

Morris, Marx and Engels

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It is no longer necessary to prove in detail that Morris was, in every meaningful sense, a Marxist. That battle, and it has been a long one, has been so completely won that only the invincibly ignorant will dispute the outcome. It is more useful, here and now, to examine his peculiar path to Marxism and the special quality which this approach gave to his understanding of it.

He never met Marx, who in any case was a dying man when Morris joined the Democratic Federation at the beginning of 1883. More than that, he says himself that at that time he had never so much as heard of Karl Marx, and, in *How Shall We Live Then?*:

I became a Communist before I knew anything about the history of Socialism or its immediate aims. And I had to set to work to read books decidedly distasteful to me, and to do work which I thought myself quite unfit for.

We can pin-point the moment of his initiation pretty exactly. Before January he was totally unaware of Marx. But his biographer Mackail quotes from the diary of a friend, whom he does not name but who was most probably Cormel Price, under the date Feb. 22, which records that 'he [Morris] was bubbling over with Karl Marx, whom he had just begun to read in French'. Morris at that time knew no German and *Capital* had not yet been translated into English. How intensively he read 'this great work' (it is worth noting that he constantly used the adjective 'great' when speaking of Marx or his writings) can be judged from the fact that in October 1884 he sent it for rebinding to his friend T. J. Cobden-Sanderson who noted in his diary that when it came to him the book 'had been worn to loose sections by his own constant study of it'. To read such a book to pieces in less than two years is no small feat!

Morris's plunge into Marxism was thus both sudden and immediate. It is not hard to imagine what took place. He joined the Democratic Federation largely through moral and aesthetic revulsion against capitalism. As he says, again in *How Shall We Live Then?*:

Is it intellectual conviction deduced from the study of philosophy or from that of politics or economies in the abstract? I suppose there are many people who think that this has been the means of their conversion; but on reflection they will surely find that this was only its second stage.

And among the first things that would have been said to him would have been: 'Morris, you really must read Marx.' The man from whom this advice was most likely

to have come was Hyndman himself. Morris's association with Hyndman was short, and Hyndman's dictatorial methods, opportunism and love of intrigue, as well as his very limited understanding of Marxism, have been justly criticised then and later. Yet it has to be said that he was a man of considerable talent, immense energy and the first to introduce the ideas of Marxism, in however incomplete a form, to the British public.

Another who might have given similar advice was E. Belfort Bax, who was already friendly with both Morris and Engels, but he seems to have joined the Federation somewhat later, when Morris was already deep into *Capital*. Later still the two were close colleagues, especially in preparing the series of articles which went to form their joint book *Socialism: Its Growth and Outcome*. Morris refers to Bax as among those from whom he learned, but the evidence of this book certainly suggests that by this time the relation was not that of teacher and pupil but of equal collaboration. It was some time before Morris was to meet Engels, whose hostility to Hyndman (fully reciprocated) would have made contact difficult. It was not till Morris came into open conflict with Hyndman in 1884 that his relationship with Engels developed. More will be said about this later. Finally, it is most improbable that Morris met Eleanor Marx till the beginning of 1884, when the D. F. became the Social Democratic Federation with a new and more explicitly socialist programme and Eleanor and Edward Aveling both became members. He very probably did read the two articles she published about her father in the May and June 1883 numbers of *Progress*. No better elementary introduction to the life and work of Marx was available in English at that time.

Morris was, as Shaw said, an unassuming man, conscious that he was entering a field in which he was quite inexperienced, and ready to take advice and instruction from those who seemed to know what they were doing—as Hyndman in particular certainly did. At any rate he hastened to take this advice, with results that we can see in his work. No doubt he found the details of the 'pure economics' of *Capital* hard to master, as he said. But these difficulties were of an entirely technical kind: the essential features of Marxism were absorbed totally and immediately. It might be said that he did not so much *become* a Marxist as discover that he had been one all his life without knowing it. This ready acceptance we must attribute mainly to one thing—his prolonged reading of Ruskin and the subsequent deep consideration of Ruskin's thought about the nature of art and its relation to man in society.

It is not easy in 1984 to understand the influence that Ruskin had, not only on Morris but upon two whole generations of Socialists in Britain. I myself came to Socialism largely by way of Ruskin but my generation was perhaps the last in which such an approach was possible. Ruskin's shortcomings are indeed obvious and lamentable: his religiosity, his paternalism, his belief that society ought to be a hierarchy, his sentimentalism which substituted rhetoric and denunciation for serious analysis to such a degree that while we can often share his hates we can only smile at his suggested remedies. This was clear enough even a century ago, though much clearer now, but the point is that we all read him with enthusiasm but also critically and selectively. Morris could speak of his 'gammon' and his 'strange bursts of fantastic perversity', but also of 'my master'. And in *How Shall We Live Then?* he was able to make a balanced acknowledgement of his debt:

I know that I had come to these conclusions a good deal through reading John Ruskin's works, and that I focussed so to say his views on the matter of my work and my rising sense of injustice, probably more than he intended, and that the result of all that was that I was quite ready for Socialism when I came across it in a definite form, as a political party with distinct aims for a revolution in society.

