‘The Down-Trodden Radical’: William Morris’s Pre-Socialist Ideology

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Recent criticism of Morris’s political thought has concentrated less on the development of his own ideas and more on the supposed influence on his work of theorists such as Marx, Engels and Kropotkin. This approach has often led scholars to underestimate the sophistication of Morris’s pre-socialist philosophy. The aim of this article is to outline the ideological position Morris had reached prior to joining the Democratic Federation in January 1883, and to indicate how these ideas influenced the modes of political action he pursued in his pre-socialist period. In doing this I hope to show that key concepts such as alienation, dialectical historical change and even the class war were crucial to his thought before he became acquainted with the work of the scientific socialists.

One reason why Morris’s pre-socialist ideology has rarely been discussed is that few of the most important texts were included in the Collected Works. According to Eugene LeMire, Morris composed 34 lectures and addresses between 1877 and 1883 of which 27 have survived in either manuscript or published form. Of these, two have never been published in their entirety – ‘Our Country, Right or Wrong’ (1880) and an ‘Address to the Men and Women’s College, Queen’s Square’ (1880) – while two more – a ‘Speech on Women’s Rights’ (1880) and ‘The Progress of Decorative Art in England’ (1882) – only exist in published form in provincial newspapers and periodicals. In addition to these lectures, over 400 of Morris’s letters from this period exist, along with his pamphlet ‘To the Working Men of England’, and a number of memorials and manifestos relating to his involvement in the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, the Eastern Question Association, the National Liberal League, the Kyrle Society and the Commons Preservation Society.

These works reveal that during his pre-socialist period Morris was borrowing and reformulating an ideological stance inherited from an indigenous tradition of nineteenth century social criticism. This had originated in the work of Coleridge and Cobbett, and was most fully realised in books such as Carlyle’s Past and Present (1843), Ruskin’s Unto This Last (1862) and Arnold’s Culture and Anarchy (1869). Although there was no unity of purpose behind these works, taken together they offered a comprehensive attack on capitalism and the bourgeois aspirations on which it was based. Many of these arguments appealed to Morris and contributed to the development of his own political ideology.

Morris was aware of this debt and often acknowledged it in his own writing. Although it is not certain when he first became acquainted with the work of William Cobbett, we do know that in August 1883 he requested the booksellers Ellis and
White to forward as many of his books as possible so that he could refamiliarise himself with their unique brand of social observation. This he did during the following month, for in September he wrote to his daughter Jenny that there was ‘plenty of stuff in them’. He was particularly attracted to the ‘Englishness’ of Cobbett’s message, and the image of London as the ‘Great Wen’ in *Rural Rides* (1830) was one which he was to use frequently throughout his whole political campaign. He later described Cobbett as ‘a man of great literary capacity of a kind, and with flashes of insight as to social matters far beyond his time’.

Morris was even more enthusiastic about the writings of Thomas Carlyle. He and Burne-Jones had first read *Past and Present* while students at Oxford, and it is probable that they went on to read all Carlyle’s major works. Morris’s interest in Carlyle was rekindled during his period of pre-socialist political activity by reading J. A. Froude’s edition of Carlyle’s *Reminiscences*. This led him to reread *Frederick the Great* and *Sartor Resartus*. In a letter to Georgiana Burne-Jones he wrote that the ‘moral of it all is the excellence of art, its truth, and its power of expression’. Shortly before Carlyle’s death in 1881 he went on to praise him more directly: ‘Mr. Thomas Carlyle, who still lives to the glory of England, has warned you off shams and poured his scorn on cant many a time’. Many of Carlyle’s ideas were to influence Morris: his denunciation of capitalist society as a sham; his emphasis on re-establishing genuine human relationships as an alternative to those based on the ‘cash-nexus’; his medievalism; and the crucial emphasis he placed on work and labour for understanding the progress of human development.

