

Editorial – still playing 'the Great Money Trick'

Patrick O'Sullivan

It seems that 2011 was yet another socialist anniversary of a kind, in that it marked the centenary of the death of Robert Tressell (Robert Noonan), author of *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*, completed the previous year, but not fully published until 1955.¹ The plot of this wonderful book is probably well known to many readers, but it was also recently (and rather movingly) summarised by Howard Brenton, so I hope that he (and they) will not mind my paraphrasing parts of his description.

Around the year 1905, in a seaside town on the south coast of England, a group of painters and decorators are about to have dinner ... The conversation flits from subject to subject, ill-informed but lively, ignorance blazing into certainty ... An argument flares up about poverty: what causes it? One man blames drink, another 'overpopulation' (even in those days). Another thinks education the cause – it puts foolish ideas in people's heads and encourages laziness. An older man says that there's always been rich and poor in the world, and always will be. One, a 'chapel man', blames original sin: 'When it comes to poverty, what a grown man must do is conquer hisself'. Eventually, Frank Owen, a skilled man, and a socialist, can stand it no longer. Overpopulation, drink, laziness, sin have nothing to do with it. The real cause of poverty, says Owen, is money!²

Of course, he is immediately challenged to prove it, and does so by means of what Tressell calls 'the Great Money Trick'. Using pieces of left-over bread, Owen demonstrates to three of his colleagues how the wage system not only fails to pay them the full value of their labour, but also charges them for the necessities of life they have already produced, so that they end up with nothing. Thus is money, according to what I am sure we most of us recognise as Marx's Theory of Surplus Value, the cause of poverty.

The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists is set at a time (another time?) of rising unemployment and increasing poverty, which, in those pre-welfare state days, places increasing stress on the very charitable institutions our present government sees as its Big Society safety net. But as we have just learned, the workers

are not ‘philanthropists’ because they give generously to such charities (although some do), but because they already give away the true value of their labour to their employers. Tressell sees them as stunted, their potential blocked, forever made to hurry and botch jobs in order to keep down costs, suppressing their natural creativity – precisely the phenomena described by Morris in many of his lectures and essays. Like Morris, Tressell was also a member of the Social Democratic Federation, although long after Morris had left to form the Socialist League.

I first read met *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists* as a result of reading what somemight consider an unlikely source – *Borstal Boy*.³ But Brendan Behan, his father Stephen, and his brothers Rory and Dominic, were all at one time or another house painters, and ‘strong union men’, and Brendan maintained that if you ever asked a house painter anywhere whether they had read the book – which he called ‘the House Painter’s bible’ – they would always say ‘Yes!’ So, one day, back in the mid-1960s, one on of my many journeys between Lancaster and Devizes, I found myself on a train sharing a compartment with a house painter, and asked him, had he read it, and he replied ‘Oh Yes!’ (Would I get the same answer nowadays, I wonder?).

Meanwhile, current events in the Middle East, especially in Egypt, recall what many regard as the key section of *News from Nowhere*, Chapter XVII, ‘How the change came’. Here, Morris explains that the main reason his own particular revolution was successful was because the soldiers sent to control a key demonstration, having seen the consequences of their first actions, refuse to fire a second time upon the crowd. Given the essential differences between the two revolutions – one fictional, one real; one socialist, one ‘democratic’ (so far) – the parallels with Egypt (and the opposite, more chilling one, with Libya) are very striking. Indeed, an account of the fall of Mubarak I saw recently, reads as if it is indeed an extract from ‘How the change came’.

On Friday 4 March, after Ahmad Shafiq, the last-minute prime minister appointed by Mubarak, finally resigned, and minutes after the new prime minister had spoken in Tahrir, people noticed plainclothes men carrying garbage bags out of state security headquarters in Alexandria. They intercepted the men and found the bags contained shredded documents. The people formed a cordon and insisted nothing leave the building. State security went on the attack. The army, after standing on the sidelines for a while, came in on behalf of the citizens. Within minutes the people had moved on state security buildings across Egypt, and everywhere they found documents being shredded or burned, and computers stripped of their hard disks. But they found enough files to show the enormity of the operation that had been in place against the Egyptian people. ... For one hallucinatory evening our young people were inside the state security buildings rescuing files and taking our calls as we urged: ‘Find my file’. ... Two days later

the thugs came back. But now the revolution belongs to everybody, and they won't let go of it.⁵

