
William Morris's Practical Joke

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In 'How I Became a Socialist' (1894), William Morris uses the term '*practical* Socialism', italicising practical, to describe the kind of socialism that he had adopted just over a decade earlier. It is a provocative term for a number of reasons. First, he had been a practical artist, insisting upon and making beautiful works of art that were useful – chairs to sit in, candleholders to hold candles. Though not approaching the idea of use-value in the same way as might an earlier generation of Gradgrindian utilitarians, in 'The Lesser Arts' (1878) Morris nonetheless said that 'nothing can be a work of art which is not useful'.¹ The term '*practical* Socialism' might imply that his activist politics were an extension of his art and the philosophies behind it; he was, after all, primarily interested in 'making socialists' by presenting visions of a socialist future that were just and fair, but also beautiful and full of true enjoyment. David Lloyd and Paul Thomas, on the other hand, see Morris's explicit turn to socialism during the 1880s as evidence that he '*displaced*' his 'backwards' art '*in its entirety*', and even that his politics signalled an intransigent rejection of art.² The word 'practical' suggests action, as opposed to the contemplative world of art, however useful that art might be. It suggests the application of ideas, and the need to test philosophies and beliefs in the 'real' world. In 'The Society of the Future' (1887), Morris seems to confirm the opposition of art and action by saying 'the function of the reformers now alive is not so much prophecy as action'.³ In using the term '*practical* Socialism', was Morris conceding the idealism of prophecy and vision for the gradualness of practical action?

Even more problematically, the word 'practical' also implies compromise, especially in a political context. 'Practical politics', meaning what actually takes place in political life, or realpolitik, was a phrase that Benjamin Disraeli had used in *Vivian Grey* (1826) to distinguish between day-to-day political actions (and political theatre), on the one hand, and political ideals on the other. Mediating between Socialist League

(SL) parliamentarians and anarchists, Morris needed to seek compromises, and his reputation for having patience with the SL, despite episodes of pronounced frustration, has been well documented.⁴ In her biography of Morris, Fiona MacCarthy suggests that Morris resisted practical politics, seeing ‘his real value as his capacity to stand back and take the broader view’, and yet as a founding member of the League he had to be involved in developing positions on trade unionism, women’s rights, education and other reformist measures that were social but not necessarily socialist.⁵ ‘Practical politics’, however, after Disraeli, meant more than policy; it meant a rejection of political ideals. This paper is an attempt to make sense of Morris’s repeated claim to have adopted ‘*practical* Socialism’ in ‘How I Became a Socialist’, because I do not think that he aspired to compromise and dreamed of mediocrity.

Morris’s endorsement of the term ‘practical Socialism’ might be understood as a gesture to confirm his renewed commitment to the Social Democratic Federation (SDF) and its approach to bringing about a socialist state, ostensibly rejected when he broke with the group in 1884. Published on 16 June 1894, ‘How I Became a Socialist’ was the first full-length article that Morris wrote for *Justice*, the journal of the SDF, after his partial reconciliation with the group that he had split from ten years earlier. The SDF had declared itself decidedly practical.⁶ I argue, conversely, that rather than interpreting Morris’s use of the term as a sort of olive branch, it should be read ironically, meaning that Morris was continuing to demonstrate his reluctance to define socialism as a narrowly political goal that might be achieved through parliamentarian and reformist measures. He uses the term ‘practical Socialism’ deviously and in order to challenge members of the SDF who would reduce socialism to a purely political or economic arrangement, or promote it in that way. By presenting himself as having been both an unwavering idealist and an adherent of ‘*practical* Socialism’ since his conversion in 1883, Morris shows a little of the uneasiness he had in re-affiliating himself with the SDF and its ‘stepping-stone’ approach to achieving socialism. Commenting on ‘How I Became a Socialist’, E. P. Thompson argues that Morris ‘inserted a humorous reference to his own difficulties with [Marx’s] *Capital*, and an insistence upon the importance of cultural questions to the Socialist movement: both very salutary rebuffs to the doctrinaire and mechanical outlook of some of the SDF’.⁷ I take this idea a step further, arguing that Morris was gently mocking the SDF by emphasising that he had been a practical socialist during the early 1880s. Trumpeting ‘*practical* Socialism’, Morris appears to be making a huge concession, reversing the principled anti-palliation and anti-parliamentarian stance that played some part in his leaving the SDF in the first place. Morris, however, claims to have been ‘practical’ as early as 1883, the year during which he joined the group, which was then known as the Democratic Federation. In 1884, he left it to form the

SL. By looking at Morris's use of the term '*practical* Socialism' in 'How I Became a Socialist', and the way he uses it leading up to that essay, as well as the continued allegiance he shows to Ruskin and Carlyle and their work on 'the mechanical age', I want to demonstrate that Morris's declaration of practicality should primarily be understood as a critique of the SDF's rigid economic presentism and as an opportunity to redefine what practical socialism might be.⁸