The evidence for Matthew Arnold’s influence on Morris is inconclusive. In March 1878 Thomas Wardle sent Morris a copy of Arnold’s lecture ‘Equality’ which had just appeared in the *Fortnightly Review*. In this lecture Arnold adopted the rather unlikely line of argument that the social inequality which characterised nineteenth century England was a legacy of the medieval laws of bequest. His solution to this inequality was to change the laws governing bequest and to cultivate manners amongst all classes as a means of promoting equality. Morris, having read the lecture, wrote to Wardle that while he agreed with the main part of its contents: ‘I think myself that no rose-water will cure us; ... I suppose he dimly sees this, but is afraid to say it, being, though naturally a courageous man, somewhat infected with the great vice of the cultivated class he was praising so much — cowardice to wit’. Any lingering regard Morris had for Arnold disappeared in August 1883 when the latter decided to accept a Civil List Pension of £250. In Morris’s eyes this confirmed Arnold as an Establishment figure, and he was referred to in *Commonweal* as ‘Matthew Arnold the pensioner’ or compared to the self-important Mr Podsnap in Dickens’s *Our Mutual Friend*.

It was Ruskin, however, who was the main source of inspiration for Morris prior to 1883. Although May Morris speaks of *Unto This Last* and *The Political Economy of Life* as the books that her father ‘deeply admired ... as direct and eloquent statements of the condition of Art & Labour in the century’ and E. P. Thompson reserved his most detailed account of Ruskin’s influence on Morris prior to his conversion to socialism for the importance of the political criticism of *Unto This Last* and *Fors Clavigera*, there can be little doubt that it was the artistic criticism of *Modern Painters*, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* and *The Stones of Venice* that shaped his thought most profoundly during the period 1877 to 1883.
Of these *The Stones of Venice* is the key text, and within it ‘The Nature of Gothic’ the crucial chapter. Morris acknowledged this debt throughout his lectures. In the very first ‘The Lesser Arts’ (1877) he informed his audience that if they read ‘The Nature of Gothic’ they would come ‘at once [upon] the truest and the most eloquent words that can possibly be said on the subject. What I have to say upon it can scarcely be more than an echo of his words’. He made the same point in one of the last lectures of his pre-socialist period – ‘The Prospects of Architecture in Civilisation’ (1881) – where he argued that his reason for repeating Ruskin’s arguments in ‘The Nature of Gothic’ was ‘because people have been afraid of them, less they should find the truth they expressed sticking so fast in their minds that it would either compel them to act on it or express them slothful and cowardly’.

Ruskin’s argument in *The Stones of Venice* was itself partly derivative. He was most obviously influenced by the ideas Pugin had developed in his *Contrasts; or, a Parallel between the Noble Edifices of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries, and Similar Buildings of the Present Day; Shewing the Present Decay of Taste* (1836). Using a technique that anticipated Carlyle’s juxtaposition of medieval St. Edmundsbury with the suppression of the cotton operatives in Manchester in *Past and Present*, Pugin used pictorial contrasts to emphasise what he considered to be the social and architectural degradation that had occurred between the middle ages and the nineteenth century. Like Ruskin, Pugin rejected neoclassicism as devoid of humanity, and instead advocated a revival of the Gothic style. Central to Pugin’s argument was the belief that Gothic architecture was the embodiment of a way of life – a specifically Catholic way of life – and that through its revival England could be transformed both socially and religiously.

Although Ruskin borrowed elements of Pugin’s argument when he wrote *The Stones of Venice*, the prospect of a Catholic England did not attract him. He sought to Protestantise the Middle Ages by emphasising that Gothic was a universal style not merely confined to cathedrals and churches, but also present in the humblest workman’s house. Ruskin’s attempt to rid Gothic of its Catholic associations was only partially successful, as he never accounted for the link Pugin established between the decline of Gothic architecture and the loss of influence of the Catholic Church. Nevertheless, Ruskin did retain the Christian framework developed by Pugin. It was in the paradox of the Fall, where prior transgression could through grace be transformed into a higher perfection, that Ruskin found the justification for the free expression of individuals and for the imperfections of the architectural forms they produced. As Rosenberg has written, it is this idea of the Fall that ‘draws together, with the full sanction of Christian doctrine, his [Ruskin’s] aesthetic and social criticism, and it lies at the heart of his belief that Gothic is at once the most Christian, the most natural, and the most humane of architecture’.

