Morris After Marcuse: Art, Beauty, and the Aestheticist Tradition in Ecosocialism

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It is the province of art to set the true ideal of a full and reasonable life before him, a life to which the perception and creation of beauty, the enjoyment of real pleasure that is, shall be felt to be as necessary as man as his daily bread, and that no man and no set of men, can be deprived of this except by mere opposition, which should be resisted to the utmost.

Art can do nothing to prevent the ascent of barbarism—it cannot by itself keep open its own domain in and against society. For its own preservation and development, art depends on the struggle for the abolition of the social system which generates barbarism as its own potential stage: potential form of its progress. The fate of art remains linked to that of the revolution. In this sense, it is indeed an internal exigency of art which drives the artist to the streets—to fight for the Commune, for the Bolshevik Revolution, for the German revolution of 1918, for the Chinese and Cuban revolutions, for all revolutions which have the historical chance of liberation.¹

To bring together the ideas of William Morris and Herbert Marcuse is not such a stretch as one might first imagine. Both of these committed socialists did not separate the practices and ideals of art and socialism, and both, given these interlocking commitments, could not help but envision ecological regeneration in a future socialist society. This mutual convergence in their thinking of art, beauty, socialism, and ecological sustainability has led to both Morris and Marcuse being heralded as key figures in the tradition of ecosocialism. As an important subtradition within radical ecology, ecosocialism has consistently argued that capitalist economic practices, given their myopic commitment to profit, have created intensive and extensive conditions of ecological destruction in the form
of pollution, resource depletion, global climate change, and the devastation of a panoply of flora and fauna, ensuring a continual and growing antagonism between human beings and nature.

Moreover, ecosocialism has further argued that a socialist revolution will help to alleviate humanity’s destruction of the environment in such a way as to establish a renewed harmony between human beings and external nature, in the process allowing nature to flourish and regenerate. To put it in the words of Marcuse, with which, I am sure, Morris would agree: ‘[T]he liberation of nature from the destructive violation of industrialisation, repressive industrialisation, is an essential part of the liberation of man’. Yet the real issue which arises within this subtradition is how socialism can imply a renewed relationship to nature, particularly given that traditionally socialism has been conceived along very similar lines as capitalism (as its dialectical twin, so to speak), only now a growth-orientated mode of production controlled and owned by the community for the sake of the community. Indeed, it is the way in which both Morris and Marcuse conceive of socialism via their aesthetistic commitments which allows them to seamlessly integrate a ‘limits to growth’ caveat in their conceptions of socialism.

What I want to argue in this essay is that there can be much to learn from bringing Morris into relation with the theory of Marcuse, who, as is well known, was an important exponent of the first generation Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School in the twentieth century. What can students of both Morris and Marcuse gain from such a comparative and critical analysis? On the one hand, given Marcuse’s reputation as an important philosopher in the tradition of Western Marxism, to see the intimate similarities between his work and Morris’s ideas can help to resuscitate a renewed acceptance of the importance of Morris within this tradition. Even with the continual appreciation of Morris’s ideas by scholars in this Journal and elsewhere, there is still not a consistent sense that Morris represents a significant theoretical figure in the Western Marxist tradition. Of course, Morris did not help in rectifying this type of dismissal: at times he downplayed his theoretical pedigree by claiming that his position could best be seen as ‘constructive’ socialism, an orientation which he insisted lacked the ‘analytical’ character of other socialists who, he confessed with some envy, engage in the ‘dreamy contemplation of the perfection of some favourite theory’.

Yet, on the other hand, given Morris’s intimate participation in the ‘revival of socialism’ as a ‘practical socialist’ in late nineteenth-century England (from first joining the Democratic Federation in 1883 to his death in 1896, Morris continually engaged in socialist organisation and politics, not to mention giving lectures to middle class and working class audiences for the sake of educating individuals on the ‘religion’ of socialism), the unique theoretical preoccupations of Marcuse’s theory may, in turn, not seem as so elitist and anti-political as some commentators on the Frankfurt School have argued. At the very least, such an
attempt to bring both together in some fruitful dialogue should be enlightening about the characteristics and concerns of their socialist positions, and, as the title of this essay suggests, in clarifying the particularities of what I have termed, the ‘aestheticist’ tradition of ecosocialism.

