letter to *Commonweal* of 5 May 1889:

In short, experience shows us that wherever a dozen thoughtful men shall meet together there will be twelve different opinions on any subject which is not a dry matter of fact (and often on that too) . . . they must agree on some common rule of conduct to act as a bond between them, or leave their business undone. And what is this common bond but authority—that is, the conscience of the association voluntarily accepted in the first instance.

(Note however that the initial conditions of assertion must be 'voluntarily accepted'.)

In other writings, Morris criticized as a kind of tyranny of inaction the anarchist-individualist doctrine that every veto of one should paralyse an entire group. In a letter to J.L. Mahon (17 June 1887),⁴⁸ Morris commented disparagingly that Bernard Shaw tended 'towards individualist-anarchism', and Hulse has commented that most of Morris's criticisms of anarchism seem directed against such extreme individualism. By contrast, Morris remarks of anarcho-communism at one point:

⁴⁵ *Artist, Writer, Socialist*, II, p. 437.

⁴⁶ 1888, Eugene Le Mire, *Unpublished Lectures of William Morris* (Detroit, 1969), p. 230.

⁴⁷ *Commonweal*, 22 June 1889.

⁴⁸ Arnot, *William Morris*, p. 69.

I am not pleading for any form of arbitrary or unreasonable authority, but for a public conscience [cf. the 'conscience of association', above] as a rule of action: and by all means let us have the least possible exercise of authority. I suspect that many of our Communist-Anarchist friends do really mean that, when they pronounce against all authority.⁴⁹

The views of League anarchists recorded in *Commonweal* suggest that (unlike Kropotkin) they were more anarchist than communist. Morris was much more concerned with 'communism'—shared resources of work and life—than with any defensive protection of individual freedom; but he shared with some of his opponents a strong preference for 'direct action':

the organization I am thinking of would have a serious point of difference from any that could be formed as a part of a parliamentary plan of action: its aim would be to act directly, whatever was done in it would be done by the people themselves.⁵⁰

For I want to know and to ask you to consider, how far the betterment of the working people might go and yet stop at last without having made any progress on the *direct* road to Communism.⁵¹

Morris's mixture of advocacy of a general strike with rather broad and schematic assumptions about its organizational details roughly suggests some form of anarcho-syndicalism, similar to the views of such contemporary anarchists as Charlotte Wilson and Kropotkin. Even after Morris came reluctantly to accept that many small boycotts would have to prepare for the one great strike, he still maintained that the essential methods by which the workers could compel social change would be mutual co-operation and refusal of their labour. In the 1887 essay 'The Policy of Abstention', Morris attempted to answer the charge that this was a policy of inaction:

The revolutionary body will find its duties divided into two parts, the maintenance of its people while things are advancing to the final struggle, and resistance to the constitutional authority, including the evasion or disregard of the arbitrary laws of the latter. Its chief weapons during this period will be co-operation and boycotting, the latter including all strikes that may be necessary: whether it will be driven to use further weapons depends on the attitude of the Reaction.⁵²

Morris also did not refrain from criticizing the 'propaganda of the deed', unlike most of his anarcho-communist comrades (including many no more

likely to engage in it than he). His most tolerant view was exemplified by an 1888 remark on its social antecedents:

A man who notices the external forms of things much nowadays must suffer in South Lancashire or London, must live in a state of perpetual combat and anger; and he really must try to blunt his sensibility, or he will go mad, or kill some obnoxious person and be hanged for it.⁵³

By 1893 the accumulation of anarchist acts of terror has goaded him to sharp criticism:

As to the attempt of a small minority to terrify a vast majority into accepting something which they do not understand, by spasmodic acts of violence, mostly involving the death or mutilation of non-combatants, I can call that nothing else than sheer madness. And here I will say once for all, what I have often wanted to say of late, to wit that the idea of taking any human life for any reason whatsoever is horrible and abhorrent to me.⁵⁴

By 1895, in a lecture 'What Have We To Look For', the identification of anarchism with 'actionist' violence has become an unfortunate commonplace:

the idea of successful insurrection within a measurable distance of time is only in the heads of the anarchists, who seem to have a strange notion that even equality would not be acceptable if it were not gained by violence only.⁵⁵

Unlike most anarchists (e.g. Joseph Lane) and some Marxists (e.g. Ernest Belfort Bax) of the period, Morris also considered immediate theoretical assaults on 'the state', 'religion', and the 'bourgeois family' counterproductive or irrelevant. Not only *Freedom and Justice*, but even the *National Reformer* were more aggressively anticlerical than *Commonweal*, and when young Bruce Glasier wished to open a discussion of sexuality in *Commonweal*, Morris quietly diverted him to other topics.