The Christian basis of Gothic was never to be of central importance to Morris. He chose instead to emphasise the social nature of art and its importance for the interpretation of human history. From the start he secularised the historical process by stressing the interrelationship between art and civilisation. He argued that the health of a society could be assessed by examining the correlation between two crucial indicators: art (the expression of man’s individual and creative abilities) and civilisation (the means of social interaction). For Morris a perfect society would be one in which art and civilisation were synonymous. This was because, as he
put it in ‘The Beauty of Life’ (1880), both had as their ultimate aim ‘the attainment of peace and order and freedom, of goodwill between man and man, of the love of truth and the hatred of injustice’. Morris did not believe that such a conjunction had ever been achieved historically, but the possibility that it could be attained in the future was to be the hope which motivated much of his political activity.

In the course of his pre-socialist lectures Morris developed further sub-divisions within both ‘art’ and ‘civilisation’ to serve as additional indicators by which to judge the health of society. Those he applied to civilisation were derived from insights borrowed from Carlyle and Ruskin. As the aim of civilisation was to obtain liberty, equality and fraternity for its members, it followed that any movement towards or away from these ideals should be regarded as indicative of a corresponding improvement or deterioration in social well-being. Therefore the more pronounced the divisions between rich and poor, cultivated and uncultivated, and privileged and unprivileged, the less healthy society must be.

It is worth dwelling on the corresponding division in the arts as this was at the heart of much of Morris’s pre-socialist writing. In ‘The Lesser Arts’ he divided all artistic creation into what he termed its ‘higher’ and ‘lesser’ components. The higher or intellectual arts he defined as those of architecture, sculpture and painting, and the lesser or decorative arts as ‘the crafts of house-building, painting, joinery and carpentry, smiths’ work, pottery and glass-making, weaving, and many others’. These two forms of art he argued were intrinsically linked and interdependent. Only when the barriers between them were broken down and they existed as a fully integrated spectrum of creativity could art be said to be truly popular. It followed, therefore, that when the lesser arts were in a state of decline this would have implications for those working in both fields. On the one hand it would create an elite of fine artists divorced from the traditional skills practised in the decorative arts, on the other, a mass of inferior handicraftsmen with no prospect of elevation.

By using these constructs, and borrowing heavily from Ruskin, Morris was able to formulate a dialectical relationship between art and history which explained the past ages of European civilisation. He identified four stages in the development of modern society: classical antiquity, the middle ages, the Renaissance and modern capitalism. Morris’s views on the first of these – classical antiquity – are to be found in ‘The Beauty of Life’ where he argued that while an ‘Athenian citizen . . . led a simple dignified almost perfect life’ this was only possible because ‘the civilisation of the ancients was founded on slavery’. The class-based nature of classical society had profound implications for both the health of civilisation and art. Civilisation was clearly imperfect as it relied on a distinction between free men and slaves and thus denied social equality. A similar division was to be found in the arts, with the lesser arts existing in slavish subordination to the higher arts. This situation was compounded because the higher arts were themselves enslaved to the pedantic notion of perfection embodied in the architecture of the period. The desire for formal perfection gave the artist very little opportunity for individual expression.

