
Hobsbawm's Morris

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The tenth chapter of Eric Hobsbawm's *How to Change the World: Tales of Marx and Marxism* (2011) is entitled 'The Influence of Marxism 1880-1914'. In it Morris is, as we would expect, a significant presence. He first appears, in a rather complicated formulation, when Hobsbawm observes that 'the most interesting left-wing theorist in England [...] was, characteristically, not even a Fabian socialist but a progressive liberal: J. A. Hobson. The native middle-class intellectuals were numerically and intellectually negligible, with the exception of William Morris.'¹

We are thus led to expect to see Morris as a striking exception to the rule, as far as England is concerned, though his appearance is deferred. He next appears in a general discussion of the relationship between artistic and political avantgardes: '[t]here is no necessary or logical connection between the two phenomena, since the assumption that what is revolutionary in the arts must also be revolutionary in politics is based on a semantic muddle'. Nevertheless, the two groups may often be 'pressed into a not unfriendly coexistence' by their shared hostility to 'the morals and value systems of bourgeois society'. Cultural historians are well aware that heterodoxies often overlap, and the British socialist movement of the 1880s 'provides several examples', including Eleanor Marx and Bernard Shaw. Hobsbawm concludes convincingly: '[t]he avantgarde Arts and Crafts movement (William Morris, Walter Crane) was drawn into (Marxian) socialism', while 'the avantgarde of sexual liberation (Edward Carpenter and Havelock Ellis) operated in the same milieu', as did Oscar Wilde.²

Hobsbawm then remarks that, as Marx and Engels had published little about the coexistence of artistic and political avantgardes, the early Marxists were 'not seriously constrained in their tastes by a classical doctrine'.³ They worked out an aesthetic based on the belief that art should cast light on contemporary capitalism, with special

attention to and sympathy with the workers. This did not limit them to avantgarde art – traditional artists and writers could also fulfill these expectations. The 1880s and 1890s was ‘an era dominated, at least in prose literature, by realistic writers with strong social and political interests, or those who could be interpreted in that way’.⁴ These included ‘the great Russian novelists’, the drama of Ibsen and other Scandinavian literature, but ‘above all the writers of schools described as “naturalist”, who were patently preoccupied with those aspects of capitalist reality from which conventional artists turned aside’.⁵ These naturalists included the French novelists Zola and Maupassant, the Germans Hauptmann and Sudermann, and the Italian Verga. The working class also assumed an important position as a subject in visual art at the time, particularly in the Low Countries; the paintings of Constantin Meunier (1831-1905) provide notable examples, followed later by ‘Van Gogh’s explorations in the world of the poor’.⁶

The applied and decorative arts showed a closer ‘direct and conscious’ link with socialism than the fine arts. This was especially true in the British Arts and Crafts movement, ‘whose great master William Morris (1834-96) became a sort of Marxist and made both a powerful theoretical as well as an outstanding practical contribution to the social transformation of the arts’.⁷ Hobsbawm continues:

These branches of the arts took as their point of departure not the individual and isolated artist but the artisan. They protested against the reduction of the creative worker-craftsman into a mere ‘operative’ by capitalist industry, and their main object was not to create individual works of art, ideally designed to be contemplated in isolation, but the framework of human daily life, such as villages and towns, and their interior furnishings.⁸

For economic reasons, their main market was found among ‘the culturally adventurous bourgeoisie and the professional middle classes – a fate familiar to champions of a “people’s theatre” then and later’.⁹ A footnote states that for the same reasons a ‘people’s opera’ did not develop at all, despite the revolutionary composer Gustave Charpentier having created a working-class heroine in Louise in 1900, and the entry of an element of verismo in opera of this period like *Cavalleria Rusticana*.¹⁰ No other historical account that I know of includes drama and music in its discussion of the reasons why socialists failed to reach their target working-class audiences.

Hobsbawm goes on to argue that the Arts and Crafts movement, and the *art nouveau* that followed it, ‘pioneered the first genuinely comfortable bourgeois lifestyle of the nineteenth century, the suburban or semi-rural “cottage” or “villa”’.¹¹ He mentions Brussels, Barcelona, Glasgow, Helsinki and Prague as places where ‘young

or provincial bourgeois communities [were] anxious to express their cultural identity'. But here he is able to strike a more positive note. This avant-garde did not only satisfy middle-class needs: '[t]hey pioneered modern architecture and town-planning in which the social-utopian element is evident'; Hobsbawm names a number of those in this category, including W. R. Lethaby and Patrick Geddes and 'the champions of garden-cities', who all came from 'the British progressive-socialist milieu'.¹² On the continent, too, the expositors of these values were associated with social democracy: Victor Horta designed the Maison du Peuple in Brussels in 1897, where the German H. Van de Velde lectured on William Morris, while the Dutch architect H. P. Berlage designed the Amsterdam Diamond Workers' Union offices in 1899. The new politics and the new arts converged at this point:

