The Moral Marxism of William Morris

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William Morris's brief autobiographical writings suggest that, from his youth, he contrasted the ideal of a commonwealth based on creative labour, harmony with nature, and communalism, with the greed, shoddiness, and vulgarity of industrial capitalist civilization.[1] In 'How I Became a Socialist', Morris wrote, 'Now this view of socialism which I hold today [1894], and hope to die holding, is *what I began with* [my emphasis][2] . . . Apart from the desire to produce beautiful things, the leading passion of my life has been and is hatred of modern civilization . . .'[3] Morris's conviction that he had *always* had socialist ideals is probably what led Asa Briggs to characterize Morris's socialism as 'innate'.[4] Nicholas Salmon writes, 'His ideals he believed to have been socialist from the very start of his involvement in politics'.[5]

In Morris's time, 'socialism' and 'communism' connoted, among other things, sympathy for the Paris Commune of 1871, and Marx's distinction between a 'lower' stage of communism – that is, socialism, where society is organized according to the principle, 'From each according to their ability, to each according to their work' – and an 'upper' stage of communism, where society is organized according to the principle, 'From each according to their ability, to each according to their need'. Morris, as a consistent follower of Marx after 1883, and as a member of various political Marxist groups, is perhaps most accurately characterized as a communist.[6]

Morris's contrast between a commonwealth and capitalism was based on a moral judgment. A socialist commonwealth exemplified morality while capitalist civilization exemplified immorality. E. P. Thompson characterized Morris's communism as morally-based.[7] Briggs wrote that Morris's socialism 'rested on moral as much as on theoretical foundations'.[8]

The moral contrast between capitalism and commonwealth which motivated Morris is illuminated by contemporary analyses of morality as grounded in moral metaphors. It is suggested here that moral metaphors based on Morris's experience of creative work initially inclined him towards socialism, and later led him to intuitively grasp the affinity between Marx's labour theory of value and the concept of sustainable development. The moral connection between the labour theory of value and the concept of sustainable development which is implicit in Morris's work is relevant to contemporary approaches to global environmental problems, especially anthropogenic global climate change.

According to the American cognitive scientist, George Lakoff, morality is experientially based on a conception of well-being which involves, among other things, being healthy rather than sick, being strong rather than weak, being free rather than coerced, being happy rather than unhappy, enjoying close ties to a community rather than being isolated, etc.[9] Individuals can metaphorically possess

10

various amounts or quantities of well-being. The metaphorical linkages involved in such moral reasoning often occur at an unconscious level. Lakoff writes: 'most of our thought is unconscious – not unconscious in the Freudian sense of being repressed, but unconscious simply in that we are not aware of it. We think and talk too fast and at too deep a level to have conscious awareness and control of everything we think and say'.[10] Lakoff goes on to claim that 'there are two principles of moral action. *The positive-action principle*: Moral action is giving something of positive value; immoral action is giving something of negative value. *The debt-repayment principle*: There is a moral imperative to pay one's debts; the failure to pay one's moral debts is immoral'.[11] Morris's description of the purposes of the decorative arts, given in his first public lecture 'The Lesser Arts (1878), seems almost a paraphrase of the positive-action principle: 'To give people pleasure in the things they must perforce *use*, that is one great office of decoration; to give people pleasure in the things they must perforce *make*, that is the other use of it'.[12]

Work and well-being are conceptually linked in the sense that work is necessary to provide goods that are essential to the maintenance and enhancement of well-being. At the same time, work can be fatiguing, boring, or degrading. Like well-being, work is conceived as a quantity. One can ask whether completion of a project is 'worth' the loss of well-being that it would incur. The concept of balance illuminates the metaphorical equivalence of work to well-being: the loss of well-being incurred by work might *outweigh* the well-being that the work would create.[13]

According to the labour theory of value, commodities produced by workers employed by capitalists take less time to produce than the commodities that workers can buy with their wages. This difference is appropriated by capitalists. Engels wrote: 'the appropriation of unpaid labour is the basis of the capitalist mode of production and of the exploitation of the worker that occurs under it; . . . even if the capitalist buys the labour power of his labourer at its full value as a commodity on the market, he yet extracts more value from it than he paid for; and . . . in the ultimate analysis this surplus value forms those sums of value from which are heaped-up the constantly increasing masses of capital in the hands of the possessing classes'.[14] The labour theory of value seems to be implied by the debt-repayment principle: to the extent that some people who do not contribute to society by expending labour power maintain or increase their well-being by consuming goods produced by others, they have taken well-being without returning it.[15] Thus they are exploiters. Morris seemed to be intuitively aware of the moral dimension that is inherent in the labour theory of value. In 'Useful Work versus Useless Toil', he wrote, 'We have seen that modern society is divided into two classes, one of which is *privileged* to be kept by the labour of the other – that is, it forces the other to work for it and takes from this inferior class everything that it *can* take from it, and uses the wealth so taken to keep its own members in a superior position, to make them beings of a higher order than the others: longer lived, more beautiful, more honoured, more refined than those of the other class'.[16] Morris explicitly addressed the labour theory of value in his series of articles, 'Socialism From the Root Up', published in *Commonweal* in 1886-8.[17]