Although Morris was uncertain at this stage why social change took place, he was aware that its agents often went unrecognised by those living at the watershed between epochs. In an address he wrote for delivery before the Men and Women’s College, Queen’s Square, London, probably in 1880, he illustrated this by using
the example of the Roman historian Tacitus. The latter, when writing of a battle between two barbarian tribes on the fringes of the Empire, had observed complacently that 'we have now attained the utmost verge of prosperity, and have nothing left to demand of Fortune except the discord of these barbarians'. Yet, as Morris pointed out, it was these very barbarians 'who had the fate decreed them of catching up the torch of progress from the dying hand of Rome'. He made a related point about Edward Gibbon's failure to appreciate the potential of the working classes in the eighteenth century.

While Morris made no attempt to explain why classical civilisation had failed, he went into some detail concerning the subsequent spread of Gothic architecture throughout Europe. This topic was first introduced in 'The History of Pattern Design' (1879), but his most detailed analysis was reserved for a lecture entitled 'The Gothic Revival'. According to Morris the origins of Gothic art - the art characteristic of the Middle Ages and which included both the higher and lesser arts - lay in a combination of influences from late Roman art, when an element of freedom was entering social life, and the art evolved in Mesopotamia and then later Syria and Persia. These two influences finally converged at Constantinople, evolving into Byzantine art, which Morris believed to have been 'the first style of Gothic'. Byzantine art, according to Morris, reached its perfection in the days of Justinian. Two forms of Byzantine art influenced Europe. The first was 'pure' Byzantine which spread to Germany in the early Middle Ages and subsequently to Northern Europe, pre-Norman conquest England, and parts of Scandinavia. As this style owed very little to the classical age Morris referred to its mature form as 'English Romanesque'. The second form he termed 'Romano-Byzantine' as its origins lay in the final days of the Roman Empire. It later spread through Italy to Southern and Northern France, and eventually reached England at the time of the Norman Conquest. Later examples of this architecture Morris called 'Norman' or 'Franco-Norse'. During this blooming of the Romanesque Gothic one final influence was brought to bear. This was the brilliant but less intellectual art of the East, which, like Gothic, had its origins chiefly in Justinian Constantinople. Through this influence a remarkable unity of styles occurred at the end of the fourteenth and the beginning of the fifteenth century which heralded the fully developed Gothic. Its chief characteristics were that it was common to the whole people, free, progressive, hopeful, and full of sentiment and humour. As Morris put it in 'The Prospects of Architecture in Civilisation', 'the past art of what has grown to be civilised Europe from the decline of the classical peoples, was the outcome of instinct working on an unbroken chain of tradition'.

A great deal has been written about Morris's view of the Middle Ages in which this Gothic architecture flourished. Most commentators have suggested that Morris used the epoch both as an ideal against which to contrast the realities of nineteenth century capitalism and as a model for the future organisation of society. Both these techniques are certainly used in the pre-socialist lectures. Yet Morris does not slavishly follow Carlyle and Ruskin, but instead presents us with a rather more realistic portrayal of the Middle Ages than has often been assumed. On the positive side, Morris, in common with Ruskin, saw the Middle Ages as representing the most advanced stage that art had yet attained. The crucial distinction between the higher and lesser arts had largely been eradicated with the result that artists and
handicraftsmen were one and the same. As a result art was unconscious, intuitive, free and popular. Everything from the most humble pot to the greatest cathedral embodied the experience of the men who made them and mirrored and reflected their lives. As Morris wrote in his 'Address to the Cambridge School of Art', when men were creating these wonderful works of art they were not only being artists but also men: 'They were earning their bread, they were glorifying their creeds, they were struggling with difficult and intricate pieces of knowledge while they wrought them'.