There was always a quality in the power and passion of Ruskin's writing which made it possible for us to absorb what he had to give and then pass beyond it. And when we are tempted to be dismissive let us remember his unique and noble praise of the Paris Commune while it was actually taking place.

Morris at any rate was able to find in Ruskin just those things which prepared him for the reading of Marx and this approach helped him to find there many things which others failed to find. Marxism (at least in Britain) concentrated on the immediately practical—on the labour theory of value and the nature of capitalist exploitation. No doubt this was necessary and we must never forget how little of Marx's work was then available, but it led to a rather naive belief that one only needed to explain to the workers how they were being robbed for them to rise in revolt. Morris never neglected this aspect and expounded it repeatedly not only in his lectures but in a work of fiction like *A Dream of John Ball*:

. . . he shall sell himself, that is the labour that is in him, to the master that suffers him to work, and that master shall give to him out of the wares he maketh enough to keep him alive, and to beget children and nourish them till they be old enough to be sold like himself, and the residue shall the rich man keep for himself.

But his approach by way of Ruskin made it easy for Morris to see aspects of Marx which were ignored by his contemporaries, and above all Marx's humanism. Ruskin had been concerned almost to the point of obsession with such questions as the outcome of the division of labour, writing, for example:

We have much studied and much perfected, of late, the great civilized invention of the division of labour; only we give it a false name. It is not, truly speaking, the labour that is divided; but the men:—divided into mere segments of men—broken into small fragments and crumbs of life.

Or again, the division between town and country or between mental and physical labour:

The mass of society is made up of morbid thinkers and miserable workers. Now it is only by labour that thought can be made healthy, and only by thought that labour can be made happy, and the two cannot be separated with impunity.

Through his reading of Ruskin Morris was able to arrive independently at something very close to the concept of alienation—an aspect of Marxism ignored, and indeed unknown at this time. From Ruskin, too, Morris largely derived his deep moral and aesthetic revulsion from capitalist society—a revulsion which I think Marx shared but

of which he seems at times slightly ashamed as unworthy of a true and rigorous scientist.

It may even be that the Ruskinian influences which played a part in shaping Morris's very idiosyncratic prose style have been among the reasons for the failure of many people—including a number of Marxists—to recognise the true nature of Morris's thinking. As M. Paul Meier says in *La Pensée Utopique de William Morris*, and here I must take my opportunity of acknowledging my indebtedness to that remarkable work:

It is even not too much to say that concepts taken from Marx are often expressed in the language of Ruskin, which possibly is an extenuating circumstance in the blindness of certain critics. And we must not neglect the fact that certain of Marx's descriptions are to be found in embryonic state in Ruskin.

In *Socialism: Its Growth and Outcome* however, Morris showed that he was perfectly capable of expressing Marxist concepts in orthodox language when he wished to do so.

If his attitude to Marx is one of admiration and even discipleship, that to Engels, whom he knew personally rather than through his writings, is more complex. It is to be regretted that these two great men, both standing head and shoulders above their contemporaries, each failed to appreciate the other's true worth. Through their references to one another are respectful they are guarded and certainly nothing like intimacy ever developed. Such evidence as exists suggests that Engels regarded Morris, while sincere and personally irreproachable, as sentimental and unpractical, while Morris regarded Engels as bossy. Both were wrong I think. Morris was certainly not unpractical and Mackail even criticises him for a lack of sentiment! His practicality had been demonstrated by his ability to create and conduct a most successful business and by his easy mastery of a dozen crafts. But he was politically inexperienced, entering a world that was new to him and which confronted him with unexpected problems and situations. Engels, on the other hand, was rightly conscious of his position as the living representative of Marxism and of his immense experience. He was used to being consulted by Socialists from all over the world, and expected that his advice would be, if not always followed, at least seriously considered. With many calls on his time and energy he tended to be dismissive of the small and divided Socialist Movement in Britain. As he wrote to Laura Lafargue:

Morris is a settled sentimental Socialist; he would be easily managed if one saw him regularly a couple of times a week, but who has the time to do it, and if you drop him for a month he is sure to lose himself again. And is he worth all that trouble even if one had the time . . . his ideal is a debating club uniting all shades.