Morris looked to a socialist commonwealth to redress the theft of well-being by the parasitic class: 'When class robbery is abolished, every man will reap the fruits

of his labour, every man will have due rest – leisure, that is. . . . But though the compulsion of man's tyranny is thus abolished, I yet demand compensation for the compulsion of Nature's necessity. As long as work is repulsive it will still be a burden which must be taken up daily, and even so would mar our life, even though the hours of labour were short. What we want to do is to add to our wealth without diminishing our pleasure . . . .'[18]

Morris saw the potential expansion of the decorative arts into many spheres of work, as in medieval Europe, as a means of redressing the loss of well-being that many kinds of labour entail. Presumably, this is what he meant when he characterised art as the 'certain solace of labour'.[19] He addressed this issue in his lecture 'The Lesser Arts':

> Nevertheless there *is* dull work to be done, and a weary business it is setting men about such work, and seeing them through it, and I would rather do the work twice over with my own hands than have such a job: but now only let the arts which we are talking of beautify our labour, and be widely spread, intelligent, well understood both by the maker and the user, let them grow in one word *popular*, and there will be pretty much an end of dull work and its wearying slavery; and no man will any longer have an excuse for talking about the curse of labour, no man will any longer have an excuse for evading the blessing of labour.[20]

Morris hated capitalist civilisation not only because it was based on exploitation, but because it posed an immoral barrier to the expansion of the decorative arts into different spheres of work. This resulted in mass-produced, shoddy, ugly artifacts and dwellings for most working people, and thus constituted a further denial of well-being.

Morris's intuitive sympathy for the labour theory of value may have stemmed in part from his own work experience. He knew early on that his life would be devoted to making beautiful and useful artifacts. His creative work not only enhanced the well-being of those who acquired and used these artifacts, it enhanced the well-being of Morris himself. He took pleasure in designing and making beautiful things, even when this involved drudgery, boredom, and fatigue. He could feel empathy for those whose work involved the loss of well-being due to inadequate renumeration or loss of artistic fulfilment. He realised that they were compelled by economic necessity to produce shoddy, ugly commodities in order to enrich a parasitic capitalist class. On the basis of his own experience of work, which most members of the middle classes did not share, Morris could distinguish between exploited labour and work which at least provided aesthetic fulfilment for the worker. It is thus not surprising that, as Nicholas Salmon, suggests, Morris understood such Marxist concepts as alienation, class struggle, and practice[21] before he read the works of Marx and Engels.[22]

Although many of Morris's artistic contemporaries may have understood the aesthetic fulfilment of creative labour, they perhaps doubted that most ordinary working people, without 'natural' artistic talent, could share this understanding. Morris saw the pursuit of the 'lesser arts' by the common people during medieval times as evidence to the contrary.[23]

12

Another major theme in Morris's work was profit-driven environmental degradation. In 'The Lesser Arts', he rhetorically declaimed: 'Is money to be gathered? cut down the pleasant trees among the houses, pull down ancient and venerable buildings for the money that a few square yards of London dirt will fetch; blacken rivers, hide the sun and poison the air with smoke and worse, and it's nobody's business to see to it or mend it: that is all that modern commerce, the counting-house forgetful of the workshop, will do for us herein'.[24] Morris's awareness of sustainability[25] is reflected in what is perhaps the most well-known passage in *News from Nowhere*, his utopian novel of a communist commonwealth:

> England was once a country of clearings amongst the woods and wastes, with a few towns interspersed, which were fortresses for the feudal army, markets for the folk, gathering places for the craftsmen. It then became a country of huge and foul workshops and fouler gambling-dens, surrounded by an ill-kept, poverty-stricken farm, pillaged by the masters of the workshops. It is now a garden, where nothing is wasted and nothing spoilt . . . .[26]
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> . . . we [residents of *Nowhere*] like these pieces of wild nature [*i.e.*, forests], and can afford them, so we have them; let alone that as to the forests, we need a great deal of timber, and suppose that *our sons and sons' sons will do the like* [my emphasis].[27]

Morris recognised that, just as profit-driven capitalist production robs workers of well-being, so profit-driven environmental degradation robs future generations of well-being. Both types of robbery violate the positive-action and debt-repayment principles.