Where Morris differed from Carlyle and Ruskin was in his acknowledgement that there was a negative side to the Middle Ages. As he was an enthusiastic scholar of both medieval art and society he was aware that life was often far from ideal. He recognised that while individual workmen were more or less free to pursue their art they did so under social conditions which were sometimes oppressive. He often pointed out the injustice, ignorance and violence that characterised the period. In 'The Art of the People', he even admitted that disease and war did on occasions destroy the workman's pleasure in his work. Although his view of the development of civilisation was one in which massive cyclical movements were superimposed on a general upward progression, he hints on a number of occasions that within each age there were also cyclical movements. The attainment of the medieval idea was not a straightforward linear process but an often painful oscillation in which art 'changed, it wavered, grew faint, rose up again, lost on one side, gained on the other, fitted itself to all races and all creeds'. Morris introduced these qualifications to prevent his arguments appearing merely retrogressive. While he encouraged his audience to view the Middle Ages as a model by which to judge contemporary conditions, it was never his intention to suggest that it was possible – or desirable – to resurrect the past. As he wrote in a letter to Robert Thompson, 'we cannot turn our people back into Catholic English peasants and guildcraftsmen, or into heathen Norse bonders, much as may be said for such conditions of life'. For Morris the Middle Ages were the historical epoch in which the elusive equilibrium between art and civilisation had nearly been achieved but it still remained only a stage in the progressive development of human society. Even in his pre-socialist phase he recognised that it was only in the future that the full integration of the two was possible.

Morris traced the beginning of the decline of the Middle Ages to the late fifteenth century when the lesser arts grew coarser in quality and a new form of higher art developed. This change in attitude, or 'New Birth' as Morris termed it in 'The Beauty of Life', heralded the dawn of the Renaissance. For Morris this was a period in which civilisation lost the sense of tradition which had sustained it throughout the Middle Ages and began to imitate the art of the classical period. Morris argued that the full implications of this desire to perfect the old classical forms of art was hidden for a time by the individual genius of some of the fine artists of the period. Indeed, Morris was not as critical of the Renaissance in his pre-socialist lectures as he was to become later in his career. He recognised, for instance, that it was 'a stirring and hopeful time' one in which 'many things were newborn . . . which have since brought forth fruit enough'. Amongst these improvements Morris cited the increased liberty and freedom of the individual. Even so these political gains could not disguise the fact that the art which was
produced was largely imitative. As far as Morris was concerned, once classical art had been successfully reproduced the brightness of the Renaissance faded rapidly and darkness descended on the arts.

These mitigating features did not prevent Morris sharing Ruskin’s contempt for the Renaissance. Morris considered it to be a period in history when the thread of tradition had been consciously rejected. By losing touch with the organic, unconscious art of the Middle Ages, and concentrating on imitating the pedantic art of the classical period, the artists of the Renaissance had set themselves tasks that were self-destructive. The result was that the higher and lesser arts were sundered: the former becoming the property of an elite of rich men, the latter being looked down upon with contempt as inferior art. The crucial failing of the Renaissance for Morris was that it severed ‘art from the daily life of men’. Nevertheless, he felt ‘that the very suddenness of the change ought to comfort us, to make us look upon the break in the continuity of the golden chain as accident only’.25

Morris believed that the end of the Renaissance was marked by a revitalisation of the higher arts which looked for a time as though it might have a permanent effect on public taste. In ‘The Beauty of Life’ he attributed this rebirth in the fine arts to a combination of despair at the death of the decorative arts and optimism engendered by the French Revolution. It manifested itself in three areas: poetry, the rediscovery of history, and painting. Blake and Coleridge were praised for writing ‘good earnest poetry’ in contrast to the ‘sycophantic verse-makers’26 of the eighteenth century, Sir Walter Scott for his historicism, and the Pre-Raphaelites for revolutionising English art. Ruskin was also praised in this context, Morris writing that it ‘would be ungracious indeed for me who have been so much taught by him, that I cannot help thinking continually as I speak that I am echoing his words, to leave out the name of John Ruskin from an account of what has happened since the tide, as we hope, began to turn in the direction of art’.27 Ruskin’s contribution to the rehabilitation of art, according to Morris, was that through his wonderful eloquence he had managed to gain a hearing amongst cultivated people at a time when they seemed to have lost their interest in literature and art. He had succeeded in becoming the mouthpiece of an attitude that ‘was already stirring in men’s minds’ for ‘he could not have written what he had done unless people were in some sort ready for it’.28