II

The art of modern Europe, whose roots lie in the remotest past, undiscoverable by any research, is doomed, and is passing away; that is a serious, nay an awful thought; nor do I wonder that all artists, even the most thoughtful, refuse to face the fact. I cannot conceive of anyone who loves beauty, that is to say, the crown of a full and noble life, being able to face it, unless he has the full faith in the religion of Socialism.

The relation between art and revolution is a unity of opposites, an antagonistic unity. Art obeys a necessity, and has a freedom which is its own—not those of the revolution. Art and revolution are united in ‘changing the world’—liberation. But in its practice, art does not abandon its own exigencies and does not quit its own dimension: it remains non-operational. In art, the political goal appears only in the transfiguration which is the aesthetic form.  

In using the term ‘aestheticist’, I am of course referring to a recurring aesthetic ideology which took traction during Morris’s lifetime, and which continued to flower in the avant-gardist aesthetic positions of the twentieth century which influenced Marcuse. Most simply, aestheticism is a position which defines the most important function of art as the production of beauty for the sake of beauty. It thus militates against any attempt to use art for moral or political propaganda purposes, which would inevitably taint the particular experience of which art can supply. Ultimately, this movement initially gained purchase in a number of nineteenth century artistic groups concerned with keeping the beautiful uncorrupted by the growing rationalisation and industrialisation associated with capitalist society, manifesting itself, particularly in the English context, in avid calls for keeping art’s truths and forms separate from the bourgeois world of ‘dogmatic morality’ and capitalist ‘living interests’.

In this register, then, we find an avid concern with beauty and the ideal of ‘art for art’s sake’. While some commentators have seen aestheticism as leading to a form of escapism and withdrawal from human life (or, at the very least, the aestheticisation of individual behaviour or ‘dandyism’), this could not be further from the metapolitical intentions of some of its more political and radical
proponents: for certain advocates of aestheticism (what we might call ‘critical aestheticism’) at least, such a commitment to the beautiful is intimately related to ensuring that certain truths and forms can continue to exist so as to provide a better ideal for a truly human life. Beauty for its own sake becomes a call for a social world that reflects the beautiful—‘the poetry to be lived’.8

As a key proponent of English aestheticism early in his artistic life, this critical aestheticist dimension was vital to Morris’s development as a political theorist.9 As is well known, Morris began his life devoted to the principles of Pre-Raphaelitism (a particular discourse of aestheticism infused with an attempt to portray medieval and natural themes in its artistic representations), and was a fellow traveller of the Aesthetic Movement (of which Algernon Charles Swinburne, a lifelong friend, was a key proponent). While earlier commentators on Morris’s life were adamant about separating certain aestheticist commitments from his development as a socialist, I think that this completely overlooks the important political dimension this position assumes.10 At the very least, Morris nurtured a critical notion of beauty from his early aestheticist position (even if he felt he was no more than an ‘idle singer of an empty day’, as he famously portrayed his poetic self in the ‘Apology’ at the outset of The Earthly Paradise), which was given an important social dimension once it was rethought via John Ruskin’s ‘labour theory of beauty’, that is, the potent notion that the conditions for the flourishing of beauty were directly related to the labouring conditions of ordinary workers.

When Morris in 1877 began writing lectures on the nature of art, he laid out the following propositions which he would repeat in various ways: that art was in a state of decay under the grinding teeth of capitalism; that in the past, particularly as expressed in the medieval social world, art was a natural outgrowth of the conditions of pleasurable labour of the everyday worker; and, that the regeneration of art in modern society demands more than a few artists committed to producing beautiful artworks (such as his own artistic self). Instead it requires large-scale social transformations, which can then bring about pleasurable labour and in turn a renewed aesthetic sense in which beauty becomes an intimate part of everyday life. Prior to his conversion to practical socialism in 1883, these lectures (Morris claimed in a letter to Andreas Scheu), represented ‘socialism seen through the eyes of an artist’, and were extremely important conceptual platforms for the constitution of Morris as a socialist.11