Instead of associating practical socialism with parliament and compromise, or simply with economic 'reality', Morris likely considered himself 'practical' insofar as he sought, in 1883, to become a useful, working, active socialist. Having been both an uncompromising and practical artist, Morris associated practical action with hard work and giving money and time to the cause.⁹ Never one to enjoy public speaking and contentious argument, he especially disliked to go 'a-preaching', but, beginning in 1885, and apparently having decided to embrace '*practical* Socialism', he forced himself on Sunday mornings to do just that.¹⁰ Speaking again on his conversion to socialism in 'How Shall We Live Then' (1889), a lecture which was unpublished during Morris's lifetime, he explicitly aligns the 'practical Socialist' with necessary but unenjoyable work:

Of course with the longing for equality went the perception of the necessity for the abolition of private property; so that I became a Communist before I knew anything about the history of Socialism or its immediate aims. And I had to set to work to read books decidedly distasteful to me, and to do work which I thought myself quite unfit for and get myself into absurd messes and quarrels like a schoolboy with people I liked in order to become a practical Socialist – which rank I have no doubt some of you don't think I have gained yet. But all that did not matter because I had once again fitted a hope to my work and could take more than all the old pleasure in it; my bitterness disappeared and – in short I was born again.¹¹

This is not the only time Morris would playfully point out that he was disparaged by some socialists for not being practical, in this case 'practical' meaning merely the ability to master economic language, but he insists that he can be comfortable with the term because it should simply mean the work-a-day dedication to bringing about true socialism, not a capitulation to economism or electoralism. He came to socialism as an artist who was already grounded in forms of productivity that included handwork; upon his conversion, he was not inclined towards theoretical pursuits and armchair commentary, having to force himself to read Marx. In an 1884 letter to Andreas Scheu, criticising Fabian permeation strategies, Morris wrote that 'I cannot

yet forgo the hope of our forming a Socialist party which shall begin to act in our own time, instead of a merely theoretical association in a private room with no hope but that of gradually permeating cultivated people with our aspirations'.¹² MacCarthy insists that the reference to a 'party' here simply means a group, and not a political party, but, in any case, Morris was determined to be a practical socialist in the sense that he wanted to engage himself with the hands-on efforts needed to have an immediate and direct impact on bringing about *the change*. As many in the Democratic Federation, the group which would later become the SDF, also rejected theoretical socialism, calling themselves practical because they promulgated action over theory, the pairing seemed appropriate. However, despite a belief in the virtues of parliament and palliation, members of the SDF, especially its leader Henry Hyndman, also implied a preference for violent revolution, which in 1884 Morris considered a 'theatrical' gesture, given that 'there is no movement among the workers'.¹³ Morris thought that the practical work of socialism was first and foremost educational and was disappointed that the SDF had 'entirely given up that side of things'.¹⁴

In describing himself as practical in 'How I Became a Socialist', Morris also attends to the criticism he faced when converting. Nicholas Salmon notes that, in 1883, '[i]n the *Manchester Examiner and Times* his views were contemptuously dismissed as "unpractical" while the *Manchester Weekly Times* hoped that [...] when he ventured into the sphere of political debate he would "have something less impracticable [...] to say"'.¹⁵ Moreover, by calling himself practical, Morris draws attention to the lack of any clear and meaningful usage of the term by socialists during the 1880s and 90s. Was it practical to participate in parliament? Or was revolutionary action practical? What exactly was the relationship between economic discourse and practical efforts, especially when practicality was also promoted as the opposite of theory and armchair intellectualism? Were the Fabians being practical – a word they used to identify themselves – by promulgating evolutionary change or were they impractical, merely an intellectual association? Was opportunism practical, the making of questionable allies, and even political intrigue? Did being practical simply mean the suspension of principle and the rejection of 'romantic' idealism? If so, would rejecting romantic or utopian socialism imply an allegiance to Marxian scientific socialism? Was practical socialism a matter of time, what can be done in the present day as opposed to a futuristic goal?

Morris proceeded to call himself practical in 'How I Became a Socialist' without defining the term, only emphasising that he was simultaneously practical and an idealist, constantly pursuing 'the realization of the ideal'. The conversion story he offers in the essay on how he became practical is also far from illuminating. Morris explains that, overwhelmed by the ugliness of civilisation and feeling 'in for a fine

pessimistic end of life', he has a Carlylean moment of yea-saying as it dawns upon him that 'the seeds of a great change, what we call Social Revolution, were beginning to germinate'. He does not make clear who planted these seeds. He then says: 'and all I had to do then in order to become a Socialist was to hook myself onto the practical movement', ostensibly the SDF. Still, he does not make explicit what he means by 'the practical movement', and he dims any possible praise offered to the SDF as his beacon of light by adding that he has tried to 'hook' himself to the practical movement 'as well as I could'. The 'realization of the ideal' involves hard, practical work and so, he vaguely explains, he joined the (then) Democratic Federation, or 'fell into it'. He suggests that part of the process of becoming fully practical involved rejecting the hard-line approach of the anarchists in the SL: '[s]uch finish to what of education in practical Socialism as I am capable of I received afterwards from some of my Anarchist friends, from whom I learned, quite against their intention, that Anarchism was impossible'. Morris uses the same logic to explain how he discovered the problems of liberal reformism by reading John Stuart Mill's posthumously published 'Chapters on Socialism' (1879). He credits Mill for putting the 'finishing touch to my conversion'.¹⁶ Alerting readers to his habit of overturning authorial intention, Morris invites critical independence of mind and promotes resistance to mechanical allegiances to political ideologies. If Morris is supposed to be explaining his reconciliation with the SDF, he seems to be doing so in a somewhat underhanded way.