So the two remained on civil but usually distant terms, to the loss of both. It may be remarked in passing that Morris's relations with Marx's two surviving daughters were more cordial. For this distance there were a variety of reasons. The first and simplest of these was the problem of time and space. They lived at opposite ends of London—Engels in Hampstead, Morris in Hammersmith. Both were extremely busy men with

neither the time nor the inclination for socialising. Their weekdays were fully occupied: only on Sunday did each open his house to friends and comrades and for each this Sunday gathering was a fixed engagement. Each was the centre of his own circle and neither would ever have been prepared to abandon it to attend that of the other. So there was no time or place for them to meet except by a formal appointment which would not be made except for some weighty reason.

Another barrier, not only between Engels and Morris but between Engels and the British Socialists in general was his closeness to Edward Aveling. This, indeed, was an aspect of one of his finest qualities—his absolute loyalty to Marx and his family. The fact that Eleanor Marx had chosen Aveling was sufficient for Engels to give him unquestioned support. But the fact was that Aveling had, and on the whole deserved, such a bad reputation that, as Bernstein wrote, ‘On account of Aveling many people kept away from Engels’s house.’ Morris was very tolerant of other peoples’ personal weaknesses and for a time worked quite closely with Aveling in the Socialist League, but he certainly did describe him as ‘a disreputable dog’, which, taking into account the rarity with which he expressed personal dislikes, must indicate a pretty strong aversion.

Yet I think that beyond all this there were marked differences of outlook and temperament which stood in the way of any real understanding or friendship. Morris was a romantic and a medievalist. His emotional roots were in the Gothic North. His visits to Iceland were among the main formative influences in his life and his socialist convictions were bound up with them. Engels, on the contrary, was a thoroughgoing rationalist, a man of the Renaissance and the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, both of which Morris, on balance, regarded as regrettable, though he was prepared under pressure to acknowledge their positive aspects, just as Engels, in *The Origin of the Family*, upon which Morris drew substantially in his late romances *The Roots of the Mountains* and *The House of the Wolfings*, was prepared to acknowledge the contribution of the barbarian North to social progress. Morris, Engels wrote, was ‘quite delighted to find the Old Norse Edda on my table. He is an Icelandic enthusiast’. Perhaps one may be pardoned for wondering if it had been placed there for his benefit. He would not have been so delighted by Engels’s earlier opinions on the subject:

Scandinavianism is enthusiasm for the brutal, sordid, practical Old Norse national traits, for that profound inner life which is unable to express its exuberant ideas and sentiments in words, but can express them only in deeds, namely in rudeness towards women, perpetual drunkenness and the wild frenzy of the Berserker alternating with tearful sentimentality . . .

Scandinavianism was the pattern of the Danes’ appeals for Swedish and Norwegian support. But as always happens with the Christian-Teutonic nation, a dispute immediately arose as to who was the genuine Christian-Teuton, the true Scandinavian. The Swede contended that the Dane had become ‘Germanised’ and had degenerated, the Norwegian said the same of the Swede and the Dane, and the Icelander of all three. Obviously the more primitive a nation is, the more closely its customs and way of life resemble those of the Old Norse people, the more ‘Scandinavian’ it must be.

Fortunately this was hidden safely away in the files of the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* where Morris could not possibly have discovered it. And in fairness to Engels it should be added that it was written at the time of the first Schleswig-Holstein war and may not represent his settled opinion. Nevertheless it is poles removed from that of Morris who wrote in *Dream of John Ball*, 'in that land was the summer short and the winter long; but men lived both summer and winter; and if the trees grew ill and the corn throve not, yet did the plant called man thrive and do well. God send us such men even here.'

In any case, the period of active co-operation between Morris and Engels was quite short. There is no evidence that they met before 1884, and their first meeting may not have been before the autumn of that year. However, the situation was changing. Eleanor Marx and Aveling had joined the Social Democratic Federation and almost at once came into conflict with Engels's *bête noire* Hyndman. In this conflict they found that Morris was on their side. In March, when Hyndman was defeated on two separate issues, Eleanor wrote to her sister Laura that 'Morris, who is a fine old chap, also spoke for us'. As the divisions within the S.D.F. widened throughout 1884 Morris found himself, much against his will, cast as the leader of the anti-Hyndman faction. He wrote in August:

I don't see how I can avoid taking my share in the internal conflict which seems likely to rend the D.F. into two or more. More than two or three of us distrust Hyndman thoroughly: I have done my best to trust him, but cannot any longer. Practically it comes to a contest between him and me . . . I am driven to thrusting myself forward and making a party within a party.

