

This text is the Introduction to *Art and Society: Lectures and Essays by William Morris*, Gary Zabel, ed. (George's Hill, Boston: 1993)

## The Radical Aesthetics of William Morris

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**By Gary Zabel**

It must have been a difficult blow for members of the English ruling class when they lost William Morris, so difficult in fact that it induced in them a curious state of denial. When the established press reported his activities as a radical agitator, it referred to him as Mr. W. Morris, as though he were a different person than William Morris, poet, publisher, designer, and owner of Morris & Company. Even more striking, nine years after his conversion to the revolutionary wing of the working-class movement, a member of Gladstone's cabinet offered him the poet laureateship on Tennyson's death; it was left up to Morris to point out the absurdity involved in the notion of a socialist court poet. In part, such denial, of course, was elicited by the unshakable reputation that Morris had established in a number of the arts well before his political conversion in 1883. How psychologically incongruous it would have been for a wealthy Englishman to recognize Morris as a social insurgent when his own home might have been decorated with furniture, tapestries, and carpets by Morris & Company. In a deeper sense, however, this denial indicates the ease with which a considerable segment of the bourgeoisie has always been able to live with, and even embrace, a purely aesthetic radicalism. After all, Morris had been ranting against 'civilization' and the spirit of 'the age' ever since his arrival as a student at Oxford in 1853, and his identification there with the Romantic poetic tradition as well as the Pre-raphaelite painters, Burne-Jones and Rossetti. Rejection of the commercialized culture of the Victorian middle class had served as the central thread of his aesthetic efforts from that time on. But it was not until he fused his program of artistic transformation with that of the radical reconstruction of society that Morris presented a problem

to his peers, and left us with the task of understanding the contemporary significance of his revolutionary cultural legacy.

If we exclude some underdeveloped propositions by Marx in the 1844 Manuscripts, the *Grundrisse*, and other writings, as well as similarly scattered passages by Engels, Morris is the first socialist writer to frame a theory that locates art squarely within the general life process of society. In this respect, he is the earliest representative of an extraordinarily creative tradition, a tradition that includes such central figures as Georg Lukács, Ernst Bloch, Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, and Raymond Williams. In spite of their many differences, these left aestheticians apply themselves to a common theoretical task. The late Renaissance painter's pretention to a status more elevated than that of craftsman, the symbolist concept of *l'art pour l'art* (art for art's sake), the emergence of the museum as a detached cultural space, and the development of a private market in art as a luxury commodity all signal an unprecedented event: the appearance in the modern period of a supposedly 'autonomous' art, a form of artistic practice and associated institutions which claim independence from the ordinary activities of life. Each of the thinkers in the socialist aesthetic tradition cited above attempts both to account for and challenge art's new claim to autonomy by rooting it in the very social process from which it purports to take its distance. Now, Morris' successors elaborate their theories from the perspective of the future-oriented assault on the separation of art from life launched by the European avant-garde of the early twentieth century (whatever their attitude to the avant-garde itself). They project the unification of the aesthetic and workaday dimensions of human existence into a future condition for which there is no earlier model. Morris, however, analyzes the split between art and life from a standpoint prior to its emergence. For him, their unification has the significance of a return to familiar ground rather than a journey into uncharted territory. More precisely, Morris regards the art of the modern epoch from the rear watchtower of the medieval period that precedes it, rather than the forward outpost of the avant-garde that would liquidate it in the name of something entirely new.

In the United States, after the near complete annihilation of the indigenous population, capitalism grew in a sort of hothouse environment purged of any factor that could restrict the expression of its intrinsic social logic. As should be evident to almost everyone from our vantage point at the end of the

twentieth century, with its integrated world market and globally triumphant culture industry, that social logic consists in the extension of the commodity form into all corners of human experience. But in Europe, the capitalist mode of production had to raise itself on a foundation that was riddled with fragments of a more ancient culture, fragments which held open the memory of a type of social and personal existence free from the universal domination of the cash nexus. In the politics of nineteenth and early twentieth century Europe, the appeal of such fragments was often given a reactionary formulation, extending from the 'Feudal Socialism' excoriated by Marx and Engels in *The Communist Manifesto*, to the obsession of the central-European right with pre-capitalist *Gemeinschaft* (community) that eventually fed into the fascist movement. Morris' medievalism, however, had no affinity with right-wing Romantic anti-capitalism. What conservatives found compelling about the Middle Ages was its religious irrationalism, its cult of authority, and its hierarchical model of communal organization and Morris had rejected all of these elements even before becoming a socialist. In spite of his enduring association with the Romantic Movement, he was not really a part of the Counter-Enlightenment at all. He believed that the emancipation of humankind from superstition, dependence, and hierarchy, which was the ostensible goal of the revolutionary bourgeoisie, must also be emblazoned upon the banner of the socialist movement, and that only there would it be freed of all class limitations and so attain its true significance. But he was afraid that such emancipation, even in its socialist version, would arrive cut off from the tradition of art, the aspiration toward beauty, and therefore, in Morris' view, the promise of happiness. The danger, then, was that the destruction of aesthetic value that was part and parcel of the bourgeois, utilitarian disenchantment of the world would cling to the realized socialist society so that post-revolutionary life would be free indeed, but devoid of human fulfillment. The goal of Morris' cultural practice was to forestall this possibility by creating a united front between the politics of emancipation and the creation of beauty in art. The Middle Ages provided him with a model for such linkage in the form of a radical conception of the meaning of work.