He begins 'How I Became a Socialist' by defining socialism as an economic and political arrangement that is simply the opposite of capitalism, but the essay develops in other directions. He insists throughout that practical socialism is not about compromise and partial reforms, but merely the means by which an ideal can be realised:

I feel that I might never have been drawn into the practical side of the question if an ideal had not forced me to seek towards it. For politics as politics, i.e., not regarded as a necessary if cumbersome and disgustful means to an end, would never have attracted me, nor when I had become conscious of the wrongs of society as it now is, and the oppression of poor people, could I have ever believed in the possibility of a *partial* setting right of those wrongs.¹⁷

This is not a ringing endorsement of practical socialism or of politics of any kind. Though he also insists that he did not become a 'mere railer against progress', the final paragraph of the essay makes it clear that to put 'the question of art and cultivation' before practical questions of 'knife and fork' assumes a false dichotomy

between the two, for true socialism means ‘the enjoyment of real pleasure’ that would be ‘felt to be as necessary to man as his daily bread’.¹⁸ The pursuit of art and the visionary is equally part and parcel of a very practical course towards socialism. Using the term ‘*practical Socialism*’ in ‘How I Became a Socialist’, Morris gives priority to the cultural, lifestyle aspects of socialism beyond the political or economic. Converting the public to socialism by offering an education in the ideal was for Morris a practical strategy.

Morris’s repeated use of the term is made even more conspicuous when we consider that after his departure from the SDF, in a number of his writings from the 1880s and early 90s, Morris specifically undermines the idea of practical socialism and those who call themselves practical socialists. In an article for *Commonweal* entitled ‘On Some “Practical” Socialists’ (18 February 1888), Morris shows frustration with the appropriation of the term by those who would reduce the movement to a deep investment in the study of economics and economic language.¹⁹ Mastering concepts such as ‘surplus value’ or ‘the iron law of wages’ is important in case one is confronted with non-socialists who use terms like ‘surplus value’ or ‘the iron law of wages’, he says, but the emphasis on the economic or ‘practical questions’, which he also understands as the sign of ‘militant socialism’, creates two problems: first, that one will tend to ‘read the present into the future’ and think that when we have entered a new socialist age a term like ‘surplus value’ will still be at all relevant. This kind of presentism is also the basis of Morris’s critique of Edward Bellamy’s *Looking Backward* (1888). His insistence that we see ‘through the murky smoked glass of the present condition of life’ also relates, of course, to his ‘hatred of modern civilization’, a particularly thick line of continuity in Morris’s work. The second problem with ‘the too entire absorption in the economic view of Socialism’ is that it leads to ‘the ignoring of all its other aspects’. He then adds that ‘[t]he kind of Socialist who is most likely to be caught by these traps is he who considers himself as specially practical’. In the following issue of *Commonweal* (25 February 1888), Thomas Binning, a London-based trade unionist and SL member, responded somewhat harshly to Morris’s criticism, saying at one point that it is ‘all very well for people in comfortable circumstances to go in for the “whole hog” [...] and to make light of ameliorative changes in the conditions of the workers’.²⁰ As editor of *Commonweal*, Morris had asked Binning to publish his objections to the initial article. Morris then briefly commented that Binning had missed the mark, insofar as Morris was only making the point that the ‘ideal’ is too easily lost by ‘practical Socialists’ and that focusing on the ideal can be educational, a tool to convert the public to socialism. The 10 March issue of *Commonweal* has further correspondence on the debate over practical socialism, with Tim Bobbin and William Blundell defending Morris and the ‘non-politicals’.

Addressing 'Practical Socialism' in an earlier issue of *Commonweal* (29 May 1886), Morris had expressed the same resistance to technical questions about the future. He had been asked: '(1) Will there be any shopkeepers or public houses in the new state of society, and if not how are things to be exchanged? (2) Will there be any money used? (3) Who will superintend workmen in factories, etc.?' He answers the questions patiently, but one can easily hear his exasperation with their short-sightedness. Morris begins his reply by saying that '[w]hen the plan is visible the new state of Society will be realized, it cannot be visible before'. He does go on to answer the questions, if vaguely, and he does admit that questions about money are important, as are questions about personal property and individual choice, but he would repeatedly insist that we cannot define the socialism of the future by the terms we have inherited in the present. Merely addressing 'practical questions' limits the political imagination, restricting what socialism could become by tying it to the present, real world. The *in toto* rejection of the present world is both the principle for the rejection of certain kinds of 'practical Socialism' and a confirmation of his earlier work as a poet and artist. He goes on to say to the correspondent in the *Commonweal* that '[o]f course there will be distributors of goods', and then, in parenthesis, '(which goods will, I hope, include drinks, as we shall it is to be hoped be able to enjoy ourselves without bestiality on one side, so shall not need total abstinence ritual on the other)'.²¹ On the one hand we can hear the patient, kind, deeply human Morris; on the other hand, his frustration with the lifeless, mechanical nature of the so-called practical perspective, with being dragged into the business of tinkering, of speaking 'realistically' (as in what is realistic in contemporary life), is unmistakable in the wilfully casual, distracted and rambling nature of the reply.