However, before any regeneration and rehabilitation of the arts could be achieved it was necessary to confront what Morris termed in his lecture ‘The Prospects of Architecture in Civilisation’ (1881) the ‘river of fire’.29 He used this expression to encompass ‘the hurry of life bred by the gradual perfection of competitive commerce’.30 He argued that during the nineteenth century the middle classes had pursued capitalism in as blind a manner as the artists of the Renaissance had imitated classical art. Once again he was willing to admit that this pursuit of an ideal had not been without some benefits to society. These he listed as liberty, the decline in influence of the aristocracy, and advances in human knowledge. Unfortunately, none of these had been achieved without human suffering.

Morris held nineteenth century industrial organisation responsible for breaking the links with the traditions of the past and thereby enslaving the decorative arts. In pursuing commercial profit the middle classes had only encouraged
mammonism. In his opinion they had built a system which had assumed monstrous proportions and now controlled them. Their desire for mass-production had resulted in the virtual destruction of individuality and art. Whereas in the past there had been handicraftsmen there were now manufacturers or ‘sham’ handicraftsmen: ‘sham’ because they were really capitalists and salesmen and not artists at all. For Morris the destruction of the decorative arts had resulted in there being little difference in outlook between rich and poor: the rich bought glitter, show and vulgarity, while the poor merely yearned for it: ‘the sordidness of the surroundings of the lower classes, has its exact counterpart in the dullness and vulgarity of those of the middle classes, and the double distilled dullness, and scarcely less vulgarity of the upper classes’.31

The consequences for the workman of the division of labour in manufacturing industry formed the corner-stone of Morris’s pre-socialist criticism of capitalism. His views on the division of labour relied heavily on Ruskin and Carlyle’s criticisms of the laissez-faire economists such as Durkheim, Malthus, Mill, Ricardo and Smith. Although Carlyle had initiated this attack in Past and Present, it is the ‘Savageness’ section in Ruskin’s chapter ‘On the Nature of Gothic’ which was the source of Morris’s ideas on the subject. Ruskin argued that the division of labour, while increasing individual productivity, had serious consequences for the workers. By stripping them of individuality it had deprived them of any pleasure in their work, and the mechanical repetition of their tasks had caused them to suffer psychologically. As they worked they felt ‘their souls withering within them, unthanked, to find their whole being sucked into an unrecognised abyss, to be counted off into a heap of mechanism, numbered with its wheels, and weighed with its hammer strokes’.32 It was this hopelessness, this alienation from the object of one’s labour, that was echoed by Morris.

He developed his own views on the subject most comprehensively in his lecture ‘The Prospects of Architecture in Civilisation’. Here he divided work into ‘Mechanical Toil’, in which men were obliged to work within the restrictions imposed by the division of labour and were employed merely as tools to make money, ‘Intelligent Work’ which was more or less mechanical but offered the workman some opportunity of stamping his individuality on the object of his labour, and ‘Imaginative Work’ which was altogether individual.33 According to Morris, Intelligent and Imaginative Work corresponded to the higher and decorative arts and were divided merely by degree. When art was healthy they formed an unbroken chain where all men were artists and where all art was linked by a thread of tradition back through history. Mechanical Toil, on the other hand, was ‘bred of that hurry and thoughtlessness of civilisation of which . . . the middle classes of this country have been such powerful furtherers’.34