But surely the widespread occurrence of protests across the Arab world raises the question of why they have not taken place more widely elsewhere, especially in the 'mature democracies' of the West. The truth of course, is that they have, but nowhere with the impact (so far) of those of the 'Arab Spring'. In particular, why has the *increase* in inequality which has characterised the richest nations over the past decade or so (and which will clearly be emphasised by most of the recent measures taken to restore 'financial stability') – and the placing of the burden for 'balancing the books' on the community, the poorest and the most vulnerable, while those responsible continue to reward each other with obscene amounts of money (and do not even seem to understand why they should not) – not led to more widespread outrage?⁶

One clearly important argument is that, as Ruth Kinna recently put it, many people in the West are complicit on their own oppression, in that they have been 'seduced by capitalism's competitive logic. Mistakenly regarding themselves as free, ... they (have) been pacified by the slim probability that they might emerge as beneficiaries of market exchange'.⁷ Or as Morris explains,

... in the days to come poor men shall be able to become lords and masters and do-nothings; and oft it will be seen that they shall do so; and it shall be even for that cause that their eyes shall be blinded to the robbing of themselves by others, because they shall hope in their souls that they may each live to rob others: and this shall be the very safeguard of all rule and law in those days.⁸

And here we see the essential cruelty of 'the Great Money Trick' in all its manifestations – the 'American Dream', the 'Lucky Country' – the prospect that given sufficient motivation, but also a great deal of luck and opportunity, we can *all* become rich. Which is, of course, a cruel lie, because, in a finite system, which is what we now understand the Earth to be, one person can only become rich if many others are impoverished.

Morris, of course, had his own description of 'the Great Money Trick', which he used several times. For example

... as to the class of rich people doing no work, we all know that they consume a great deal while they produce nothing. Therefore, clearly, they have to be kept at the expense of those who do work, ...

As to the middle class, ... they do, as a rule, seem to work quite hard enough, and so at first sight might be thought to help the community, and not burden it. But by far the greater part of them, though they work, do not produce, and even

when they do produce, ... they consume out of all proportion to their due share. ...

The class that remains to be considered produces all that is produced, and supports both itself and the other classes, though it is placed in a position of inferiority to them; ... But it is a necessary consequence of this tyranny and folly that again many of these workers are not producers. A vast number of them once more are merely parasites of property, ... engaged in the service of the private war for wealth ...

Next there is the mass of people employed in making all those articles of folly and luxury, the demand for which is the outcome of the existence of the rich non-producing classes; things which ... whoever may gainsay me, I will for ever refuse to call wealth ...

... further, there is even a sadder industry yet, which is ... the making of wares which are necessary to them and their brethren, *because they are an inferior class*. For if many men live without producing, ... it follows that most men must be poor; ...

To sum up, then, concerning the manner of work in civilized States, these States are composed of three classes – a class which does not even pretend to work, a class which pretends to work but which produces nothing, and a class which works, but is compelled by the other two classes to do work which is often unproductive.

Civilization therefore wastes its own resources, and will do so as long as the present system lasts.⁹

In 'Socialism', as Florence Boos recently reported, Morris quantified his argument

... the tribute taken from the workers is no trifle, but amounts in all to about two thirds of all they produce: ... such profits as that are seldom made by the employer[,] who has to be content with 10 percent perhaps, or perhaps even less in bad times. ... (But) it (is) the rich class that (takes) this tribute[,] not the individual employer only; besides his tribute, which in all cases is as much as he can get ... , the worker has to pay taxes for payment[,] amidst other things[,] of *the interest of the national debt* which the privileged classes take to themselves: and remember that all taxes are in the long run paid by labour, since labour only can produce wealth: rent also he has to pay, and much heavier rent in proportion to his income than rich people[, as well as] the commission of middle-men, who distribute the goods he has made, and who instead of doing this distribution simply and for a moderate payment, form a system of wheels within wheels, and make monstrous profits from their busy idleness.¹⁰

But now it seems that, given the insouciance of many bankers (even those now

employed by banks taken into public ownership in order for them to survive) we can add another stage to Owen's Trick – that when the system breaks down, it is the producers of wealth who must pay to put it back in working order, and the 'kindhearted capitalists' who must be rewarded for their incompetence.