The idea and image of the practical socialist is further ridiculed in *News from Nowhere* (1890), in the chapter 'How the Change Came', the title of which sets up readers to expect a blueprint for bringing about change in their own world. Old Hammond explains that a group of well-meaning socialists, in trying to mobilise 'the huge mass of the oppressed classes', attempted to better conditions gradually through piecemeal reform, 'by hook or crook', until they could bring about 'practical equality'. Hammond parenthetically adds that 'they were very fond of using the word "practical"'. The notion that small, practical improvements in the conditions of the lives of the poor would lead to meaningful and substantial change is nicely dismissed: 'as a theory this was not altogether unreasonable; but "practically", it turned out to be a failure'.²² Linking practical socialists, reformers and parliamentarians with theoretical success but material, practical failure comically underlines Morris's belief in holistic change and his view that a new socialist society cannot emerge out of the machinery of a capitalist society. What else could Morris then be doing but gently

mocking the preoccupations of some British socialists with practicality and practical strategies to engender socialism when, in 'How I Became a Socialist', he calls himself a 'practical Socialist'? Thompson notes that when Morris first converted to socialism and began to write and speak as an advocate, he would regularly be met by a 'chorus of "unpractical", "misguided idealist", "poet-upholsterer", and so forth'.²³ In 'How I Became a Socialist', Morris cheekily attempts to have the last laugh by pointing out that to be an idealist is not to be impractical.

Writing on Morris's life work, Florence Boos argues that 'gradualism and bargain-cutting were as remote from his natural mode of actions as from his imaginative efforts'.²⁴ Morris was staunchly 'unpragmatic', but he had a deep belief that practice makes reality.²⁵ In the negative, this means that life will be circumscribed by what we know and that we will become convinced that what we know is all that can be. On the other hand, imagining how life *might be* makes the imagined life possible and desirable: practice makes perfect, so to speak. Morris once said that 'it is inevitable that every Socialist who begins to agitate for Radicalism shall become a Radical'.²⁶ That we become what we do is a wonderfully simple concept but it is especially risky in relation to politics or political affiliation, insofar as the dangers of being restricted by the practices and received definitions of a group and its authorities are always at risk of overwhelming the possibility of expressing individual character. Like John Ruskin before him, Morris weighs the success of a society and its political systems by the extent to which individuals are free to cultivate personal expression within it. Whereas Ruskin, of course, thought that unfettered freedom in a just world would result in reverence for established hierarchies, Morris thought it would lead to classlessness.

Before 'How I Became a Socialist', Morris tends to use the term 'practical' negatively, linking it with short-sightedness, compromise and failure, as well as to a kind of Orwellian enslavement to orthodoxy. His playful fable in the first issue of *Justice*, 'An Old Fable Retold' (19 January 1884), humorously suggests that the main problem with the 'great liberal party' is its blind, mechanical conformity to received practices. In the fable, 'a solemn conference' of poultry is held to debate 'the all important subject, "*with what sauce shall we be eaten?*"' The conference is interrupted by an easily recognisable 'battered looking and middle-aged barn-cock', who understandably adds to the conversation: '*I don't want to be eaten at all*'. The reaction from the rest of the birds indicates Morris's real attitude towards the language of practical politics:

a storm of disapproving cries broke out, amongst which could be heard loudest the words 'practical Politics!' 'county franchise', 'great liberal party', 'municipal government for -- Coxstead!' which at last all *calmed* themselves down into a

steady howl of 'question, question!' in the midst of which the ragged, middle-aged cock withdrew, apparently not much more depressed than when he first stood up.²⁷

Morris's objection to his socialist comrades who wore practicality as a badge was not unlike the objection he raised against Liberal reformism and its acquiescence or attraction to the conventions of the existing world.

One exception to this pattern of relating practicality to conformity – and especially conformity to the 'real world' – occurs when Morris employs it in the phrase 'practical equality', which R. H. Tawney would take up years later. In 'Why I am a Communist', he says that 'real Communism [...] is a state of Society the essence of which is *practical equality of condition*'; 'practical' here is used as an antonym to theoretical, and to allow for the quirks of individual taste and habit. All would enjoy the same social and economic conditions but enjoyment itself would not be homogenised. Importantly, 'practical' is treated as an economic term: '[p]ractical, i.e., equality as modified by the desires, and capacity for enjoyment of its various members. This is its economical basis; its ethical basis is the habitual and full recognition of man as a social being, so that it brings about the habit of making no distinction between the common welfare and the welfare of the individual.'²⁸ He uses the term again in a letter to the editor of the *Daily Chronicle*, dated 9 November 1893, and also in 'How Shall We Live Then', once more to indicate the need for improved and socially-conscious individual desires, and the respect for different individual desires that follows.²⁹ Though in *News from Nowhere* the term 'practical equality' is lumped together with a general derision of those socialists who boast that they are practical, Morris uses the term in his lectures and journalism to confirm a commitment to a version of individualism that he saw as crucial to his conception of socialism, and as a safeguard against doctrinaire politics.