Even more significantly, the original (mainly British) artists who had pioneered this revolution in the applied arts were not merely influenced by Marxism, as for instance Morris, but also – with Walter Crane – provided much of the internationally current iconographical vocabulary of the social-democratic movement. Indeed, William Morris developed a powerful analysis of the relations between art and society which he certainly considered Marxist, even though we can also detect the earlier influences of the Pre-Raphaelites and Ruskin. Curiously enough, orthodox Marxist thinking about the arts remained almost completely unaffected by these developments. William Morris's writings have not, to this day, made their way into the mainstream Marxist aesthetic debates, though after 1945 they became much better known and found powerful Marxist champions.¹³

A footnote refers us to E. P. Thompson's *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (1955) and Paul Meier's *La pensée utopique de William Morris* (1975). But the truth of Hobsbawm's assertion that 'Morris's writings have not, to this day, made their way into the mainstream Marxist aesthetic debates' is not easy to assess, since the whereabouts of that mainstream is not defined bibliographically. However, the seventy-seven notes to the chapter, referring to texts from a range of European languages, show the impressive extent of Hobsbawm's reading.

In Hobsbawm's view, the Marxism of the Second International did not have an adequate theory of the arts and made no effort to create one. This was despite the fact that Morris had developed an intelligent account of the matter, which 'looked beyond the structure of the arts in the bourgeois era (the individual "artist") to the element of artistic creation in all labour and the (traditional) arts of popular life, and beyond the equivalent of commodity production in art (the individual "work of art")

to the environment of everyday life'.¹⁴ This was the only branch of Marxist aesthetic theory to pay particular attention to architecture, which it saw as the most important of the arts. According to Hobsbawm, this was not recognised at the time:

It was neglected because Morris, who was one of the earliest of British Marxists, was seen merely as a famous artist but a political lightweight, and no doubt because the British tradition of theorising about art and society (neo-romantic medievalism, Ruskin), which he merged with Marxism, had little contact with the mainstream of Marxist thought. Yet it came from within the arts, it was Marxist – at least Morris declared that it was – and it converted and influenced practitioners in the arts, designers, architects and town-planners, and not least the organisers of museums and art schools, over a large part of Europe.¹⁵

For Hobsbawm, it is not surprising that this line of thought was developed in Britain, although Marxism was not strong there, since Britain was 'the only European country sufficiently transformed by capitalism for industrial production to have transformed artisanal production'. It is therefore not surprising that 'the Marxist element in this significant movement within the arts has been forgotten'.¹⁶ Morris himself recognised that 'while capitalism lasted, art could not become socialist'. Hobsbawm quotes as his source a sentence from 'The Socialist Ideal', first published in the *New Review* for January 1891 and included by Holbrook Jackson in his 1947 selection *William Morris: On Art and Socialism*, published by John Lehmann: '[c]onsidering the relation of the modern world to art, our business is now, and for long will be, not so much attempting to produce definite art, as rather clearing the ground to give art its opportunity'.¹⁷ Hobsbawm develops his argument in the following terms: '[a]s capitalism emerged from its crisis to flourish and expand, it appropriated and absorbed the arts of the revolutionaries. The comfortable and cultured middle class, the industrial designers, took it over'.¹⁸ Thus the greatest work of the Dutch socialist architect H. P. Berlage is not his building for the Diamond Workers' Union, but the Amsterdam Stock Exchange, while the 'nearest Morrisian town-planners got to their people's cities were "garden suburbs", eventually occupied by the middle class, and "garden cities" remote from industry'.¹⁹ The Second International would bear no more democratic fruit. I am not alone in thinking that the garden cities made a more significant contribution to town planning than this implies. In 1994 Fiona MacCarthy, in *William Morris: A Life for Our Time*, praised Morris's description in *News from Nowhere* of the 'very pretty houses' on the river-edge at Hammersmith, as showing that Morris held 'an extraordinary and deeply imagined image of urban possibility'. She went on: '[w]e

can see its effect as the Garden Cities burgeoned early on in the next century'.²⁰

The cover of *How to Change the World* offers a quotation from Ben Wilson in the *Daily Telegraph* to the effect that 'Hobsbawm is one of our greatest historians. There is plenty with which to argue and engage.' The account of Morris given here, however, while it certainly encouraged my engagement, only occasionally led me to argue; instead, it eloquently reinforced my sense of the significance of Morris to political thought in the nineteenth century and beyond.

NOTES

1. Eric Hobsbawm, *How to Change the World: Tales of Marx and Marxism* (London: Abacus, 2012), pp. 223-24.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 246.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 247.
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 247-48.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 249.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*
9. *Ibid.*, p. 247.
10. *Cavalleria Rusticana* is an opera in one act by Pietro Mascagni to an Italian libretto by Giovanni Targioni-Tozzetti and Guido Menasci, adapted from an 1880 short story of the same name and subsequent play by the Italian Giovanni Verga.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 250.
12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 250-51.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 258-59.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 259.
16. *Ibid.*
17. *Ibid.*, p. 443; quoting *William Morris: On Art and Socialism*, ed. by Holbrook Jackson (London: John Lehmann, 1947), p. 323. Hobsbawm omits the first three words of Morris's sentences, and dates the book to 1946.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 259.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 260.
20. Fiona MacCarthy, *William Morris: A Life for Our Time* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), p. 587.