William Morris and 'Education Towards Revolution':

'Making Socialists' versus 'Putting Them In Their Place'

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The Victorian debate about education was principally concerned with the containment of democracy. In truth, it was hardly a debate about education at all, but about schooling - for class deference, disciplined wage slavery and responsible voting. The oft-cited, though frequently misquoted, words of Robert Lowe, in his speech to the House of Commons on the passing of the 1867 electoral Reform Act, define axiomatically the political motives of the Victorian state educators: "I believe it will be absolutely necessary that you should prevail on our future masters to learn their letters". Such schooling should be given to the newly-enfranchised workers so that (again, in the explicit words of Lowe) "they may appreciate and defer to a higher cultivation when they meet it." Concluding his speech to the Commons in support of compulsory elementary education, on 17th February 1870, W.E. Forster (who was Matthew Arnold's brother-in-law) left his fellow parliamentarians in no doubt that enforced educational culture was to be commended not merely as a good end in itself, but as an insurance against the unchecked democratic impulses (Arnold's 'Anarchy') of those who were to be educated:

Parliament has lately decided that England shall in future be governed by popular government... now that we have given them political power we must not wait any longer to give them education. There are questions demanding answers, problems which must be solved, which ignorant constituencies are ill-fitted to solve.2

Earlier in the century, when the political struggle for the working-class vote gave rise to the great Chartist movement, Sir James Graham, Peel's Home Secretary, took to parliament a Factory Act including a provision for universal elementary education. Speaking for it he explained that "The police and the soldiers have done their duty, the time has arrived when moral and religious instructors must go forth and reclaim the people from the error of their ways." In short, schoolmasters can contain democracy more efficiently than sabreurs. Kay-Shuttleworth, another veritable liberal friend of schooling for all, reported to parliament how "we cannot contemplate with unconcern the vast physical force which is now moved by men so ignorant and so
unprincipled as the Chartist leaders” and therefore the Tories should be ashamed for failing to throw their political weight behind “the diffusion of that knowledge among the working classes which tends beyond anything else to promote the security of property and the maintenance of public order.” Such a plea was not lost on The Times which, on 2nd September 1851, editorialised that “Cheap publications containing the wildest and most anarchical doctrines are scattered over the land . . . Let a prudent spirit of conciliation enable the wise and the good to offer the people a beneficial education in place of this abominable teaching.” The gift of free schooling, granted by ‘the wise and the good’, came with a hidden cost: we teach you to read; you read our lips when election time comes around.

It was in the context of such intended schooling for submission that Morris offered his penetrating analysis of capitalist education. This he described as being “only class education” which is “purely commercial and political”. Under capitalism “people are ‘educated’ to become workmen or the employers of workmen, or the hangers-on of the employers, they are not educated to become men.” Far from hastening the movement for workers’ self-emancipation, such schooling inculcated habits of regimentation: educating cogs for the profit-churning machine. And yet Morris could not dismiss the matter of workers’ education. His socialist vision depended upon such a process being undertaken successfully. For Morris, as a social revolutionary, the mass diffusion of political knowledge was a prerequisite for the transformation of social relationships from those based upon market profit to those based upon human need. If the schools could not be relied upon to spread such knowledge, and could be identified as obstacles in the path of a gathering working-class consciousness, then nothing less than a full-scale educational struggle was called for. It is too easy to dismiss such counter-educational efforts by the early socialists as mere “abstract propagandism” (as if there is something abstract about standing out on a windy street corner convincing workers of the case for revolution) or as talk rather than action – as if the two are inherently dichotomised, with robotic proletarians only capable of non-verbalised ‘action’ while saloon socialists jaw-jaw-jaw their passage through the class war. Attempts to create a rigid antinomy between education and agitation are absurd and usually based on the belief that mere workers are only capable of being agitated rather than educated. The subversive educational course adopted by Morris and his comrades recognised with strategic clarity that democratic self-emancipation by the workers for themselves (in accordance with Marx’s opening dictum of The First International) was the only guarantee of a non-authoritarian outcome from a socialist revolution. “Therefore, I say, make Socialists,” wrote Morris in 1890. “We Socialists can do nothing else that is useful, and preaching and teaching is not out of date for that purpose; but rather for those who, like myself, do not believe in State Socialism, it is the only rational means of attaining to the New Order of Things.” This was the same policy as that stated at the outset of the Socialist League in 1885: “The work that lies before us at present is to make Socialists, to cover the country with a network of associations composed of men who feel their antagonism to the dominant classes, and have no temptation to waste their time in the thousand follies of party politics.”