Morris's thoughts here owe a great deal to his study of Ruskin, who in his own way insisted on reconciling individual expression and the social good, most famously in 'The Nature of Gothic', in which Ruskin thoroughly develops the idea of a society organised around the worker's autonomy and fulfilment. It was a struggle for Morris to harmonise his belief in an educated and socialised but heterogeneous desire with the politics of many of his colleagues. In a letter to John Glasse he states that 'I have an Englishman's wholesome horror of government interference and centralization which some of our friends who are built on the German pattern are not quite enough afraid of I think' (23 May 1887).³⁰ Later, Tawney would use 'practical equality' to distinguish real, lived equality from the idea of an 'equality of opportunity', 'equality that depends, not only upon an open road, but upon an equal start'.³¹ Tawney was

an admirer of Morris, and his insistence that true equality of opportunity was not possible in the world-as-is relies heavily on Morris's fundamental understanding that only holistic change can create true fairness. By using the term 'practical' in 'Why I am a Communist' to clarify a futuristic vision in which needs are to be 'modified by the desires and capacity for enjoyment of its various members' – a practical way to make socialists but an impractical way to make socialism – Morris once again upsets the image of compromise, concession and corruption (of an ideal) that the word practical connotes.

In 'How I Became a Socialist' Morris gives credit not only to Ruskin but also to Thomas Carlyle, a strange gesture if the intent of the essay was to signal renewed allegiance with the SDF. Carlyle's attempt to conflate the ideal and the real is based upon a very different assumption of what is ideal than Morris's understating of the same, but Morris shared Carlyle's basic philosophy that modernity was preoccupied by the 'real' and the practical. In 'Signs of the Times', discussing the Ideal and the Real, Carlyle argues that:

To define the limits of these two departments of man's activity, which work into one another, and by means of one another, so intricately and inseparably, were by its nature an impossible attempt. Their relative importance, even to the wisest mind, will vary in different times, according to the special wants and dispositions of those times. Meanwhile, it seems clear enough that only the right co-ordination of the two, and the vigorous forwarding of both, does our true line of action lie. Undue cultivation of the inward or Dynamical province leads to idle, visionary, impracticable courses, and especially in rude eras, to Superstition and Fanaticism [...]. Undue cultivation of the outward, again, though less immediately prejudicial, and even for the time productive of many palpable benefits, must, in the long-run, by destroying Moral Force, which is the parent of all other Force, prove not less certainly, and perhaps still more hopelessly, pernicious. This, we take it, is the grand characteristic of our age.³²

Morris would modify the proto-Arnoldian critique of an unbalanced age where the pursuit of concrete, pragmatic action outstrips the desire for the truly valuable. However, in transposing Carlyle's notions of 'the outward' onto the development of socialism he maintains the most essential idea that the chief characteristic of the modern mind is its emphasis on short-sighted action, where holistic change was needed (what Carlyle calls a spiritual change). Both Carlyle and Morris would complain about what the former would call 'the Age of Machinery, in every outward

and inward sense of that word; the age which, with its whole undivided might, forwards, teaches and practices the great art of adapting means to ends'.³³ When Morris singles out Ruskin and Carlyle for praise in 'How I Became a Socialist', noting that especially Ruskin, 'before my days of practical Socialism, was my master towards the ideal', having just previously made the point that 'my ideal forced me to look for practical Socialism', he was once again pointing to the shortcomings of 'practical Socialism' as defined in an age dominated by practical, mechanical thought.

Morris rejected 'isms' in the same way that Carlyle had done. Though he embraced 'Socialism' and 'Communism', political terms for him merely occupy the space of a new unrealised world that could only be defined by the people of that new world with their new, improved and individual desires and ambitions. In *A Dream of John Ball* (1886-87), the narrator says, 'I pondered all these things, and how men fight and lose the battle, and the thing that they fought for comes about in spite of their defeat, and when it comes turns out not to be what they meant, and other men have to fight for what they meant under another name'.³⁴ Earlier, in 'How Shall We Live Then', he offers his 'personal view of the Promised Land of Socialism', asking for the audience to come up with their own personal views of utopia as well.³⁵ For Morris it includes 'the abolition of the individual ownership or monopoly of the means of production' and he assumes that it has to mean the same for the audience, because individual ownership and monopolies are limiting features of the present.³⁶ His point in the essay is deeply humanist: that sharing our fantasies will let us know each other better and make people more welcoming of each other. He wants to make socialists but socialists have to make socialism.

