



William Morris and the Idea of Revolution

Terry Eagleton

At first glance, the English literary canon does not strike one as stuffed with revolutionaries. Once one has mentioned the names of Milton, Blake, Godwin, Shelley, Morris and O'Casey (an honorary Irish member of the English canon), there would seem few other obvious apologists for insurrection. Milton and Morris are alike in that both men were revolutionary activists as well as theorists – Milton during the prologue to the Cromwellian seizure of power and later as an official of the Commonwealth, Morris in the early stages of a socialist revolution which has yet to materialise. More precisely, Morris was both a political and intellectual activist, while Milton's political activism consisted mainly of his intellectual work. Both writers' positions were at first glance incongruous: Milton was a Neo-Platonist who clamoured for the king's head, while Morris was a medievalist who was also a Marxist. His detailed portrayal of utopia, however, is far from Marx's own style of thought. Marx was impatient with utopian projects, regarding them as an intellectualist distraction from the political struggle. Yet Morris was both visionary and agitator.

Milton and Morris differ in that the former was a political revolutionary, whereas the latter was a social and economic one as well. Milton drew the line at abolishing

private property. He was a radical bourgeois, not a communist. Marxism distinguishes between two kinds of revolution: those which involve the overthrow of a political regime by the militant action of the masses, and those which go further and transform property relations, toppling one dominant social class and installing another. The revolt against apartheid in South Africa was of the former kind, as were the so-called Arab springs, while the dismantling of the neo-Stalinist regimes in Eastern Europe some decades ago involved a decisive change in the relations of production.

Other people's revolutions, however, are sometimes more appealing than one's own; so that if one extends the list to those who championed political uprisings elsewhere, it begins to expand considerably. Samuel Johnson proposed a toast to the next uprising of slaves in the West Indies; Burke, Paine, Hazlitt, Byron, Wollstonecraft, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Southey and Clough all fellow-travelled with insurrections abroad; and so did the sizeable number of writers during the 1930s who threw their weight behind the Soviet Union. The same goes for writers (Graham Greene springs to mind) who defended the various anti-colonial insurgencies of the twentieth century. In mildly mischievous spirit, one might even count Evelyn Waugh as pro-revolutionary, along with a galaxy of other rightist authors who supported the Falangist victory in Spain. Strictly speaking, those who flocked to the banner of the Spanish Republican cause were anti-revolutionists, out to defeat a fascist insurrection, though many of them also supported the cause of socialism. Since a great many Western writers greeted the downfall of Communism with acclaim, and since the event involved a radical shift in property relations, they could be said to hold pro-revolutionary views, much as they might indignantly refuse the label. Not all revolutions are of the left. Martin Heidegger, Ezra Pound and D.H. Lawrence might be characterised as revolutionists of the right. There are also those from Daniel Defoe onward who were, so to speak, retrospective revolutionaries, profoundly indebted to the seventeenth-century Parliamentary cause. Most people, looking back, would now approve of the overthrow of British imperial power in, say, India, and certainly in America.

Revolutionaries or pro-revolutionaries, then, are far more common in the annals of English writing, and among the public in general, than may at first appear. It is simply that many of them are not aware of it. They seem unaware, for example, of the fact that their own way of life is the product of massive social and political upheavals in the past. Not many people actually call themselves revolutionists, as not many people call themselves Spotty or Fatso. This is largely because they associate the idea of revolution with bloodshed and barricades. It is true that most revolutions involve episodes of violent confrontation, but this is not what is definitive about them. So-called race riots, or skirmishes between soldiers and refugees, may involve such

showdowns too. What is definitive of revolution is firstly the fact that it involves the mobilisation of large numbers (perhaps millions) of men and women, as a putsch, mutiny, or *coup d'état* typically does not; and secondly, at least in the classical Marxist sense, that it culminates in more than the overthrow of a government, or even of a state. As a consequence of the bringing low of a political regime, a new social class comes to power, along with a widespread transformation of social and economic life.

The point about mass mobilisation is worth elaborating. Marx, as is well known, focuses on the proletariat as the chief agent of revolutionary change; and when commentators speak of the demise of the working class, it is usually the diminished role of the proletariat within it in advanced capitalist conditions that they have in mind. Proletariat and working class are by no means synonymous. The reasons for the attention Marx pays to the former, however, are not always well understood. It is not that the proletariat, in the sense of the blue-collar, manual, industrial working class, is necessarily the most wretched, intensively exploited group in society as a whole. Others (poor peasants, for example, or the so-called lumpen-proletariat) may be in far worse shape. Nor does Marx see it as the instrument of a socialist future because it constitutes the largest sector of the working class. He was well aware that the great majority of working people in his own society were domestic servants, and that an overwhelming number of these were women. If the proletariat matters so much, it is because of its capacity for self-organisation, given that it is physically and socially brought together by the very system it serves. Because of their less collective condition, domestic servants and peasants are harder to organise – though as far as the latter group goes, Marx might have recalled the great O'Connellite movements in the Ireland of his day. Raymond Williams's well-known insistence in the *Conclusion to Culture and Society 1780-1950* (1958) that masses are simply other people, while salutary in some senses, overlooks this point.