Moreover, the aestheticist underpinnings to Morris’s thinking were also clearly central in reinforcing his attachment to natural beauty, and, in turn, in intensifying his concern for the destruction of nature under capitalism. Not only was it, as one sympathetic critic noted in 1852, a principal tenet of Pre-Raphaelitism to ‘go to Nature in all cases, and employ, as exactly as possible, her literal forms’:12 Morris quickly developed an expansive notion of art which inevitably included nature and ‘all the externals of our life’. The destruction of natural beauty, more-
over, can easily be a catalyst for the withering away of the aesthetic sense in general. ‘Can you expect the people to believe you to be in earnest in bidding them to love art and cultivate it’, Morris cajoled middle-class art enthusiasts in 1881, ‘if they see you in your greed for riches, or your fear of what are falsely called commercial interests, take no heed of and pay no reverence to the greatest of all gifts to the world, the very source of art, the natural beauty of the earth?’ 13 What then is important to see in Morris’s development as a thinker, is that these early aestheticist commitments continued to circulate throughout his work in various ways, and that their influence on Morris as an ecosocialist was fundamental. 14

A very similar commitment can be seen in Marcuse’s thought, although its incubation within a different aesthetic and intellectual context (respectively European art and German philosophy), led him to articulate his aestheticist position in a more conceptual, rigorous, and, as we shall see, purist way. As clearly portrayed in the quote with which we began this section, Marcuse always assumed the importance and the necessity of aesthetic autonomy. Given the cultural, political, and economic closure of advanced capitalist societies (which he poignantly labelled, ‘one-dimensional society’), Marcuse was continually concerned with the need, in order to provide a fulcrum for articulating alternatives to the status quo, to keep open alternative languages and cultural forms. Thus, for art to provide a negation of the current capitalist life-world, let alone a vision of future liberation, it must speak a language not shared by one-dimensional society. And, for Marcuse, such a critical distancing applies to all aspects of society: that is, not only should the language of the status quo be eschewed (and, of necessity, transformed by the intrinsic qualities of authentic art): a truly ‘revolutionary’ art must be careful in trying to aid too closely the necessities of political revolution.

For sure, to argue for the need to keep art in critical tension to political exigencies does not at all deny the Marxist materialist thesis that art is conditioned by the totality of prevailing social relationships. Nor, should one add, does this argument deny the ‘affirmative’ quality to art in the context of a repressive society: ensconced within a museum and printed in a popular text, art can indeed provide a necessary catharsis which allows one to return, satiated, to performing one’s ‘pleasurable’ alienation at work and at home. 15 As Marcuse argued, art and revolution are part of an ‘antagonistic unity’. Art clings to the society from which it arose (in its reality-content, social conditioning of style, and via its cathartic role, which expiates one’s sense of discontent with what exists), while, through the way in which the aesthetic form inevitably transforms this particular social element into a universal human condition, it opens a dimension for creating sensibilities which point beyond the current social conditioning and modes of repression. And, for Marcuse at least, it is only in its own autonomous realm associated with the aesthetic form that art can play any role in the revolutionary struggle for emancipation and liberation. ‘[T]he radical qualities of art’, Marcuse argued,
that is to say, its indictment of the established reality and its invocation of the beautiful image (schöner Schein) of liberation are grounded precisely in the dimensions where art transcends its social determination and emancipates itself from the given universe of discourse and behavior while preserving its overwhelming presence . . . The inner logic of the work of art terminates in the emergence of another reason, another sensibility, which defy the rationality and sensibility incorporated in the dominant social institutions.  

As with other critical aestheticists, such as Morris, Marcuse could not but see that a commitment to ‘art for art’s sake’ was equally a commitment to ‘art for politics’ sake’.

At this juncture, we can already see some interesting similarities, not to mention telling differences, between Morris’s critical aestheticist stance, and Marcuse’s. In a certain sense, they both realise that, under particular conditions of social life, art will of necessity be something separate from the everyday world of capitalism; only in that distancing can it provide an ideal beyond the exigencies of profit and domination. In ‘Art Under Plutocracy’, Morris argued against diluting art so that it could be closer to reigning popular tastes, given that this would ultimately do a disservice to its true cultural function:

Therefore the artists are obliged to express themselves, as it were, in a language not understanded of the people. Nor is this their fault. If they were to try, as some think they should, to meet the public half-way and work in such a manner as to satisfy at any cost those vague prepossessions of men ignorant of art, they would be casting aside their special gifts, they would be traitors to the cause of art, which it is their duty and glory to serve.

