

## William Morris: pioneer socialist

At the present time “Socialism” is a dirty word. It is something that is supposed to have failed in Russia and East Europe and something that the Labour Party is said to have rejected as archaic. The word has become a turn-off associated with bureaucratic control, regimentation and lack of freedom.

Some positive associations remain, however, and one of them is William Morris who died a hundred year’s ago this year. Morris’s positive image stems from the fact that he was someone concerned about the ugliness of capitalism and about arts and crafts, which are two themes that people are concerned about today.

### Revolutionary socialist

Morris was indeed a Socialist, but not just some moderate or milk-and-water social reformer. He was a revolutionary socialist who got many of his ideas from Karl Marx. He was also someone who stood for something quite different from the things which the word “socialism” has come to be associated with thanks to the activities of the Labour Party and Russia. Things such as state control and lack of freedom.

As a matter of fact Morris stood for a society in which there would be no coercive state machine, and in which people would work voluntarily to produce what was needed and would then have free access to it without having to hand over money or any other means of exchange. In other words, he stood for what we in the Socialist Party have always meant by socialism. Indeed what, at the end of the 19th century, the vast majority of those calling themselves Socialists meant by it.

Morris’s main contribution to socialist literature is undoubtedly his “utopian romance” (as he called it) *News from Nowhere*, though he was also the author of a number of Socialist pamphlets such as *Useful Work versus Useful Toil*, *How We Live and How We Might Live* and *Monopoly*, or *How Labour is Robbed* which are still worth reading.

*News from Nowhere describes social relationships in a society of “pure Communism” from which private property, buying and selling, money, government over people, armies, prisons and police forces have disappeared. This is the exact opposite of the state capitalism which the Labour Party and Russia used to stand for and would be described by them as some form of anarchism. In so far as an anarchist society is a society without a coercive central government that can impose its will on the population, this is true. But then this is what socialism always meant to people like Marx and Engels too. For them socialism was necessarily an an-archist, i.e. a non-state society, though not of the kind advocated by most anarchists in that it was to be based on common ownership and democratic control rather than on rampant individualism.*

So by “socialism” Morris meant a moneyless, wageless, stateless society based on common ownership, a classless society of free and equal men and women where social affairs are conducted through voluntary cooperation.

### **What about the lazy man?**

Those who advocate such a society are faced with objections which occur again and again. “It’s against Human Nature”. “What about the Lazy Man”, “What would be the incentive to work?”, “What about the Greedy Man?”, “If things were free wouldn’t people take too much?”, “How would you deal with violent behaviour?”

All of these questions – which Morris encountered as an outdoor speaker and indoor lecturer during his period of intense socialist activity from 1884 to 1890 – are dealt with in *News from Nowhere* either in the narrative or in question-and-answer sessions with an old socialist.

Morris’s answers didn’t differ from those we ourselves would give. That human behaviour was not something fixed by our biological make-up but something that depends on the kind of society we live in. Why should people take more than they need when they would know that the stores would always be stocked with what they needed for them to take as and when they wanted them? But Morris’s major contribution here lay in his answer to the Lazy Man objection. A whole chapter (XV) is devoted to this entitled “On the Lack of Incentive to Labour in a Communist Society”. In fact all his socialist talks and writings revolve around this theme.

Morris regarded work – the exercise of a person’s physical and mental faculties – as a basic, natural human need. His main criticism of capitalism – what made him become a socialist, in fact – was that it denied the vast majority of humans satisfying and enjoyable work.

Under capitalism work, instead of being the enjoyable activity of creating or doing something useful, became a boring and often unhealthy and dangerous burden imposed on those who were forced to get a living by selling their mental and physical energies for a wage or salary.

This criticism of capitalism followed from Morris’s concept of “art”. Which he defined, not as some specialised activity engaged in by some fringe group of “artists”, but as “the expression of a person’s joy in their work”; people who enjoyed their work would produce beautiful things. He had inherited this definition which is that of John Ruskin from his pre-socialist days. And when he realised that the nature of capitalism meant that most producers were denied any enjoyment in their work – or, put another way, that it meant the “death of art” – he became a socialist.

### **No hope under capitalism**

His theory of what capitalism did to work shaped his idea of what tactics socialists – indeed anyone concerned about the fate of “art” – should pursue. For in saying that capitalism, as a competitive system of production for sale on a market with a view to profit, necessarily meant the death of art because it had to put the pursuit of profits before the enjoyment of the producers, he was saying that nothing could be done to revive “art” until capitalism had been overthrown. In other words, that what was called for was root-and-branch change not piecemeal reform.

This point has been lost by most of his successors and admirers in the “arts and crafts” movement. Morris was involved in this, but was under no illusions as to what he really doing: training others to provide beautiful things for the “swinish rich” as he described the work of his furniture-making and wallpaper Firm. Art, being the expression of the producers’ enjoyment in their work, could never be revived under capitalism. This could come only after a social revolution had abolished the tyranny of seeking ever cheaper and quicker ways of production imposed by the profit system.

Morris’s radical criticism of capitalism also led him to take the side of Revolution in the “Reform or Revolution?” controversy within the socialist movement. When he became a socialist in 1884 he joined the Social Democratic Federation, the first organisation in Britain to publicise Marx’s ideas. But he soon left, in large part over the issue of whether or not a socialist organisation should seek reforms within capitalism. Morris thought it shouldn’t and the new organisation he helped found, the Socialist League, pursued a policy of “Education for Revolution” and “Making Socialists” rather than advocating reforms.

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