Like all forms of class society, European feudalism was based upon the extraction of an economic surplus from the labor of the direct producers, but, according to Morris, this exploitative relationship did not reach into the actual conduct of work. The very disdain for labor of the aristocratic upper classes left them content to exact a tribute without involving themselves in the

detailed organization or day-to-day management of the labor process. Thus, in spite of the fact that work was incorporated into an overall system of exploitation, Morris claimed that the concrete activity of work in the Middle Ages constituted a sphere of free expression, of the joyful exercise of human powers and sensibilities, of what his mentor John Ruskin called 'wealth of life'. This exuberant freedom was embodied in the self-management of craft labor by the guild organizations. It was also reflected by the evident beauty of ordinary craft objects, a beauty that reached its apogee in the organic spontaneity and finely wrought ornamental detail of Gothic architecture. What is unique about capitalism, even among class societies, is its transformation of human activity, of labor power itself, into a commodity, a transformation that entails the extension of ruling-class domination into the very fabric of the working day. Following Marx, Morris equated this extension with the development of the division of labor which both separates managerial direction of work from its proletarian execution, and fragments production into a series of meaningless partial processes to each of which a particular worker or group of workers is lashed. The result of the dispossession of the worker from his or her own life activity is, on its subjective side, misery and enslavement. On its objective side, it is destruction of the beauty of nature as well as of the built environment. The same process that empties life of happiness drains the world of aesthetic value.

The profound ugliness of capitalism was not difficult to discern in the heyday of the First Industrial Revolution. The depopulation of the English countryside in the service of sheep farming for the international market, the development of mining in Cornwall and Devon as well as the North, the rise of the great manufacturing cities of Birmingham, Manchester, and Leeds, and the concentration of an impoverished and sometimes diseased proletarian population in London had created an overwhelming experience of squalor, blight, and disproportion. Violent technological intrusion into the delicately evolved patterns of the natural and historical worlds was accompanied by the degradation of objects of everyday use, by what even quite conservative Englishmen recognized as the 'triumph of shoddy'. In the classical tradition of Western aesthetics running from Plato through Aquinas to Baumgarten and Kant, beauty is conceived as a complex and harmonious organization of particulars which induces a state of elevated pleasure in the human observer. Given this conception, the grotesque dissonances of capitalist industrialization were bound to provoke an aesthetic rebellion in the name of beauty. However,

according to Morris, the degradation of the work process had isolated the art rebellion from any possible popular audience. The works of Romantic poets and Pre-Raphaelite painters in particular embodied genuine aesthetic achievements, but they were forms of expression suspended in a void or, even worse, capable of reaching only those educated individuals whose class depended for its existence on the conversion of ugliness into profit. For Morris, the highest achievements of artistic genius presupposed the creative engagement of very ordinary people. On his reading of art history, the most genuine phase of the Renaissance was actually the final expression of the medieval period with its intact craft traditions. The paintings of a Leonardo or the sculptures of a Michelangelo were capstones of a vast structure erected by innumerable craft workers who did not share their genius, it is true, but who knew what it was to create beauty in grappling with the material world. It was not until the late Renaissance that 'high' art elevated itself above the popular masses, and the capitalist reorganization of the labor process began to create a working class detached from creative endeavor and aesthetic comprehension. Beauty then cannot be restored by artists alone. Artistic rebellion is futile so long as it does not join forces with the social and political revolution whose goal is the abolition of toil and its replacement by meaningful work.