In attempting to assess the debts and affinities of Morris's thought, one should above all keep in mind the early *commonality* of socialist ideas. Theorists who debated with (but did not necessarily denounce) each other still influenced each other's formulations; practical exigencies modified received wisdom, and several groups competed for the prestige of a few compelling ideas. Both Kropotkin's voluntary societies and Marx's withered state might be assimilated, for example, to the regional assemblies who send delegates to an

⁴⁹ *Commonweal*, 5 May 1889, reprinted in *Artist, Writer, Socialist*, II, p. 316.

⁵⁰ William Morris, 'The Policy of Abstention', in *Artist, Writer, Socialist*, II, p. 447.

⁵¹ *Collected Works*, XXIII, p. 267.

⁵² *Artist, Writer, Socialist*, II, p. 448.

Ibid., p. 465.

Ibid., p. 351.

Ibid., p. 359.

international body in *News from Nowhere*. Similarly, Morris's insistence on the creative pleasure of legitimate work and his credo of the labourer-as-artist were compatible both with anarcho-communist theories of mutual aid, and with Marx's vision of unalienated labour in a communist state. Like Kropotkin as well as Marx, Morris was internationalist in his friendships, sympathies and literary imagination as well as in his socialism. Like Marx, he was preoccupied with economic rather than political sources of oppression, but he was much more intense than Marx in his contempt for gradualist measures, and his hatred of industrial technology extended well beyond any analysis of its organization under capitalism. Like Kropotkin he foresaw a semi-agrarian economy and dispersal of population. Finally, Morris's rather pronounced indifference to scientific and medical technology distinguished him from both Kropotkin and Marx.

Two facts about Morris emerge throughout these debates: in a period of many distractions and uncertainties he was one of the few English socialists of his class who remained consistently internationalist, anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist, and he acted for a number of years in unwavering support of these beliefs. Morris learned from all for whom he felt affinity, but he was not embarrassed to reshape their ideas according to his own priorities, and he felt at least some affinity for all who had passionately opposed the reigning dogmas of progress: 'The discontent of John Ruskin and Thomas Carlyle, of the men of the Commune of Paris, of Karl Marx and Peter Kropotkin is a protest against the whole system of modern Society.'⁵⁶

IV

More Recent Analogues:

E.F. Schumacher, Raymond Williams and Rudolf Bahro

Three recent writers on social change offer divergent views of the ideal society which partly parallel those of Morris. They are the ecological conservative E.F. Schumacher, in his *Small is Beautiful: Economics As If People Mattered* (1973); the English social critic Raymond Williams, author of *Toward 2000* (1983); and the utopian-communist Rudolf Bahro, whose book *Die Alternative (The Alternative in Eastern Europe)* (1978) led to his imprisonment and expulsion from the German Democratic Republic.

Schumacher's diffuse appeals to ethical and religious values sometimes suggest a more apolitical and conservative Morris. Schumacher was an antifeminist, and no revolutionary socialist, even by nineteenth-century standards. Further, his apparent assumption that the nineteenth century offered more leisure, 'traditional values' and happiness to its workers would have seemed to Morris stunningly naïve. Ironically, some of Schumacher's projections of a simple-but-honest past may parallel Morris's own idealization of medieval societies, and some of his arguments could have been written by a less class-conscious Morris.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 424.

Schumacher would certainly agree with Morris that truly productive labour (again, as opposed to 'useless toil') is work which encourages human intelligence and leisure, and conserves life and environment. With Morris, he would also argue that unchecked industrial 'development' destroys human autonomy and the wealth of future generations, degrades rural industry and crafts, corrupts agriculture and obliterates natural beauty. Both were rather indifferent to population growth and believed human beings have a natural affinity for farmwork and artisanry; both also condemned the conventional technologies of their respective times.