Important issues of principle and strategy lay behind the split. Unfortunately when it came to the push these were obscured by petty and personal questions and the real reasons were never made clear to the members or the public. In December Morris and his supporters won a narrow majority on the S. D. F. Council, and then, to everyone's surprise, resigned and proceeded to set up a new body, the Socialist League. Among them were Eleanor Marx, Aveling and Belfort Bax.

What is more to our immediate point, the split brought Morris into close and, apparently, fairly frequent contacts with Engels. Engels welcomed the formation of the League, which he hoped might form the nucleus of a real workers' party in a way which he did not believe possible under Hyndman's dictatorial and opportunist leadership. A number of meetings took place in his house, one on the actual day of the secession at which he gave his approval to the formation of the League. Engels contributed to its journal *The Commonweal*, for which Eleanor also wrote an invaluable international column. Unfortunately this period of co-operation was short.

The S.L. from the first was composed of very diverse elements—to a large extent the result of the way the split had taken place. On the one hand were a number of anarchists who disliked Hyndman's autocratic methods but were also opposed to leadership of any kind. Others, with Eleanor and Aveling most prominent, were for Engels's line of a real party carrying on a political struggle on all fronts, including the

electoral. Between the two stood Morris and a group who were certainly not anarchists but had reacted from Hyndman's opportunism to a belief that the one thing they could usefully do was to 'make Socialists' by propaganda and education. As differences developed they were increasingly forced to rely on the support of the anarchists against the 'parliamentarians'. But for the first year the League seemed to be making fair progress and in January 1886 Engels could write to Sorge:

Up to now the whole movement here only exists in appearance; but if a nucleus of men inside the Socialist League can be educated to understand the situation theoretically, it will constitute a great step towards a real mass movement which cannot be long delayed.

Thereafter he began to become increasingly impatient. In April he wrote to Laura Lafargue that the League 'is sleeping', and in May that 'the League is in a complete muddle through having let the anarchists in'. Again, in November:

Thanks to the stupidity of all its rivals and opponents, the Social Democratic Federation is beginning to become a power . . . The fact is that . . . the Socialist League is too deeply engaged in discussing its own rules and regulations with its anarchist members to have a moment to spare for events outside No. 18 Farringdon Road.

At the League's 1887 Conference a resolution was passed holding to its anti-parliamentarian policy. Engels commented bitterly that 'the real reason was Morris's money which is to continue to pay the £4 weekly deficit on the *Commonweal*'. Matters dragged on unhappily till the 1888 Conference at which a final break took place despite a plea by Morris for 'unity and good-will'. Direct contact between Morris and Engels seems to have ended, though without hostility on either side. Engels sent Morris a copy of the American edition of *The Condition of the Working Class*, they shared the same platform at May Day demonstrations in 1891 and 1892 and Engels praised *Socialism: Its Growth and Outcome* when it appeared in 1894 and sent a copy to Sorge in America. Morris also maintained friendly relations with Eleanor Marx and the Lafargues and in 1889, when rival International Congresses were held, Morris attended the 'Marxist' Congress while Hyndman attended the 'Possibilist' one.

Yet, brief as it was, Morris's association with Engels did play an important part in his political education, and it is to this that I want to turn now. His political writings from this time strike a deeper note and seem more firmly grounded in Marxist theory. They suggest, too, some knowledge of writings by Marx still unpublished, or unpublished in English, which he could hardly have obtained in any other way. I have already referred to the influence of *The Origin of the Family* on Morris's later romances. More striking is the dialectical approach in which he was unique among British Marxists. In 1888 the famous *Theses on Feuerbach* were published in German. Morris knew little or no German and would have been most unlikely, unaided, to have hit upon a book published in Germany. Yet a year earlier in his lecture *The Society of the Future* he said:

. . . if individual men are the creatures of their surroundings, as indeed I think they are, it must be the business of man as a social animal, or of Society, if you will, to make the surroundings which make the individual man what he is. Man must and does create the conditions under which he lives; let him be conscious of that, and create them wisely.

The closeness of the thinking, and even language, to that of the *Theses*, especially to the Third, is remarkable:

The materialist doctrine concerning the changing of circumstances and upbringing forgets that circumstances are changed by men and that it is essential to re-educate the educator himself.