The function of education as a revolutionary process rested upon a fundamental assumption: that the mass of the people were indeed educable. This was by no means a self-evident supposition amongst Morris’s contemporaries. Perceiving the class

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hierarchy in sociobiological terms, the Victorian intellectual élite justified minimal educational opportunities for working-class children not only on the bases of cost and political contingency, but also on the grounds that the children of those who laboured for their livings were simply incapable of learning very much. Ragged inhabitants of squalid dwellings were biologically destined to lives of all but functional ignorance – and more so if they had the misfortune to be born girls. Over a century later it is perhaps difficult to comprehend the conception of human nature which attributed mental incapacity to the impoverished and the deprived majority, but this view prevailed, even, as we shall see, amongst some of those who were Morris's self-declared socialist comrades.

That unyielding enemy of the culture of democracy, George Gissing, was one Victorian who briefly pursued the idea of providing radical education for the working class. In the spring of 1879 he proposed to give a series of lectures to workingmen and to support the establishment of a network of free libraries, arguing in defence of this project that "No material advance will ever be effected if we do not take for our earliest watchword – popular education." He gave one such lecture, after which a career of undisguised contempt for working-class educability was pursued. The course of Gissing's thinking on this matter was so emblematic of the snobbery and rationalised disdain felt by late Victorian intellectuals in relation to the workers' capacity to develop their intelligence that it may serve as a direct contrast to Morris's outlook. Indeed, Demos, Gissing's most specifically anti-socialist novel, has a character called Westlake who is directly based upon Morris. But it is in his novel, Thyrza, published a year after Demos, that Gissing presents his readers with the character, Egremont, a young idealist whose mission is to provide popular education, but not, as he explained, for all workers:

With the mud at the bottom of society we can practically do nothing; only the vast changes to be wrought by time will cleanse that vast foulness, by destroying the monstrous wrong which produces it. What I should like to attempt would be the spiritual education of the upper artisan and mechanic class. At present they are all but wholly in the hands of men who can do them nothing but harm – journalists, socialists, vulgar propagators of what is called freethought. These all work against culture, yet here is the field really waiting for the right tillage. I have in mind one or two of the men at our factory in Lambeth. They are well-conducted and intelligent fellows, but, save for a vague curiosity, I should say they live without conscious aim beyond that of keeping their families in comfort. They have no religion, a matter of course; they talk incessantly of politics, knowing nothing better; but they are very far above the gross multitude . . . Now suppose one took a handful of such typical men and tried to inspire them with a moral ideal.¹⁰

Egremont pursues this project, damned from the outset by Gissing's conviction that to suppose that one can inspire workers with ideals is doomed to ignominious failure. Indeed, Egremont's workers' library in Lambeth is not a success; his condescendingly conceived lectures, upon subjects manifestly unsuited to the interests of his audience, are delivered to ever-diminishing numbers of proletarian disciples; and Egremont himself is morally corrupted by his encounter with Thyrza Trent, a woman of the class to which he seeks to appeal. Egremont's dejection is matched by Gissing's satisfaction: the masses are ineducable; case proven. Gissing's novels are replete with
case studies of workers who are educated beyond their natural level: Mutimer the socialist in Demos whose struggle to make sense of the world through books and to articulate his analysis through oratory is parodied and ridiculed as a vainglorious hypocrite; the sad sisters in The Odd Women for whom the attempt to raise their intellects has cost them their sexuality; poor Jessica Morgan in In The Year Of The Jubilee, whose feeble female brain collapses under the weight of exam pressure. Godwin Peake, the protagonist of Gissing's Born in Exile, who is in so many ways the sardonic autobiographical voice of his creator, declares that “I hate low, uneducated people! I hate them worse than the filthiest vermin... They ought to be swept off the face of the earth!... All the grown-up creatures, who can’t speak proper English and don’t know how to behave themselves, I’d transport them to the Falkland Islands... and let them die off as soon as possible. The children should be sent to school and purified, if possible; if not, they too should be got rid of.” This call to meritocratic expatriation and even genocide was not at all far from Gissing’s personally-expressed views on education; and, as John Carey has argued, this was no isolated case of Victorian contempt for the so-called mass-mind.

It would be hard to think of any Victorian writer less like Gissing – less prone to snobbery of any kind – than Morris. It was this which made his outlook unique: a man of great riches; a childhood surrounded by fineries and security; formal education in what were nominally the right places (Marlborough public school and then Exeter College, Oxford); an artist of widely recognised talent – and yet no hint of self-deceit that this owed anything to inherent superiority rather than the luck of birth within an iniquitously class-divided society. Perhaps it was the very solidity of his class status that allowed Morris to refuse the exclusivity of its benefits and demand mental refinement for all; how different from Gissing whose infamously tortuous climb to respectability had left him so vulnerable that he clung to his classicism, syntactical skills and pseudo-received pronunciation with a preciousness so exclusive that the very notion of popular education tormented him.