Morris' deepest theoretical accomplishment undoubtedly lies in the intimacy with which he links aesthetic renovation, the reorganization of work, and a political model of democratic rule, an intimacy unrivalled in the tradition of socialist aesthetics (with the possible exception of the work of Raymond Williams). Once again, he bases his conception on a paradigm drawn from the Middle Ages, that of the administration of free municipalities or 'communes' by federated craft guilds in the fourteenth century. In Morris' account, the rise of the craft guilds to political control of such cities as Ghent, Bruges, Ypres, and Florence was the result of victory by artisans in a sometimes violent class struggle against aristocrats and patrician merchants. The victory of the workmen, the most dramatic instance of which was their military triumph at the battle of Courtray, not only translated the democratic liberties of the ancient tribal societies of Europe into the medium of urban existence; it also inaugurated, in Morris' words, a veritable 'art democracy'. Regulation of their conditions of work by the associated producers had salutary effects for both the craftsmen and their products. On the one hand, it ensured the creation of high quality merchandise by establishing minimal standards of production as

well as artisan education; on the other hand, it safeguarded the joyfulness and creative potential of the work process by limiting the working day, establishing a great number of holidays, and prohibiting work under unsafe or onerous conditions. Most importantly, guild regulations prevented the accumulation of capital and the unbridled employment of wage labor by establishing strict rates for wages and limiting the number of journeymen, all of whom were themselves on their way to master status, who could work for each master craftsman. Under such democratically imposed restrictions, beauty was neither extrinsic to working activity nor the province of a special caste of creative geniuses. It was, quite simply, the objective correlate of subjective pleasure in work. Just as, according to Morris, the medieval communes represented an early, though, alas, unstable form of socialist society, so will the socialism of the future assume the shape of new, more culturally sophisticated communes, democratically controlled by the artist-workers who will constitute their free citizenry.

The intimate connection between art, work, and democratic self-management that Morris developed explicitly in the lectures and essays anthologized below, constitutes the implicit theoretical framework of the book for which he is today most widely remembered: *News from Nowhere*. In his novel, Morris broke the prohibition against graven images which the socialist movement was then in the process of adopting as an unquestioned orthodoxy, and created a detailed representation of the kind of society that could be considered a fulfillment of that movement's hope. It is not that he was blind to the legitimate concerns behind socialist anti-utopianism: a rejection of all philanthropic schemes that deny the link between organized class conflict and social renewal, as well as a refusal to preempt the freedom of those generations who will actually engage in constructing the new society. But Morris also understood that people are not puppets operated by anonymous historical forces, that they do not struggle, at least not effectively, for goals that they cannot plausibly envision. Moreover, as an artist he knew that an image of the future capable of motivating action, and even eliciting sacrifices, had to have more than a purely intellectual appeal, that it had to be anchored in the most fundamental texture of people's sensuous and emotional experience. Socialists must deploy the utopian imagination in a struggle for what Antonio Gramsci was later to call 'hegemony', in which their emancipatory vision becomes a deeply rooted schema through which people interpret the details of their everyday lives. And it is not just utopian depiction

narrowly conceived that the battle for hegemony demands. The centrality of art to Morris' conception of the socialist idea in general testifies to the full-bodied character of his notion of the human context in which historical projects unfold and allegiances must be won.

What are we to make of Morris' vision nearly one hundred years after his death, more than a decade after the rise of postmodernism in the arts, and a year after the disintegration of the Soviet Union? Certainly, there can be no question of a straightforward return to his formulations after so much has transpired in culture, technology, and politics to alter the landscape within which we must get our bearings. Just think of what's changed. A tortuous experiment claiming to be socialist has ended in failure, appearing to leave the capitalist world system more completely inviolable than in Morris' day. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, Western art has refused to be bound to the norm of beauty that Morris espoused, preferring instead to articulate dissonance, absurdity, and, in its postmodern manifestation, ironic indifference. Technological transformation of the now global work process has proceeded with such vigor that a simple return to craft labor, even with the limited concessions to machine production that Morris does indeed make, is simply no longer a tenable option. Still, in many ways, Morris' lectures and essays on art and society set a standard of emotional engagement, utopian vision (tempered by a tragic recognition of the need for protracted struggle), and decent concern for the suffering and thwarted potential of countless 'ordinary' people that the socialist aesthetic tradition has never again achieved. This standard is rooted in Morris' passionate immersion in a wide variety of forms of work - from writing poetry to cutting engravings to mixing dyes. His own multi-faceted practice as both mental and manual worker imbued him with an understanding of just how fulfilling creative work could be, and just how crippling degraded, meaningless work in fact is. At the end of the twentieth century, with so many disaffected 'post-marxist' voices counseling abandonment of concern with work and those who must bear its burdens, this is not a bad place for socialists to begin once again.