In this issue, Jan Marsh traces the history of Morris's only surviving easel painting, *La Belle Iseult*, although as she explains, that is not how it has always been known. Gabriel Schenk explores the 'living past' of Morris's late prose romances, and how this imagined past can remain alive in us, so long as we live in fellowship – a key human trait the very existence of which advocates of the unfettered free market are forced to deny. Antoine Capet evaluates the thesis that Morris's political thought possessed a dualistic aspect which stemmed from his own experience of life – that while he could sympathise with the victims of 'the Great Money Trick', he found it more difficult to *empathise* with them, as he had not experienced their conditions directly – hence what might be called his 'ouvriérisme'. And Emma Ferry discusses the contribution to one aspect of Victorian interior design of Lucy Orrinsmith, one of several female artists employed by 'The Firm', and perhaps somewhat overshadowed by her better known sister, Kate Faulkner.

We also carry reviews of a new and important text on Morris's significance for contemporary life (*William Morris in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Philippa Bennett & Rosie Miles), and of the final volume of William E. Fredeman's *The Correspondence of Dante Gabriel Rossetti*. Regina Gagnier's *Individualism, Decadence and Globalisation* discusses the role of individualism in the development of modern, globalised society, and how Morris's ideas differ from those of the many others who have influenced this process. Morris's impact on the builders of Garden Cities is assessed in Mervyn Miller's *English Garden Cities: an introduction*, and publications on the legacy of Morris and others on various crafts are represented by reviews of books on the *Royal School of Needlework: Handbook of Embroidery*, and on modern interior design from Victorian times. Finally, Jim Cheshire correctly points out that it is possible to understand the practicalities of Morris's ideas about the significance of 'work as pleasure' whilst failing completely to comprehend their economic implications – that they reveal 'the Great Money Trick' for what it is.

NOTES

1. Robert Tressell (Robert Noonan), *The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists*, (edited by Jessie Pope), London: Grant Richards, 1914, 390 pp. (Full text, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1955, 633 pp.)
2. 'Rereading: Howard Brenton on The Ragged Trousered Philanthropists

- by Robert Tressell', *The Guardian*, 5 February 2011; <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2011/feb/05/rereading-howard-brenton-robert-tressell> (as accessed 31 March 2011)
3. Brendan Behan, *Borstal Boy*, London: Corgi Books, 1961, pp. 302–305.
 4. 'How the change came', in James Redmond, ed, *William Morris, News from Nowhere*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, Chapter XVII, pp. 87–111.
 5. Ahdaf Soueif, 'In Egypt it was silence or shouting. Now it's a great conversation', *The Guardian*, 8 March, 2011; <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2011/mar/08/egypt-silence-shouting-great-conversation/print> (As accessed, 11 March 2011)
 6. U. Thara Srinivasan *et al.*, 'The debt of nations and the distribution of ecological impacts from human activities', *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 105 (5), 2008, pp. 1768–1773, www.pnas.org/cgi/doi/10.1073/pnas.0709562104; Will Steffen *et al.*, *Global Change and the Earth System*, London: Springer, 2003, pp. 5, 128; John Vidal, 'Wealth gap creating a social time bomb', *The Guardian*, 23 October 2008 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/oct/23/population-egalitarian-cities-urban-growth?INTCMP=SRCH>; Jill Treanor, 'RBS bankers get £950m in bonuses despite £1.1bn loss', *The Guardian* 24 February 2011, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/business/2011/feb/24/rbs-bankers-bonuses-despite-loss/print>; 'Bankers' threat to quit City "blackmail" says Michel Barnier', *The Guardian* 13 December 2010, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/business/2010/dec/13/banking-bonuses-fsa-regulations/print>, (all accessed 31 March 2011).
 7. Ruth Kinna, 'Time and Utopia: the gap between Morris and Bax', *Journal of William Morris Studies*, Vol. XVIII, Part 4, Summer 2011, p. 41.
 8. 'A Dream of John Ball', in A.L. Morton, ed, *Three Works by William Morris*, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1986, p. 109.
 9. 'Useful work *versus* Useless Toil' (1884); <http://www.marxists.org/archive/morris/works/1884/useful.htm> (as accessed 24 March 2011).
 10. Florence S. Boos '“Socialism” and “What we have to look for”': Two unpublished lectures by William Morris', *Journal of William Morris Studies*, Vol. XIX, Part 1, pp. 23–24 (My italics).