Engels also wrote of sustainable development and profit-driven environmental degradation.[28] But Morris made profit-driven environmental degradation a central theme of his work. This is why Morris remains a seminal figure for contemporary environmentalists.[29] But while contemporary environmentalists deplore profit-driven environmental degradation, they seldom face the possibility, as Morris did, that a revolutionary overthrowal of the capitalist system may be necessary to forestall or remedy environmental problems.[30] As scientific evidence of anthropogenic global climate change accumulates, pro-capitalist states, particular the US, continue to resist meeting targets for reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Renewable energy technologies are dismissed as 'uncompetitive' with state-subsidised fossil fuelled energy.[31] The propaganda machines of fossil fuel and related industries spew endless assurances that warnings of climate change are based on 'bad science'; that 'more study is needed'; that it would be 'too expensive' to switch to renewable energy technologies.[32] Most environmentalists tacitly assume, along with the ruling classes, that renewable energy technologies must be produced on the basis of profitability if they are to be produced at all.[33] This assumption is largely unquestioned, even as the threat to humanity posed by global climate change becomes clearer.[34]

None of this would surprise Morris, who saw the outcome of profit-driven environmental degradation as 'a counting house on the top of a cinder-heap'.[35] At the same time, he saw an alternative to this outcome in a socialist common-wealth. His legacy includes the moral linkage between capitalist exploitation and

environmental degradation which was at the heart of his revolutionary ideology. Perhaps the increasing frequency of extreme weather events brought by global climate change will lead growing numbers of people to rediscover Morris's moral Marxism.

NOTES

1   Asa Briggs (ed.), *William Morris: Selected Writings and Designs*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1962), p. 34.
2   ibid., pp. 33-34.
3   ibid., p. 36.
4   ibid., p. 84.
5   Nicholas Salmon, '"The Down-Trodden Radical": William Morris's Pre-Socialist Ideology', *The Journal of the William Morris Society*, Autumn 1999, XIII, 3, p. 41.
6   See E. P. Thompson's, *The Communism of William Morris*, a lecture originally given on 4 May 1959 in the hall of the Art Workers' Guild, (London: The William Morris Society 1965). Also, see E. P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*, (New York: Pantheon Books 1977), pp. 751-62.
7   *The Communism of William Morris*, op. cit., pp. 12-19.
8   *William Morris: Selected Writings and Designs*, op. cit., p. 17.
9   George Lakoff, *Moral Politics*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1996).
10 ibid., p. 4.
11 ibid., p. 47.
12 *William Morris: Selected Writings and Designs*, op. cit., p. 86.
13 See D. Bartels, 'Metaphor, Morality and Marxism', *Journal of Communications Inquiry*, 1999, Vol. 23, No. 2, p. 120.
14 Frederick Engels, *Socialism, Utopian and Scientific*, (New York: International Publishers [1876–78] 1945), p. 26.
15 'Metaphor, Morality, and Marxism', op. cit., pp. 118-131.
16 *William Morris: Selected Writings and Designs*, op. cit., p. 124.
17 Nicholas Salmon (ed.), *The Political Writings of William Morris*, (Bristol: Thoemmes Press 1994), pp. 585-88.
18 *William Morris: Selected Writings and Designs*, op. cit., p. 125.
19 ibid., p. 36.
20 ibid., p. 86.
21 See Gajo Petrovic, 'Alienation', in Tom Bottomore (ed.), *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1983), pp. 9-15.
22 '"The Down-Trodden Radical", William Morris's Pre-Socialist Ideology', op. cit., p. 26.
23 ibid., pp. 30-31.
24 *William Morris: Selected Writings and Designs*, op. cit., pp. 102-3.
25 'Sustainable development' is currently defined as that which 'meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs', *Our Common Future*, (World Commission on

14

Environment and Development, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press 1987), p. 42.

26 *William Morris: Selected Writings and Designs*, op. cit., p. 245.

27 ibid., p. 246.

28 For example, see Howard Parsons (ed.), *Marx and Engels on Ecology*, (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press 1977), p. 182.

29 For example, see David Ransom, 'Red and Green, Eco-socialism Comes of Age', *New Internationalist*, No. 307, (1998), pp. 7-10.

30 See D. Bartels, 'The Road to Nowhere: Morris, Utopia, and Global Climate Change', *The Journal of the William Morris Society*, Autumn 1997, XII, No. 3, pp. 39-47.

31 See Dinyar Gadrej, 'Gathering Storm', *New Internationalist*, No. 319, (1999), p. 10.

32 For example, visit the website set-up by the Global Climate Coalition (http://www.globalclimate.org); also, see Sheldon Rampton and John Stauber, 'The Junkyard Dogs of Science', *New Internationalist*, No. 314, (1999), pp. 20-22, and Paul Edwards, 'Global Climate Science, Uncertainty and Politics: Data-Laden Models, Model-filtered Data', *Science as Culture*, Vol. 8, No. 4, (1999), pp. 437-472.

33 For example, see Steven W. Peck and Robert B. Gibson, 'Pushing the Revolution, leading companies are seeking new competitive advantage through eco-efficiency and broader sustainability initiatives', *Alternatives*, Vol. 26, No. 1, (2000), pp. 20-23 and pp. 26-28.

34 See D. Bartels, 'A Rare Good Thing, The Hopi Solar Project and Barriers to the Use of Renewable Energy Technologies', *Alternatives*, Vol. 21, No. 4, (1995), pp. 36-40.

35 *William Morris: Selected Writings and Designs*, op. cit., p. 36.