In the essay he also states that 'to come sometimes from out of the hedge of party formulas and show each other our real desires and hopes ought to be something of a safeguard against the dangers of pedantry which beset the intellectual side of the Socialist movement, and the danger of machine politics which besets its practical and work-a-day side'.³⁷ Personal desire is nonetheless pragmatic because a holistic approach to socialism would educate desire so that it would be socially and not personally oriented. Making this point he says: '[s]o that when I tell you of my so-called personal desires for and hopes of the future the voice is mine, but the desires and hopes are not only mine, but are those of, I really think, many others, and you as practical men, as I hope you are, cannot afford to disregard them'.³⁸ Adding the winking phrase 'and you as practical men' is particularly interesting insofar as he wrote the speech to address the Fabian Society at Bloomsbury Hall but repeated it two days later at a meeting of the Hammersmith Branch of the Socialist League and then at least three more times the following year in London and Leicester. The question of practical engagement was central to socialist groups at the end of the nineteenth century. The journal of the

Fabians, for example, was called *The Practical Socialist: A Monthly Review of Evolutionary or Non-Revolutionary Socialism*. In 1884, at least, Morris sided with those decidedly 'non-practical' Socialists who did not believe that the promised land of socialism could emerge out of the world-as-is. Oscar Wilde represents the same point of view in 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism' (1891): '[a] practical scheme is either a scheme that is already in existence, or a scheme that could be carried out under existing conditions. But it is exactly the existing conditions that one objects to; and any scheme that could accept these conditions is wrong and foolish'.³⁹

'Practical socialism', that is, was an internally debated topic among socialists when Morris wrote 'How I Became a Socialist'. Hyndman saw himself as a practical socialist and cultivated his image after the fashion of a doer. In *Justice* he would frequently position himself as a man of immediate action and in *The Historical Basis of Socialism in England* (1883), he boasts that 'in England [...] there was perhaps more practical socialism than in any other nation'.⁴⁰ Morris complained that Hyndman was always 'waiting about to see what can be made of the political situation'.⁴¹ Ernest Belfort Bax was one of Morris's allies when Morris initially left the SDF to form the Socialist League, having as much trouble with Hyndman's ego as anyone else.⁴² He was Morris's close friend and collaborator, and, as Ruth Kinna suggests, shared with him the 'belief that the primary purpose of socialist activism was not a push for immediate "practical" reform, but to "make socialists"'.⁴³ But when Bax rejoined the SDF six years before Morris's 'reconciliation' in 1894, becoming the editor of *Justice*, he too proceeded in some ways to accept the idea of practical socialism. Just prior to 'How I Became a Socialist', Bax wrote in *Justice* of 'the Social Democratic gospel, with its wholesome immediate aims for the practical politician' (19 May 1894).⁴⁴ On 30 May 1891, writing on the Paris Commune, he describes the practical, fixed, known and immediate goals of socialism. Mentioning that *News from Nowhere* is '[t]he most successful [socialist utopia], from the literary point of view', he proceeds to dismiss its value to practical socialism: '[t]his filling in of the picture from the present [a reference to Bellamy's *Looking Backward*] or past is obviously all that the nature of human faculty can accomplish. Such attempts must necessarily remain unproductive of any practical result'.⁴⁵ Bax and Morris had their differences but they were friends. Bax was not 'going after' Morris in his essay and Morris was not seeking revenge in his by claiming to be practical. It was Bax who invited Morris to describe his 'conversion' to socialism for *Justice*. But Morris's emphasis on 'practical Socialism' was a sign that he was ready to engage with his old comrades on familiar grounds.

Beginning with A. L. Morton, a number of historians have argued that by 1894 Morris had softened his stance on parliament and that he came to believe that a gradual, reformist approach to social change was necessary. This change of direction

seems to correspond with Morris's reconciliation with the SDF, though he never formally rejoined the group. Indeed, in the 'Interviews' with 'Wat Tyler' (Lionel Selwyn) for *Justice* (27 January 1894), Morris rejects anarchist violence, or propaganda by deed, mostly because he deems it 'inexpedient', though in itself the rejection of violence does not amount to the acceptance of gradualism. However, he goes on to say that he agrees that '[a]t the present moment [...] political means are the only ones available [...]. 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'.⁴⁶ Had Morris rejected his anti-parliamentarism by 1894 to the point that it had coloured his recollection of how he became a socialist in 1883? Is Thompson wrong to say of the most autobiographical passages of 'How I Became a Socialist' that 'Morris was not imagining emotions which he might have felt when he was [younger], but [was] striving to re-create his earlier state of mind with precision'?⁴⁷ As Boos has suggested, Morris's statements late in his life that seem to indicate a compromising truce with practical politics are generally qualified or otherwise subverted.⁴⁸ The party Morris seems to champion in 'Interviews' is not to be 'the party of reaction [which] would make concession after concession until it was forced over the edge, and then they would probably surrender at discretion'. Rather, Morris says he wants a party with 'complete control' over its representatives so that cooptation could never occur. The delegates were to be disruptive, not reformist, and only argue the value of holistic socialism, 'what else it is possible to do', and the need to transcend parliamentarism. Though he credits 'the wisdom of the SDF in drawing up that list of palliative measures, that contemporary programme, as one may call it', this is not the socialism that he imagines for the future but simply a response to 'present circumstances', especially to demonstrate the need for socialist unity. Boos is correct to argue that any softening of the political stance that Morris might show has to be taken in context. She states that 'Morris did not really reverse himself about reformism-as-co-opted-revolution; he suspended the debate. Perhaps he simply decided at the end of his life that reformism was an inevitable evil, and that he would have to plead his case in more conciliatory terms'.⁴⁹ Indeed, he further qualifies his appreciation of the SDF's list of reformist propositions in 'Interviews' by calling them '[m]ean and paltry [...] as compared to the whole thing'. In 'How I Became a Socialist', the qualification of the relative merits of practical socialism sound more like parody and a reminder that being practical does not necessarily entail political allegiance or in fact politics at all.