It is sometimes imagined that revolutions are punctual events, whereas programmes of reform are gradual processes. This, however, is not necessarily so. Revolutions evolve in time, while reform can involve full frontal engagement. The social revolution portrayed in *News from Nowhere* (1890) actually begins with reform, or with what Morris himself scathingly calls State Socialism. The upshot of this state-administered modification of capitalism is simply to disrupt commercial activity without replacing it with an effective alternative, so that the suffering and disaffection of the masses is intensified. In fact, such social democracy leads eventually to a condition of so-called dual power, a development that would no doubt have come as a surprise to Clement Atlee or Harold Wilson. The power of the ruling class is diminished and its grip over the nation's wealth weakened; but at the same time the workers, despite forcing some genuine concessions from their masters, remain ill-

organised and impoverished.

Morris did not of course live to observe a fully evolved social democracy, so that his implausible notion of the dramatic stand-offs it might lead to is perhaps understandable. Even so, the customary opposition between reform and revolution is open to challenge. It is a familiar fact of political history that at one point in the run-up to the Bolshevik revolution, Lenin led his party into the Russian parliament. Besides, programmes of political reform can be bloodier than some revolutions, which may be of the velvet rather than violent kind. The civil rights movement in the United States is a case in point. In fact, many of the reforms we now take for granted – freedom of the press, universal suffrage, trade unionism and so on – were won in the face of ferocious resistance from the governing class of their day. In the colonial-dominated Latin America of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, every effort at liberal reform sparked off violent conflict. Surprisingly little blood, by contrast, was shed during the Bolshevik uprising, and much the same is true of the final collapse of the system it established. In any case, violence is not to be condemned *tout court*. The United Nations Charter permits armed resistance to an occupying power. Almost everyone believes that violence can be justified if it is used as a last resort, with a reasonable chance of success and hedged round with certain safeguards, in the cause of legitimate self-defence.

The contrast between reform and revolution, however, runs deeper than the question of armed force. To be revolutionary is to hold that, given the world we have created, the kind of justice, comradeship and material well-being one sees as desirable could only feasibly be achieved by a change that was fundamental rather than piecemeal. The fact that this is true is itself a tragedy. It would be far preferable if we could attain those ends without such turmoil. Revolutionism is in this sense a form of realism. The true fantasists are those who maintain that we could repair a world of hunger, war, poverty and forced mass migration by a sprinkling of judicious reforms. A good many people, if the question were put to them in this way, might well find themselves in agreement. It is just that they would probably doubt the feasibility of such a project, a doubt which leftists ignore at their peril. Revolution must be a rational enterprise, not least in the sense that it must be more than a leap in the dark. People who are prepared to stake everything on a future which is uncertain and obscure are probably in a state of desperation, and desperate individuals do not make the most effective revolutionary subjects. The bad news for the political left is that as long as men and women are provided by the current system with some meagre gratification, it is highly unlikely that they will trade this in for some indeterminate alternative – or even, given the perils of transition, for a determinate one. If class society can throw its minions a few scraps and leavings, it is

probably safe for the time being. The good news for the left is that when it becomes incapable of doing so, it is very likely to be challenged on a mass scale. Once the future, for all its perils and ambiguities, is perceived to be an undeniable improvement on what we have now, it is rational to commit oneself to it. The revolt against apartheid may serve as an example.

Old Hammond remarks in *News from Nowhere* that what drove the revolution was a longing for freedom and equality, along with a rejection of the drone-like lives of the prosperous classes. This may have been true of the more politically conscious vanguard, but it is hardly in general what inspires social revolution. Political revolutions, to be sure, are generally provoked by a revolt against oppression, and hence a desire for freedom; but it is not exactly a dream of liberty and equality which motivates the mass of men and women to engage in specifically socialist activity. They do so, by and large, for far more mundane, material motives. Revolution must have a smack of material necessity about it. It is not just a good idea. Nor is it for the most part an altruistic affair, which is one reason why socialism is not about members of the well-heeled intelligentsia selflessly proposing changes for which they themselves have no pressing need on behalf of the common people. There must be something in it for you, as there is something in it for some people to be subjugated. We may invest in our own unhappiness.