I will conclude with the way in which Morris alone among British Marxists reflects the thinking of Marx in *The Critique of the Gotha Programme*, which, written in 1875 remained unpublished till 1891. The MS. was held by Engels and there is no other source from which Morris could have known of it. This is of peculiar importance since it concerns Morris's most positive contribution to the development of Marxism—his views about the future. It was his constant preoccupation with human needs and human happiness which made him speculate about the future in a new way, a way not utopian, in the sense of a preconceived scheme of things based on abstract principles, nor yet a baseless wish-fulfilment fantasy. Morris set himself to answer specific questions: What do men *need* to enjoy full, happy and dignified lives? What kind of society will enable them to satisfy these needs? What are the conditions which will enable them to practise what Morris called the 'art of living worthily'? *News from Nowhere* is the best known of the books which attempt to answer such questions, but by no means the only one. In such lectures as *How We Live and How We Might Live*, *The Society of the Future* or *How Shall We Live Then?* we can see how the fictions of *News from Nowhere* were based on considered convictions, and how mistaken those critics are who dismiss them as pretty fantasy that need not be taken seriously.

His concern with needs made Morris look at the future with a curiosity Marx had never shown. All the same it was in relation to needs that Marx made a short but very suggestive excursion into the future—in the *Critique*. Here Marx distinguished between two stages in the development of socialist society. In the first stage 'equal quantities of labour in one form are exchanged for equal quantities of labour in another form'.

What we have here [Marx wrote] is a communist society not as if it had *developed on a basis of its own*, but on the contrary as *it emerged from capitalist society*, which is thus in every respect tainted economically, socially and intellectually with the hereditary diseases of the old society from whose womb it is emerging. In this way the individual producer receives back again from society, with deductions, exactly what he gives . . . The same amount of work which he has given to society in one form, is given back in another.

This first period, one of transition, can bring great and immediate gains to the mass of the people, yet its profounder historical significance is that it creates the conditions for its own supersession and the passing of society into a new stage:

In a higher phase of communist society, after the enslaving subordination of individuals under the division of labour, and therewith also the antithesis between mental and physical labour, has vanished, after labour has become not merely a means to live but has become itself the primary condition of life, after the productive forces have also increased with the all-round development of the individual, and all the springs of co-operative wealth flow more abundantly—only then can the narrow horizon of bourgeois rights be fully left behind and society inscribe on its banners: from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs.

There is perhaps no single passage in Marx's writings more pregnant: every word is loaded with meaning, opens new avenues of thought. Yet strangely enough, these ideas about the two stages were virtually ignored, and it took many years before they became part of the intellectual currency of the socialist movement—in England at any rate. The one exception was William Morris. He alone seized and elaborated these ideas and his later socialist writings might almost be seen as a prolonged commentary upon them.

It is certainly remarkable that the first time he makes use of these ideas is in a note to the Manifesto of the Socialist League, drafted in 1885, probably with Engels's advice and in the year of their closest co-operation:

The end which true Socialism sets before us is the realisation of absolute equality of condition, helped by the variety of capacity, according to the motto, *from each one according to his capacity, to each one according to his needs*; but it may be necessary, and probably will be, to go through a transitional period, during which currency will still be used as a medium of exchange, though of course it will not bear with it the impress of surplus value.

These ideas were elaborated in other places: in *The Policy of Abstention* (1887) and perhaps most clearly in *True and False Society*, a year earlier:

I will recapitulate, then, the two views taken among Socialists as to the future of society. According to the first, the State—that is the nation organised for unwasteful production and exchange of wealth—will be the sole possessor of the national plant and stock . . . This view points to an attempt to give everybody the full worth of the productive work done by him . . .

According to the other view the centralised nation would give way to a federation of communities who would hold all wealth in common, and would use that wealth for satisfying the needs of each member, only exacting from each that he should do his best according to his capacity towards the production of the common wealth . . .

These two views of the future of society are sometimes opposed to each other as Socialism and Communism, but to my mind the latter is simply the necessary development of the former, which implies a transition period, during which people would be getting rid of the habits of mind bred by long ages of tyranny and commercial competition, and be learning that it is to the interest of each that all should thrive.

Morris, I think, was the first to use Socialism and Communism as names for the two stages: Marx did not use them in this way, though Lenin afterwards did. Later this usage became common enough.

I will make two brief points by way of conclusion. First, that *News from Nowhere* can best be understood if read as an extended commentary on the passage already quoted from the *Critique*. Every phrase there—the ending of the enslaving division of labour and the antithesis between mental and physical labour, the concept of labour as the condition of life, the relation between the development of the individual and the productive forces, the springs of co-operative wealth—all are expounded in this picture of a society based on the satisfaction of human needs. Second, by his unique grasp of the role of the two stages, Morris was able to reach an understanding of revolution as a process rather than an event and so project a model of an advance to Socialism more realistic than that of any other British Socialist of his time.