In fact, it is possible to argue that Morris moves further and further away from palliation and presentism as he gets older. Six years before 'How I Became a Socialist', in a February 1888 *Commonweal* article, Morris figured that socialism was to come

about as a result of economic change. He states that we must ‘allow that such a stupendous change in the machinery of life as the abolition of capital and wages must bring about a corresponding change in ethics and habits of life’. When he describes his turn towards ‘*practical* Socialism’ in ‘How I Became a Socialist’, he sees that practising different ethics and habits of life can lead to change in the machinery: this is the practical solution. Instead of waiting for an end to the machinery that would eventually bring about conditions where ‘it would be impossible to desire many things which are now the main objects of desire’, *practise* a different desire.⁵⁰ By the time he wrote ‘How I Became a Socialist’, that is, he thought that to be practical one must act ahead of economic change so as to create the desire or conditions for economic change. In ‘The Lesser Arts’ (1877), he had written that ‘there is nothing that will aid the world’s progress’ and ‘nothing in the world that I desire so much’ as to make ‘the production and consumption of beautiful works popular’. Almost as an afterthought he adds that the desire is ‘wrapped up, as I am sure it is, with changes political and social’. Now changes political and social are merely ‘wrapped up’ with changes in the desire to make beautiful works popular.⁵¹

In using the phrase practical socialism in ‘How I Became a Socialist’, Morris expresses a rejection of reformist gestures and compromise, and, ultimately, of practical politics. As he said in a letter to the editor of the *Manchester Examiner*, dated 14 March 1883, politics, like reform or ‘blind commerce [...] persists in looking at itself as an end, and not a means’. ‘*Practical* socialism’ for Morris is not practical politics but rather the act of pushing politics to the margins. Morris was not contradicting himself when he wrote to C. E. Maurice that ‘I do not believe in the world being saved by any system’.⁵² Socialism for him was not a system but rather the means of rejecting systems; in the spirit of Carlyle, it was a rejection of Morrison Pills and a transformative process that had to be constantly applied to both the personal and the social. Morris’s ‘*practical* Socialism’ was far from being an attempt to be practical by using the contemporary language of the political, as distinct, say, from writing about the authenticity of medieval society. Rather, ‘practical Socialism’ was an attempt to be practical by imagining the end (authentic living) as a way to develop the means (socialism beyond the narrowly economic). Morris regularly compels audiences to contemplate the unforeseen, the unknowable future. For Morris, though, getting audiences to dream of ‘How We Shall Live Then’ and to have hope that these dreams could be realised was itself practical, because dreaming and hoping and imagining alters attitudes towards the present and what we should demand in the present. If historical conditions impede the political imagination, then by the same process only the de-reification of the present in the imaginative act enables the making of socialists: it is practical to be a dreamer, to be uncompromising, and to be impractical. In ‘How

I Became a Socialist', Morris says, 'my ideal forced me to look for practical Socialism', but by this he implies that it is in the ideal that he found practical socialism.⁵³