It is when there is mass hunger or unemployment, along with the authoritarian or even despotic exercise of power, that one is likely to see the seeds of revolution sown. If there seems a real prospect of a decline into barbarism, then the idea of socialism may begin to look attractive to large masses of people. So, too, however, may the road to fascism. One must recall, however, that men and women afflicted by hardship and deprivation are unlikely to have much energy for anything but meeting their short-term material needs. It is what Hammond astutely calls ‘the selfishness of misery’.¹ Revolutionary subjects need a degree of self-assurance and self-affirmation, as well as a passionate sense of injustice and feeling of victimisation, and this is a rare enough combination. Those who are content feel no need for radical change, while those who are despondent may not be capable of it. One of the ways in which they can typically achieve a certain buoyancy and self-belief is by being witness to a major crisis in the power of those who subjugate them – one which is enough to alert them to the underlying fragility of a sovereign class they had taken to be impregnable.

After a dual power situation is achieved in Morris’s imaginary revolution, the workers learn how to organise themselves into a single federation spanning almost all trades and occupations. Morris is acutely aware of the distinction between popular self-activity and some more Fabian-like paternalism on the part of a social democratic state. The workers are able through their confederacy to force significant concessions

from the bosses, including a minimum wage and the shortening of the working day. In their turn, the capitalists look to the state for support, only to find it engaged in measures hostile to its own interests, as it steps in to establish its own factories to provide material necessities at a time when the destruction of commerce seems to be looming. Not long afterwards, a large part of the impoverished population finds itself dependent on charity, with groups of men roaming the streets begging for bread, and the workers' federation declares outright war on the governing class. The state responds by unleashing its armed forces against a mass protest of workers. Riots break out across the country, while some of the wealthy flee from London or are enrolled as a special body of police. A Committee of Public Safety is set up, which forcibly expropriates essential provisions from privately run stores.

The government then proclaims a state of siege in London, with the clamorous support of the press, and there is a temporary stand-off between the state and the workers. This is brought to an abrupt end by the army's massacre of protestors in Trafalgar Square, which results in one or two thousand deaths. In the wake of this catastrophe, the government lurches into a concessionary mood, despite calls for a *coup d'état* from the more bellicose of the ruling elite, and passes some moderately reformist measures. A new network of workers' associations now emerges, devoted to the cause of overthrowing the state in the name of communism; and their masters, abandoned by a government that refuses to embark upon the slaughter of large numbers of its citizens, find themselves effectively powerless in the face of plebeian demands. Even so, the government arrests a number of leading members of the Committee of Public Safety, and a General Strike breaks out. Had the government deployed its full armed might at this point, it could well have scored a decisive victory; but since the loyalties of its troops are uncertain, it enters instead into negotiations with the Committee of Public Safety, all of whose demands are granted. Later on, most of the army join the cause of the people. A sizeable sector of the ruling class then sets on foot a counter-revolution, conducts a spasmodic war with the workers' associations and finally elicits the support of the government itself. There is a full-scale showdown or civil war between both sides, in which the workers' cause is finally triumphant.

This is a strikingly plausible scenario. Revolutions, to be sure, follow very different paths; but it is as though Morris has assembled together a number of the most typical features of such events to compose a kind of Weberian ideal type. It is especially notable that he by no means romanticises the revolution, as some claim that he romanticises the future that emerges from it. On the contrary, the whole event is brutal, bitter and desperate. What he brilliantly shows is how revolutions are complex, multilayered, internally conflictive processes, moving at different paces and rhythms

at different times, varying wildly in intensity, subject to a sudden lull or abrupt acceleration, with set-backs and schisms on both sides. There are moments of illusory conciliation and episodes of full-blooded antagonism, as the ruling class is pitched from barefaced duplicity to outright panic.

Ironically, Morris's matchless portrait of the British revolution is bloodier than Marx's conception of it. In his own adopted nation, Marx considered, as in a handful of other countries such as Holland and the United States, there was a reasonable chance of a relatively peaceful transition to socialism. Indeed, that such revolutions may be peaceful is built into the very idea of them, despite popular visions of Piccadilly running thick with blood. Revolutions, by definition, require the active participation of great masses of men and women, and that this is so is also one of their most vital safeguards against excessive violence. Governments confronted with universal disaffection and an unreliable army are well-advised to back down, and many have done so. It is true that the state has more tanks than the left does, but whether it brings them out on the streets is a political matter, not a question of brute strength.

David Hume held rather surprisingly that when it comes to the question of power, the governed always have the upper hand in the end. He meant that no political regime can survive very long without securing at least a modicum of consent to be ruled from its underlings, who may always withhold that favour. In the long run, as Edmund Burke superbly demonstrates with regard to India, America and Ireland, authority must temper an essential coerciveness with a generous amount of consensualism. The ruling class cannot lord it indefinitely over a sullen, disaffected, uncooperative populace, a situation which will demand from the rulers just the kind of force which is then likely to alienate the populace even further. You can imprison some of the people some or even all of the time, but not all of the people all of the time. Co-optation is a condition of cooperation. The problem is that the long run is a long time coming, and there are times when we simply cannot wait that long.

NOTES

1. William Morris, *News from Nowhere and Other Writings*, ed. by Clive Wilmer (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1993), p. 134.