How far did those calling themselves socialists (which Gissing did not) share such contempt for the prospect of popular education? And if they did, then how could the making of socialists proceed without an appeal to the development of class-consciousness? This was not a new problem: in September 1879 Marx and Engels had found it necessary to distance themselves from those German social-democrats who, while militant in their advocacy of working-class liberation from capitalist oppression, were quite convinced that the workers themselves could be in no fit intellectual condition to bring this about. In their circular letter to the Social-Democratic Workers' Party in Germany Marx and Engels explained that “When the International was formed we expressly formulated the battle-cry: The emancipation of the working classes must be achieved by the working classes themselves. We cannot therefore co-operate with people who openly state that the workers are too uneducated to emancipate themselves and must be freed from above by philanthropic persons...”

In the year of Morris's death, Ramsay MacDonald, addressing an ILP meeting in Rochdale, spoke in terms reflecting ideas about working-class consciousness which had been rehearsed for over a decade in bodies ranging from the SDF to the Fabian Society:
The speaker appealed for socialists more frequently to put themselves in the position of the man in the street, who is on the whole sympathetic, but does not want to follow out economic complexities. We can talk socialism seriously to him and we will likely disgust him; we may gas sentimentalities to him and we may capture a member who will only be one more impossibilist in our movement; we may show him what we can do now, show him that we are as interested as he is in doing the smaller things that lie at our feet, and he will become a valuable supporter...

Such thinking seems to possess an almost unquestionably experiential force. Of course, you can't expect workers to think seriously about socialism: it would disgust the poor fools and bewilder them with economic complexities beyond their mental reach. But who is to say that these underlying assumptions are at all true? Other socialist leaders were to say it, and say it often. For example (and there are very many to choose from), A.E. Lauder, writing in the Social-Democrat assures his readers that

The man in the street is not converted to ideas; he drifts along the sluggish current of public opinion. He has passed unconsciously from the days when human life was at the mercy of the strong, and nothing but physical might ruled, to his present state of development, and he will go on in just the same matter-of-fact way to higher stages... He will enter on a state of brotherhood, not as a result of being preached at (for to preaching he is impervious), or from any inner conviction (with which he is never troubled), but simply because the drift of economic evolution carries him with it.10

(Emphasis added)

From H.M. Hyndman, the Eton-educated overlord of the SDF, came equal certainty that workers' brains were to be superfluous in the process of establishing socialism: “...a slave-class cannot be freed by the slaves themselves,” he told them. ‘The leadership, the initiative, the teaching, the organization, must come from those who were born into a different position, and are used to train their faculties in early life.”17 – making it rather fortunate that one such as Hyndman was around to provide such a service. In his endlessly self-flattering autobiography Hyndman relates an anecdote from his experience on the open-air platform when he had “been taunting a working-class audience with their apathy, indifference and ignorance, and holding forth at length upon their contemptible lack of capacity to understand their own power”. Asked by a member of the audience “whether he seriously meant to tell us that the workers of this country are lunatics” he responded, with self-satisfied rhetorical wit, that they could not be lunatics “because...in order that people may become lunatics they must have minds to go out of to start with... What I did say was that the working classes of London and of England are idiots, and I say it again.”18

Was this sort of arrogant dismissal of workers’ ‘capacity to understand’ confined to Hyndman’s sectarian SDF? Apparently not: what the Fabians lacked in sophisticated theory compared with the SDF they equalled in terms of offensive condescension. Shaw’s Socialism and Superior Brains left its readers in no doubt that the minds of the many would only ever enable them to follow the few.19 In this he was only re-stating the view of the Webbs for whom the political education of the workers was a waste of time compared with the task of permeating the circles of professional intellectuals and capitalists. As Beatrice Webb explained, “We have little faith in ‘the average man’, we do not believe that he can do much more than describe
his grievances, we do not think that he can prescribe the remedies . . .”20 It is little wonder, then, that when she actually met a few workers who were socialists, at the International Socialist Congress held in London in the summer of 1896, she described them as being “unusually silly folk, for the most part feather-headed failures.”21 These are not occasional sentiments, born of frustration and separable from political strategy. They comprise a consistent attitude towards working-class educability by left-wing leaders, most of whom did not come from the class they sought to save. More often than not these leaders lacked the humility to recognize the political offensiveness of their paternalism and were without insight into the history of autonomous, autodidactic, democratic education which had existed in the workers’ movement before they came along to lead it.