Yet, while Marcuse seems to assume that true art will always maintain a critical distance from the social world (a consequence of the universal function of aesthetic form), Morris’s reading of history moved him to realise that art can easily become a practise closely wedded to the everyday life of humans given particular social conditions; in such times (as existed during the Middle Ages), the whole society shared a flourishing aesthetic sense. ‘[T]hat is to say’, Morris clarified, ‘the instinct for beauty which is inborn in every complete man had such force that the whole body of craftsmen habitually and without conscious effort made beautiful things, and the audience for the authors of intellectual art was nothing short of the whole people’.

Clearly, for Morris, art was not to stay a preserve of a few gifted individuals, but should become a defining feature of the whole community. And, it is this social or popular sense of art’s mission (what he had called earlier, ‘the art of the people’) which gives Morris’s thinking a clear connection to larger social and political practices, one that is sometimes lacking in Marcuse’s. Moreover, as is
well known, Morris experienced no problems in using his artistic and poetic
gifts in creating literature, poetry, and songs for propaganda purposes, the most
famous and lasting, of course, the literary utopia, *News from Nowhere*.

Yet, while Marcuse would argue forcefully for the autonomy of art from politi-
cal exigencies (be they *status quo* or revolutionary), in the context of the late 1960s
he began to see a growing ‘cultural revolution’ and ‘new sensibility’ which bespoke
of the possible translation of the promise of art into everyday life, a movement
from the cloistered aesthetic dimension into the open horizon of radical trans-
formation.\(^19\) Drawing upon the aesthetic theory of Immanuel Kant, in *Critique
of Judgment*, Marcuse laid open the potential theoretical and conceptual linkages
between the ‘aesthetic’ and the ‘political’, as seemingly expressed in the political
practices of the New Left and the cultural discourses of the counterculture during
the 1960s: the ‘aesthetic’ pertains both to the senses widely construed (and thus
to Eros, or the life-affirming instincts), and more specifically to the individual
art work. In this way, as a mode of human sensibility, the aesthetic dimension
shares aspects of wider transformations occurring in society, and offers a ‘negation
of the entire Establishment, its morality, culture; affirmation of the right to
build a society in which the abolition of poverty and toil terminates in a universe
where the sensuous, the playful, the calm, and the beautiful becomes forms of
existence and thereby the *Form of the society itself*’.\(^20\) Moreover, the aesthetic
dimension as expressed in the aesthetic form provides an *ontological basis* for
the interconnection between the fate of humanity and of nature, and therefore
possible co-liberation. In an important chapter in *Counterrevolution and Revolt*,
entitled, ‘Nature and Revolution’, Marcuse conveys the ecological implications
of Kant’s philosophy:

> The aesthetic form in art has the aesthetic form in nature (*das Naturschöne*) as its
correlate, or rather desideratum. If the idea of beauty pertains to nature as well as
art, this is not merely an analogy, or a human idea imposed on nature—it is the
insight that the aesthetic form, as a token of freedom, is a mode (moment?) of the
human as well as natural universe, an objective quality. Thus Kant attributes the
beautiful in nature to ‘nature’s capacity to form itself, in its freedom, also in an
aesthetically purposive way, according to chemical laws …’\(^21\)

Like other aestheticist ecosocialists such as Morris, Marcuse’s position is able to
articulate the intricate and intimate way in which the beautiful undergirds both
the human and the natural worlds, providing an interesting way in which to
characterise their mutual fate, and liberating possibilities.
And amidst this pleasing labour [associated with the future socialist society], and the rest that went with it, would disappear from the earth’s face all the traces of the past slavery. Being no longer driven to death by anxiety and fear, we should have time to avoid disgracing the earth with filth and squalor, and accidental ugliness would disappear along with that which was the mere birth of fantastic perversity.