NOTES

1. *The Collected Works of William Morris*, ed. by May Morris, 24 vols (New York: Russell and Russell, 1966), XXII, p. 23. (Afterwards CW).
2. David Lloyd and Paul Thomas, *Culture and the State* (New York: Routledge, 1998), p. 151.
3. *William Morris: Artist, Writer, Socialist*, ed. by May Morris, 2 vols (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1936), II, p. 453.
4. For example, see J.W. Mackail's *The Life of William Morris*. Mackail says that with the Socialist League Morris 'had a patience that was all but inexhaustible'. J.W. Mackail, *The Life of William Morris* (New York: Haskell House, 1970), p. 171.
5. Fiona MacCarthy, *William Morris: A Life for Our Time* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), p. 496. (Afterwards MacCarthy).
6. With reference to the SDF's version of socialism, Trevor Lloyd says that 'what was printed regularly in *Justice* as the SDF policy was a set of objectives almost all of which were acceptable to radicals in the Liberal party, and then some short-term proposals "to palliate the existing social order"'. Trevor Lloyd, 'Morris v. Hyndman: *Commonweal* and *Justice*', *Victorian Periodicals Newsletter*, 9: 4 (1976), 119-28 (122-23).
7. E. P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*, 2nd rev. edn (London: Merlin Press, 1977), p. 619. (Afterwards Thompson).
8. The SDF's strategies were diverse and complicated, but palliation was often promoted as the best way to bring more working people into the cause. For more on the SDF see Mark Bevir, *The Making of British Socialism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), pp. 106-127, and Anna Vaninskaya, *William Morris and the Idea of Community: Romance, History, and Propaganda, 1880-1914* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010).
9. In a letter to Andreas Scheu, dated 5 September 1883, in which Morris set out his 'rather a long-winded sketch of my very uneventful life', he says that 'all this time I have been working hard at my business, in which I have had a considerable success even from the commercial side; I believe if I had yielded on a few points of principle I might have become a positively rich man; but even as it is I have nothing to complain of'. *The Collected Letters of William Morris*, ed. by Norman Kelvin, 4 vols in 5 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984-1996), II, pp. 227, 229. (Afterwards Kelvin).
10. In an 1887 letter to Georgiana Burne-Jones, he says that 'I am not over-inclined for my morning perchment at Walham Green, but go I must, as also to Victoria Park in the afternoon. I had a sort of dastardly hope that it might rain'. Morris uses the term 'a-preaching' in another letter to Georgiana Burne-Jones on 27 May 1885. Kelvin, II, pp. 686, 438.
11. Paul Meier, 'An Unpublished Lecture of William Morris', *International Review of Social History*, 16: 2 (August 1971), 1-24 (10). (Afterwards Meier).
12. Kelvin, II, p. 295.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 364.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 631.
15. Nicholas Salmon, "'The Battered Looking and Middle-aged Barn-cock': Or 'An Old Fable Retold'", *JWMS*, 14: 3 (Winter 2001), 49-51 (50).
16. CW, XXIII, p. 278.
17. *Ibid.*
18. *Ibid.*, p. 281.
19. William Morris, *Political Writings: Contributions to 'Justice' and 'Commonweal' 1883-1890*, ed. by Nicholas Salmon (Bristol: Thoemmes, 1994), pp. 336-42. (Afterwards Morris, *Political Writings*).
20. Thomas Binning, "'Practical" Socialists', *Commonweal*, 4: 111 (25 February 1888), 61.

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21. Morris, *Political Writings*, pp. 147-48.
 22. CW, XVI, p. 105.
 23. Thompson, p. 309.
 24. Speaking of Morris's refusal to 'reduce a unified vision to its more "practical" components', Florence Boos importantly reminds us that 'Morris was one of the few who debated the issue of electoralism for whom a "successful" political career as a suitably trimmed "maverick" would in fact have been readily available'. Florence Boos, 'William Morris's *Socialist Diary*', *History Workshop Journal*, 13: 1 (Spring 1982), 1-76 (10-11). (Afterwards Boos).
 25. MacCarthy, p. 493.
 26. Quoted in Florence Boos and William Boos, 'The Utopian Communism of William Morris', *History of Political Thought*, 7: 3 (1986), 489-510 (495). (Afterwards Boos and Boos).
 27. Morris, *Political Writings*, pp. 3-4.
 28. William Morris, *The Why I Ams: Why I Am a Communist* (London: Tochat, Liberty Press), p. 2.
 29. In 'How Shall We Live Then' he says, '[n]o other ideal on this matter of livelihood in a post-monopolist community appears to me worth considering than the satisfaction of each man's needs in return for the exercise of his faculties for the benefit of each and all: to me this seems the only rational society. And this means practical equality.' Meier, p. 21.
 30. Quoted in Boos and Boos, p. 493.
 31. Richard Tawney, *Equality* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1931), p. 37.
 32. Thomas Carlyle, 'Signs of the Times', in *Scottish and Other Miscellanies* (London: J. M. Dent, 1950), pp. 223-45 (237-38). (Afterwards Carlyle).
 33. *Ibid.*, p. 226.
 34. CW, XVI, pp. 231-32.
 35. Meier, p. 6.
 36. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
 37. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
 38. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
 39. Oscar Wilde, 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism' [1891], in *Complete Works of Oscar Wilde* (Glasgow: Harper Collins, 1994), pp. 1174-97 (1194).
 40. H. M. Hyndman, *The Historical Basis of Socialism in England* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench and Co., 1883), p. 409.
 41. Kelvin, I, p. 228.
 42. Describing the resignation of Bax, Edward Aveling and Morris from the SDF, and their attempt to establish *Commonweal*, Friedrich Engels calls the three of them 'the only honest men among the intellectuals – but men as unpractical (two poets and one philosopher) as you could possibly find'. Quoted in Thompson, p. 360.
 43. Ruth Kinna, 'Time and Utopia: The Gap between Morris and Bax', *JWMS*, 18: 4 (Summer 2010), 36-47 (37).
 44. Ernest Belfort Bax, 'The New Gospel', *Justice*, 11: 540 (19 May 1894), 4.
 45. Ernest Belfort Bax, 'The Socialistic Situation', *Justice*, 8: 385 (30 May 1891), 2.
 46. William Morris and 'Wat Tyler', 'Interviews with William Morris: I. From *Justice*, 27 January 1894: "A Socialist Poet on Bombs and Anarchism"', *JWMS*, 10: 3 (Autumn 1993), 2-5.
 47. Thompson, pp. 125-26.
 48. Boos, pp. 13-15.
 49. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
 50. Morris, *Political Writings*, p. 338.
 51. CW, XXII, 6.
 52. Kelvin, II, pp. 173, 202.
 53. CW, XXIII, pp. 278-79.