This latter point is of some historical importance. It is simply not the case that the Victorian working class were waiting quiescently for middle-class intellectuals to come and educate them – or despair of doing so. The ‘socialist revival’ of the 1880s was indeed a revival of a tradition of struggle by workers to educate and organise themselves which had existed while Webb was still a Liberal and Hyndman still a Tory. It was in Harney’s Chartist journal, The Red Republican in the early 1850s that unknown working-class writers were pursuing a remarkable correspondence on the nature of money and alternative forms of distribution to a market-exchange economy: it was the same journal which was the first to publish an English version of The Communist Manifesto in November 1850 (with the memorable opening line translated as “A frightful hobgoblin stalks throughout Europe.”)22 In the London workers’ clubs of the 1870s the hugely impressive (and immensely under-estimated) figure of Adam Weiler, who was a cabinet maker, made no little impact with his lectures on Marxist theory.23 Were these the mindless idiots of Hyndman’s rhetoric? Or the “unusually silly folk” who so irritated Mrs. Webb? One senses from Morris an immediate respect for those “few working men”, that “sprinkling of the intellectual proletariat”24 which was not mere idealised romanticism, but recognition of true worth. Hyndman treated his one working-class fellow leader, Quelch, with a good deal of contempt, but none of this is apparent in Morris; on the contrary, his willingness to take the lead from those who were closer than himself to the thick of the struggle was one of his many qualities as a socialist.

The specific forms of political education engaged in by Morris ranged from the publication of literature to the highly energy-consuming work of lecturing to workers in halls across the country, as well as on the open-air platform, then a major channel of popular communication and discussion in Britain.25 Political education was not, however, confined to preaching. Then as now, capitalism dragged workers into inevitable conflicts with the class above them, and in practical struggles such as the movement of the unemployed and homeless who occupied Trafalgar Square from the mid-1860s or the strikes of the Northumberland and Lanarkshire miners in 1886-7, the educative task of the Socialist League, to which Morris belonged, was to educate through praxis. “We must be no mere debating club, or philosophical society,” explained an article by Morris in Commonweal in March 1886, directly confronting the danger of education becoming a justification for sectarian isolationism: “we must take part in all really popular movements when we can make our own views on them unmistakably clear; that is a most important part of the education in organization.”
Indeed, one can identify three principal purposes which Morris attached to political education. Firstly, workers were going to be discontented about life under capitalism whether socialists told them to or not. The job of socialists was not therefore to teach workers to become discontented, but to educate discontent. In his very first article for the SDF journal, Justice, Morris called upon socialists to “set about the great work of organizing and educating discontent.”

In June 1888 Morris declared the chief business of the Socialist League to be “The education of the vague discontent which (happily) is now so prevalent among the workers . . .” Uneducated discontent can soon transform itself into embittered frustration (and worse, as the rise of Fascist movements have demonstrated in our own century). For Morris this danger was well perceived in 1886 after the Pall Mall riots in central London frightened the rich because of the unleashed anger of the crowd, but frightened Morris for a different reason:

... we [socialists] have been overtaken unprepared, by a revolutionary incident, but that incident was practically aimless. This kind of thing is what many of us have dreaded from the first, and we must be sure that it will happen again and again while the industrial outlook is what it is; but every time it happens it will happen with ever-increasing tragedy. It is above all things our business to guard against the possible consequences of these surprises. At the risk of being misunderstood by hot-heads, I say that our business is more than ever Education. Despite the romantic glamour of such riotous adventurism as occurred in 1886, Morris was quite right to warn of the tragic consequences which could arise from uneducated discontent going on the rampage. Only a year later, in the state-led assault upon free speech at Trafalgar Square which resulted in the infamous Bloody Sunday of 13th November, the workers were only saved from “a far bloodier massacre than Peterloo” by the fact that they could not break into the Square itself wherein they would have been at the mercy of what was by then a rabidly violent police force. To defeat an organized enemy calls for knowledge, not least an awareness of who the enemy is and why; it is in this sense that ‘Education towards Revolution’ was advocated by Morris.

The second purpose of political education was to produce workers who could not only bring socialism about, but live as equals within a socialist society once it was established. As Morris put it in the first editorial of the new, weekly Commonweal, the socialist aim was

the realization of a new society with equality of condition for its basis. Before we can attain to this it is necessary that the mass of the workers should understand . . . that nothing short of this will deliver them from the ills they now groan under, that anything short of this though it may change the number of their masters or their opposition to each other, though it may take from one group of them to give to another, will leave them under masters still, will still leave them slaves to arbitrary authority.