Another resemblance is their common belief that the poor need an intermediate technology which is relatively independent of large-scale capital resources, and which strives to give priority to simplicity and overcome the constraints of immediate human needs. Like Morris, Schumacher envisaged dispersed confederations of craft-cooperatives and small industries, and valued occupational variety more than social (re)production for its own sake. The profit-sharing, flexible work hours and semi-rural environment of Merton Abbey also fit Schumacher's model of a firm in which work is performed from a sense of community welfare, and worker-owners and consumer-representatives share the enterprise's economic rewards.

The comparison also focuses attention on certain questions which both men essentially leave unanswered. What warrants the assumption that *all* forms of socially necessary work really *can* be redistributed, redefined or valourized in such a way that most of us will desire socially necessary labour for its own sake? How does one respond to someone who argues (say, by analogy with Marx's analysis of the 'historical role' of capitalism) that societies 'have' to progress through crude, musclebound, wasteful technologies, in order to refine them toward more finely adjusted ones? Has some kind of iron law in fact limited the dispersion of human perfections at a given historical stage of *technological*, as well as social and historical, development? To what extent is creativity itself indeed a 'mere' form of consciousness, and as such, an epiphenomenon of modes of production which Morris and Schumacher might both abhor?

A recent British projection of socialist ideals appears in Raymond Williams's *Toward 2000*. In an earlier interview, published in the tribute to Morris to accompany the Institute of Contemporary Arts Exhibition on Morris in 1984, Williams remarked of Morris's socialism that:

the thing that comes through most to the late twentieth century—or perhaps the thing that *ought* to have come through . . . was this emphasis on meaning in work . . . the labour processes themselves have changed and intensified the loss of meaning for a very large number of people, including that ultimate loss of meaning in what capitalists call 'redundancy'.⁵⁷

Raymond Williams, *William Morris Today* (London, 1984), p. 122.

In *Toward 2000* Williams argues with passion the thoroughly Morrisian view that socialists must envisage different relations between persons and their work and, indeed, different modes of thought and social organization altogether:

The deepest cultural damage of the ways of thinking promoted by industrial capitalism has been the isolation of certain activities, mainly economic, from the whole network of activities, interests, and relationships within which they are inevitably carried on.⁵⁸

[The] strongest centre [of the utopian impulse] is still the conviction that people can live very differently, as distinct both from having different things and from becoming resigned to endless crises and wars.⁵⁹

Williams also shares with Morris the belief that

the most widespread and most practical thinking about the future is rooted in human and local continuities. We can feel the continuity of life to a child or a grandchild . . . There is no useful way of thinking about the future which is not based in these values of close continuity in life and the means of life.⁶⁰

Williams further shares Morris's near instinctive understanding and dread of the iron law of oligarchy, and he often denounces the 'communal-bureaucratic' structures of state capitalism (Morris's 'state socialism') with good Morrisian zeal. Like many anarchists and socialists of Morris's generation (and ours), Williams tends to speak of 'direct action', and often seems to envision counterparts of Morris's self-governing and autonomous craft organizations ('Solidarity?'): 'It is not by bureaucratic regulation, however complex, but only by direct communal administration, that an idea of common welfare can become actual.'⁶¹ Other aspects of Williams's 'variable socialism—the making of many socialisms'—similarly parallel Morris's radical-democratic ideals of communal life, in which natural resources and personal relations are valued and fewer, more durable goods are made for longer use. Williams also recognizes that women are most victimized by capitalist and state-capitalist market economics (an improvement over Morris's familiar critique of bourgeois marriage as a corrupt form of ownership). He shares some of Morris's wariness of technological 'progress': 'Are the new means of labour-saving to be used for the general well-being? If so, this absolutely includes the wellbeing of all those people whom the new machines and methods displace.'⁶² Williams

⁵⁸ Raymond Williams, *Toward 2000* (London, 1983), p. 16.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 5–6.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 100.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 93.

also echoes Morris's appeals for forms of art and culture which would reinforce human sympathy and creative autonomy. Morris of course envisaged an idealized folk art of daily life and history. Williams more despairingly hopes for some alternatives to the infliction of 'popular culture' on a supine mass audience.

