

# Interviews with William Morris: I. From *Justice*, 27th January 1894

## A Socialist Poet on Bombs and Anarchism

I found my old friend Morris surrounded by the books and drawings he loves so well, and after the usual civilities I plunged at once into the subject upon which I wished to get his views.

“What do you think,” I asked, “of the Anarchist outrages; this epidemic of bomb-throwing?”

“Well,” said Morris, handing me a cigarette and filling a well-used briar pipe, “I have no doubt that you know pretty well what my view is, what the view of any

Socialist would be, upon the subject. I regard it as simply a disease — a social disease caused by the evil conditions of society. I cannot regard it in any other light. Of course, as a Socialist I regard the Anarchists — that is, those who believe in Anarchism pure and simple — as being diametrically opposed to us.”

“But do you regard these attempts as the acts of mere criminals or of revolutionists?”

“Well, the acts themselves are criminal. They would be criminal if only for the mere fact that they are a blunder. The effect of them is to disgust people, and to provoke the most deadly reaction. They give justification to a policy of brutal repression from which we Socialists are bound to suffer the most, and they do absolutely no good. Much as I deplore and condemn the acts of men like Vaillant, however, I cannot bring myself to tear a passion into tatters in denunciation of them. But I am opposed altogether to the adoption of insurrectionary methods at the present time.”

“But you are not opposed to insurrectionary methods simply because they are insurrectionary?”

“No, but because they are inexpedient. Here in England, at any rate, it would be simply madness to attempt anything like an insurrection. Whatever may be said of other countries, we have here a body, in our Parliament, at the back of which lies the whole executive power of the nation. What we have to do, it seems to me, is to get control of that body, and then we have that executive power at our back.”

“But you do not condemn this bomb-throwing merely on the ground that it is insurrectionary and and inexpedient?”

“No. Above all, I am opposed to attacking non-combatants. And, moreover, the result of such an act is out of all proportion to any immediate object that the perpetrator can imagine could be achieved, or anything that it is possible to achieve.”

“But it is argued that, admitting, as you admit, that these insurrectionary attempts are but the evidences of a disease, these evidences, these attempts, are likely to quicken the efforts of reformers to eradicate the disease which produces such effects.”

“This is no more true of the acts of Ravachol and Vaillant, for instance, than of any ordinary murder. *All* crime is disease. When a brutal ruffian knocks his wife down and tramples her to death it is generally the result of bad social conditions and indigestion caused by these conditions. I do not think there is anything at all in that argument.”

“Then you do not distinguish between these men and ordinary criminals?”

“I do not say that exactly. Ravachol, it seems to me, was simply a specimen of the *bête humaine*; Vaillant is, I think, quite a different type. He seems to me to be a southerner or Celt, brave and vain-glorious. Prepared to sacrifice his life in order to gratify his vanity, he is the type of men you meet in all grades, all professions. You and I have met some of them; even among artists and poets they are not unknown; men who would do, in their art, what they knew to be quite wrong and outrageous in order to gain notoriety, rather than work honestly and well and remain in obscurity. But quite apart from the men, the acts themselves are criminal, criminal because inexpedient and stupid, and criminal inasmuch as they are attacks on people who are personally innocent, and are destructive and harmful out of all proportion to any possible good they might produce. Take the affair at Barcelona for instance; look at the terrible effects of the outrage, and no possible good. Of course the execution of the Tzar was an entirely different thing — there you had simply an act of war.”

“Then, would you say that vanity was the sole motive which prompted Vaillant?”

“All motives are mixed. Doubtless Vaillant believed he was serving his cause by what he did, but I should say he was largely actuated by personal vanity. A brave man, of course. It is absurd to talk about cowards in this connection. A man who risks taking a bomb into a building in that way is certainly not a coward.”

“You do, then, think these are the acts of conscientious Anarchists?”

“Yes, in the main, I should say so. The Anarchists may say these attempts are not Anarchism; but these methods, it seems to me, are a consequence of their ends, and to both I, as a Socialist, am opposed. Anarchism, as a theory, negatives society, and puts man outside it. Now, man is unthinkable outside society. Man cannot live or move outside it. This negation of society is the position taken up by the logical Anarchists, and this leads to the spasmodic insurrectionary methods which they advocate, because you must do something to push your cause: though I admit that Anarchists, in condemning authority, should condemn violence as a means of propaganda. But further, Socialism has made considerable progress in this country – more, I think, than the most sanguine among us could have anticipated ten years ago. It shows that we were rather wiser than we knew – that these ideas were really in the air. At any rate, it is beyond a doubt that these ideas are becoming very popular. And now people having accepted them, to some extent, turn round and say, ‘Very well, now, what shall we do?’ and the Anarchists declare against them doing anything except that which is impossible – revolt. The people will not revolt until every other means have been tried, and, even if they did, they would be mown down to a man by the machine guns and rifles of the soldiery.”