In short, there could be no socialism without socialists. A revolution enacted without the accompanying political consciousness of those for whose benefit it is supposed to be taking place may well be led by sincere people, but victory would leave the revolutionaries presiding over an essentially passive and malleable majority
calling to be managed. It is hard to over-emphasize the value of this anti-authoritarian insight by Morris, especially in the light of our own century’s revolutionary record of dictatorial exercises by ‘new classes’ in ‘re-educating the masses’ to fit them for post-revolutionary freedom (a strategy analogous to offering people sex education after they have become pregnant.)

A third purpose of political education entailed that element of learning to think which strays into the realm of learning to dream; the border crossing between knowledge and imagination. This has been perceived by some Marxists as a danger zone, best avoided lest utopian minefields give rise to uncontrollable explosions of vision. But without such ‘education of desire’ how much drier and duller arguments for socialism would be. It was E.P. Thompson, pursuing the libertarian perspective of Abensour, who identified (albeit belatedly) the intimate connection between News From Nowhere and Morris’s other, more immediately recognizable propagandist works. The assumption that utopian imaginings constituted a romantic sideshow, contributing little towards active historical change, was only sustainable as long as it was accepted that the working class, as the anticipated historical agents, were incapable of training their own desires. What was this but an extension of the old intellectual condescension which forever limited the potentialities of the working-class mind? In transcending conservative romanticism Morris abandoned precisely this belief in the exclusive artistic imagination. Engagement in radical aesthetic criticism of the social world could not be regarded as a reserved occupation, closed to the very people whose historical activity would enable dreams of the future to be materialized. The educational function of Morris’s utopianism was different from previous utopias which had disconnected ideas from their realization. For Morris, utopian vision helped workers to think more about what the future could be like and how the process of change might happen. The value of utopia as a subversive educational device lay not merely in the prettiness of its aesthetic speculation, but in its being a source of encouragement for its readers to cultivate their own imaginative resources. At a time when Nietzschean contempt for the deadness of the common mentality was in vogue (Le Bon’s seminal critique of the innate irrationality and barbarity of the crowd was first published only five years after News From Nowhere) and it was increasingly feared that the emergence of mass culture would unleash an irressible triumph of philistinism, Morris’s respect for the collective imagination was an act of political courage. Not only courage, but necessity, for how else could the majority come to live without masters unless they could first learn to imagine living without masters?

William Morris has long been recognized for his unparalleled contribution to the aesthetic debate about the vision of an alternative kind of society to capitalism. As the Fabian, Graham Wallas, so incisively put it, “The rest of us are merely inventing methods of getting what we desire. William Morris taught us what to desire.” This quality is well recorded, although there was in the past a tendency to relegate this ‘education of desire’ to the realm of fanciful poetic idealism, divorced from theory or political action. In more recent years Morris’s energy as a political educator has been acknowledged and his overtly political lectures and writings accorded the recognition, both as products of creative socialist theory and as determined political education, which they have always deserved. There is one further area of Morris’s educational work which has yet to be given appropriate historical respect. Morris
was not simply doing what other socialist activists were doing in the field of political education; his approach to ‘making socialists’ was strategically exceptional. Both the Fabians and the SDF orthodoxy underestimated the need to win workers’ minds to socialism and, as we have seen, all too frequently dismissed, the possibility of doing so. Theirs was essentially a benevolent elitism, different only in intent from non-socialist Victorian education which defined its aims within the then ‘politically correct’ context of teaching working-class children to read biblical commandments and machine instructions. Morris has been given too little credit for his tactical rejection of such authoritarianism. The current fashion for burying the corpse of socialism and asserting with dogmatic confidence the impossibility of the project of the revolutionary transformation of capitalism testifies to the validity of Morris’s rejection of state paternalism, and does not begin to challenge what may well turn out to be the most significant strategic legacy of Morris’s politics.

NOTES

5 *Commonweal*, 30th June, 1888.
8 *Commonweal*, July 1885 (Supplement).
14 Marx-Engels, Selected Correspondence, Moscow, 1975, p.307.
16 *Social-Democrat*, November 1898.
18 Ibid., pp.343–4.

Diary entry (29th December 1894) in *Our Partnership*, London, 1948, p.120.

Diary entry (14th August 1896).


Stan Shipley's excellent *Club Life and Socialism in mid-Victorian London*, History Workshop pamphlet No. 5, London, 1971 provides a valuable introduction to Weiler's ideas and activities.


*Justice*, 9th February 1884.

*Commonweal*, 9th June 1888.

*Commonweal*, March 1886.

*Commonweal*, 19th November 1887.

*Commonweal*, March 1886.

*Commonweal*, 1st May 1886.


The English translation was entitled *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*, London, 1895.