Finally, and most significantly perhaps, Raymond Williams's socialist future is also a world of social fellowship and the mutual provision of needed care: 'The one great idea of work that will never be made redundant, though it may continue to gain useful technical supports, is in the nurture and lifelong care of people.'⁶³ In summary, then, Williams's arguments recapitulate many deep ideals of late nineteenth-century anarcho-communist thought, most especially its earnest search for a humane and stable equilibrium between communal ownership, creative autonomy and mutual respect for each others' work.

Similar issues are considered by Morris's fellow utopian-communist Rudolf Bahro, whose *Alternative in Eastern Europe* is an analysis of *real existierender Sozialismus* ('socialism as it actually exists') in the German Democratic Republic of the 1970s. Many aspects of the *Staatskapitalismus* which Bahro analyses recall Morris's premonitory observation that 'there are a great many who believe it possible to compel their masters by some means or another to behave better to them . . . all but a very small minority are not prepared to do without masters'.⁶⁴

In particular, Bahro evokes the spectre of alienation ('the misfortune of loneliness, of total loss of communication under the gigantic surface of abstract, spiritually indifferent functional activities'),⁶⁵ and traces several causes—excessive division of labour, dependence on large-scale machinery, subordination of education to material production, artificial separation of intellectual and manual labour—in terms Morris would strongly have endorsed. Consider Bahro's analysis of the form of false-consciousness he calls 'subalternity':

The overcoming of subalternity on a mass scale is the only possible alternative to the limitless expansion of material needs. It can stem the forces that drive on the growth of needs in the former sense . . . The compensatory interests, first of all, are the unavoidable reaction to the way that society restricts and stunts the growth, development, and confirmation of innumerable people at an early age. The corresponding needs are met with substitute satisfactions. People have to be indemnified, by possession and consumption of as many things and services as possible, with the greatest possible (exchange-) value, for the fact that

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 91.

⁶⁴ Morris, 'Where Are We Now?', p. 518.

⁶⁵ Rudolf Bahro, *The Alternative in Eastern Europe* (London, 1978), p. 261.

... find out what you yourselves find pleasant, and do it. You won't be alone in your desires; you will get plenty to help you in carrying them out, and you will develop social life in developing your own special tendencies.⁷⁵

Morris's lack of interest in the complexity of technology's evils and promises prevented a more concrete attention to the details by which human beings might be freed from servile labour. But his 'utopian' belief that work which no one will do willingly should be abolished articulates one form of overriding human aspiration, and challenges a selective inventiveness that devises sophisticated weaponry but leaves unrelieved countless forms of ill-paid drudgery. And his demand that work, not 'virtue', provide its own reward remains one of the nineteenth century's more radical and self-critical contributions to the vision of an ideal society.

It is surely not coincidence that the closing lines of both *Toward 2000* and *The Alternative* recall Morris's characteristic mixture of exhortation, critical judgment and hope. In an inversion of 'standard' modal usage Bahro asserts that:

Communism is not only necessary, it is also possible. Whether it becomes a reality or not must be decided in the struggle for its conditions of existence.⁷⁶

Williams's concluding lines invoke a comparably delicate need for mutual trust:

It is only in a shared belief and insistence that there are practical alternatives that the balance of forces and chances begins to alter. Once the inevitabilities are challenged, we begin gathering our resources for a journey of hope. If there are no easy answers there are still available and discoverable hard answers, and it is these that we can now learn to make and share.⁷⁷

The final words of *News from Nowhere* resonate with a similar mixture of visionary testimonial and *conditional* prophecy:

Yet surely! and if others can see it as I have seen it, then it may be called a vision rather than a dream.⁷⁸

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⁷⁵ *Artist, Writer, Socialist*, II, pp. 462, 459.

⁷⁶ Bahro, *The Alternative*, p. 453.

⁷⁷ Williams, *Toward 2000*, pp. 268-9.

⁷⁸ *Collected Works*, XVI, p. 401. (Our italics.)