“You think that political means are the only ones available?”

“At the present moment, yes. I think we have to create a party. A party with delegates in the House of Commons which would have complete control over those delegates, and would rapidly grow. The party of reaction would make concession after concession until it was forced over the edge, and then they would probably surrender at discretion. That has been the history of most popular movements in this country. You cannot start with revolt – you must lead up to it, and exhaust other means first. I do not argue that you should abstain from any act merely on the ground that it would precipitate civil war, even though the result of the civil war were problematical, so long as the initial act was justifiable. But with the tremendous power of modern armies it is essential that everything should be done to legalise revolt. As we have seen, the soldiers will fire upon the people without hesitation so long as there is no doubt as to the legality of doing so. Men do not fight well with halters round their necks, and that is what a revolt now would mean. We must try and gain a position to legalise revolt – to, as you have put it, get at the butt end of the machine gun and the rifle, and then force is much less likely to be necessary and much more sure to be successful.”

“The Anarchists, of course, are opposed to all this; moreover, they point to the backsliding of a prominent Socialist in Parliament to give point to their objection to political action.”

“Yes, that is so, but they forget that a party, and the delegates of a party, would be in a very different position from an isolated member, who, after all, was returned simply as an independent member. Moreover, it is for them to show what else it is possible to do. Present circumstances, it seems to me, go to prove the wisdom of the S.D.F. in drawing up that list of palliative measures, that contemporary programme, as one may call it. Mean and paltry as it seemed to me – and does still, as compared

with the whole thing, something of the kind is absolutely essential.”

“But our Anarchists will have none of it.”

“No, of course, that is the real Anarchists, who, as I have said, are against society altogether. But then we have the so-called Anarchist-Communists, a term which seems to me a flat contradiction. In so far as they are Communists they must give up their Anarchism.”

“You think they are really not Anarchists at all?”

“They cannot be Anarchists in the true sense of the word. Anarchism is purely destructive, purely negatory. That is why it attracts so many people who are simply rebels, simply discontented or disgusted with things as they are – as they may well be. It is so easy. It is not necessary to learn anything, there is nothing constructive about it. But with the Anarchist-Communist it is different. Really it seems to me that a great part of the difference between them and us is as to the meaning of words, and as to the methods. They are engaged in contesting a form of Socialism which exists only in their own imagination and which no Socialist would dream of advocating. As to this eternal talk of majority rule – it is absolute rot. Majority rule is a natural necessity – we cannot escape from it. If I choose to run my head against a wall I very soon find out which is the majority in power. But majority rule is only harmful where there is conflict of interest. As Socialism would substitute community of interest for conflict of interest, where would any injury arise from majority rule? Take an illustration which I have frequently used, the question of building a bridge. The majority is in favour of building the bridge, but the minority is opposed to it. Well, the majority *will* build the bridge, there is no doubt about that, whatever the minority may say. But how will that injure the minority?”

“But do you think that this will materially affect the movement?”

“I don’t know. These people, I take it, are not numerous; and as to their end, they are confessedly in favour of Socialism. It resolves itself therefore into a disagreement as to ways and methods. Therefore they should not be prepared to create or maintain a schism over such differences.”

“Then you do not attach a great deal of importance to this epidemic of Anarchism, and generally, you regard the progress of our movement as encouraging?”

“As to the bomb business, I think it is simply a disease, as I have said, to be regretted and deplored, but not to be wondered at. Destructive Anarchism will die of itself when Socialism brings us practical equality. As to the Social-Democratic movement, I think its progress encouraging beyond measure. But this only makes it the more incumbent upon us to pursue a steady definite policy and to form a strong party, with a view to bringing people together and giving them something to do. As to the party; was it true that Shaw said the other day, that there was a party of fifteen already in the House of Commons? If I had been there I should have asked him to name them.”

“Well,” said I, “Shaw must have his little joke, you know. He must say something original, fire off some ‘Shawism’ or the other, as he terms it, or he would perish. But I did not call to give you my views about Shaw, but to get yours about bombs, and seeing I have accomplished my mission I will say good day,” with which I shook hands with our genial old comrade, thanked him, and departed.

Wat Tyler