A revolution cannot be waged for the sake of beauty. Beauty is but one criterion which plays a leading role in one element of the revolution, i.e., the restoration and reconstruction of the environment.22

Like Marcuse, Morris was ultimately clear that capitalism was at the root of devastating destruction of the Earth. Each assumed in their own way that the rapacious attempt of capitalism to increase production and turn all facets of the environment into exchange value, creates a natural world in which no potential release, let alone truly human engagement, is possible. In the context of a developed capitalist system, Marcuse argued, nature all too often becomes ‘commercialized nature, polluted nature, militarized nature’.23 Similarly, Morris maintained that under capitalism ‘Commercial war’ was ‘swallowing up with its loathsomeness field and wood and heath without mercy and without hope, mocking our feeble efforts to deal even with its minor evils of smoke-laden sky and befouled river’.24 If nature happens to escape this destructive facelift, it lingers in separate spaces as ‘wilderness’, neatly disciplined and ‘protected’ in parks, acting only as a temporary respite from the drudgery of everyday life. In such a context, humans are deprived of their ability to engage their environment aesthetically and pleasurably; an interchange which, for both Morris and Marcuse, would allow for the flowering of human potentialities.

In the context of capitalist blockages of humanity’s truly sensuous relationships with its world, both humans and external nature are doomed to continued objectification and exploitation. Given this mutual fate, Marcuse argued that the struggle for human emancipation is intimately tied to the liberation of nature. ‘What is happening’, Marcuse averred (in reference to the growing ecology movement of the 1970s), ‘is the discovery . . . of nature as an ally in the struggle against the exploitative societies in which the violation of nature aggravates the violation of man. The discovery of the liberating forces of nature and their vital role in the construction of a free society becomes a new force in social change’. What ties humans and nature together in this political project, are the shared potentialities associated with the aesthetic dimension (‘the life-enhancing, sensuous, aesthetic
qualities inherent in nature’), which intrinsically raises the potential for a society which ‘repels violence, cruelty, [and] brutality’.

When (as in the quotation with which we began this section) Marcuse claimed that ‘beauty’ could only be one aspect of a true socialist society, he was clearly making sure to avoid oversimplifications regarding the regulative ideals of socialism. But, and this is important in understanding the nature of his ecosocialist position, Marcuse was convinced that traditional notions of socialism (which confined themselves strictly to transformations within the productive process) could easily fall prey to the growth-orientated and eco-destructive patterns of its dialectical twin, capitalism. In order to avoid such problems, in its understanding of the realm of the material base, true socialism must include the realm of morality, aesthetics, and sensuousness. The terrible dilemma concerning a socialist revolution is how one can assure that the humans who inhabit the new world possess a radically changed sensibility which would consistently militate against returning to the repressive ways of the past. For Marcuse, this can only come about by ensuring that there is the inauguration of a new sensibility (in a sense, a new matrix of the body, heart and mind), and it is here that the aesthetic dimension plays a key role.

If anything, Morris’s ecosocialist position clearly seems an early precursor to Marcuse’s vision. As with Marcuse’s late twentieth century conception, Morris could not help but see the interconnections between the practises and the discourses of art, beauty, socialism, and ecological regeneration. Yet, as opposed to Marcuse’s sometimes abstract rendering (which hinges on the Kantian assumption of the ontological sharing of aesthetic form in the human world and the natural world), Morris presented an intimately sociological and materialist position. In this sense, while Morris’s notion of ‘beauty’ may not have possessed the same philosophical or theoretical weight as that of Marcuse, it did articulate a clearer understanding of the intimate connection of art to the material conditions of the working class. As we know, beauty for Morris is a reflection of pleasurable labour, a condition of economic life which can be revived through socialism. True socialism, then, can bring about a renewed world of beauty and art in the hands of everyday workers: such a revived aesthetic sense will then initiate a wholly renewed cultural sensibility in which, inevitably, the externals of human life, i.e. nature, will be an important concern for all of humanity. It is because Morris’s concept of beauty is not wholly beholden to the cultural sphere, tied as it is to the structuring conditions of economic life, that he could easily argue, pace Marcuse, that beauty can indeed represent a powerful and all-inclusive goal for a future epoch of rest, plenty, and pleasure.
NOTES


10. I am thinking of the magisterial works of E.P. Thompson and Paul Meier, who, in their zeal to make Morris a ‘relevant’ socialist or Marxist, argue for the irrelevance of some of his aestheticist commitments, or at the very most that they created an interesting antagonism toward Victorian capitalist society, a critical void which could then be filled with more relevant political concepts and ideas. For a more elaborate discussion, see Macdonald.


17. ‘Art under Plutocracy’; Morton, p. 61.
18. Ibid.
23. Counterrevolution and Revolt, p. 60.
25. Counterrevolution and Revolt, pp. 59, 67, 68.