By applying this tripartite division of work to the circumstances of the nineteenth century, Morris came to the conclusion that Mechanical Toil had completely swallowed Intelligent Work and the lower part even of Imaginative Work. This had created a vacuum in which only the isolated citadel of the higher arts still remained. Morris considered this to have serious implications for those employed both in industry and in the higher arts. For the former – subjected to the mindless mechanical repetition of factory production – work had lost all meaning and pleasure. Factory hands were obliged to ‘either abstract their thoughts from it
altogether, in which case they are but machines while they are at work; or else they must suffer such dreadful weariness in getting through it, as one scarcely bears to think of. As for those engaged in the higher arts, the virtual destruction of Imaginative Work had severed their link with tradition and caused them to seek inspiration in 'some unreal world, in which nothing but art exists'. In 'The Progress of Decorative Art in England', Morris illustrated this point by asking his audience to reflect on what would have happened to even a Michelangelo obliged to pursue his art under such intolerable circumstances: 'what can happen to him but to waste his life in ceaseless indignant protest, till his art fades out in sour despondency, and his whole career has turned out a useless martyrdom'.

Another of Morris's criticisms of modern capitalism, that of its wanton destruction of the environment, was largely the result of the logical application of the conclusions he reached in this discussion of work. If, as appeared to be the case in the Middle Ages, the pleasure and happiness of a man's work was reflected in the objects he produced, then it followed that the beauty of the environment in which he lived must mirror the conditions under which he worked. It was only necessary to look at London, or any other industrial city, to realise that even in the richest nation in the world the majority of people lived in conditions of sordidness and ugliness unparalleled in any previous age. For this reason Morris's pre-socialist lectures are full of attacks on the lack of town planning, the destruction of nature, the uncontrolled pollution of the countryside, litter and advertising.

Morris also criticised the imperialistic tendencies of capitalism. This was not because he objected to all forms of colonial expansion per se but because he recognised that in some cases it could destroy indigenous cultural practices. His pre-socialist view was that imperialistic expansion was not inherently bad when taken in the context of the revolutionary development of man, as long as it was positive and forward looking. After all, history was full of examples of colonial expansion which had been both dynamic and progressive. In his 'Address to the English Liberals' Morris illustrated this by pointing to the experience of England. Over the years the country had been invaded by the Romans, the Saxons, the Danes and the Normans, yet rather than suffering from this experience the indigenous culture had been greatly enriched. What Morris objected to about Victorian imperialism was its negative effects on art. It destroyed what little remained of the decorative arts by exporting its own shoddy wares. In 'The Art of the People' he took the example of India as a case in point. Prior to the arrival of the British some remnants of native craftsmanship had still existed, but this was rapidly eradicated by an influx of cheap mass-produced articles. The result, he claimed, was 'that these poor people have all but lost the one distinction, the one glory . . . left them . . . their art is dead, and the commerce of modern civilisation has slain it'. Even at this early stage in his political development, Morris believed that the horrors of imperialistic expansion could only be eradicated when the countries at the forefront of civilisation had resolved their own internal inequalities.

Despite the ferocity of his attack on capitalism, Morris was even more incensed by the arguments the middle class advanced to justify their pursuit of profit. He was particularly annoyed by the suggestion that a state of inequality between rich and poor was actually necessary to assure the future prosperity of art. According to this view it was only possible for the higher arts to survive as long as there was
a sufficient body of educated men of wealth willing to act as its patrons. Morris, in his ‘Address to the Men and Women’s College, Queen’s Square’, pointed out that such an ‘aristocracy of intellect’ was only possible by keeping the vast majority of people in a state of ‘ignorance, unrest, and brutality’.39 As far as he was concerned it was a fallacy to suggest that by degrading the poor one could encourage virtue amongst the rich. On the contrary: ‘Material riches bred by material poverty and slavery produces vulgarity of mind and life, and heartlessness of heart; for we must shut our eyes to troubles we cannot help; intellectual riches bred of intellectual poverty and slavery produce scorn, cynicism and despair’.40

While Morris’s critique of capitalism was conceived largely in terms of the logical extension of insights borrowed from Carlyle and Ruskin, it was in his formulation of modes of practical action that he was unique amongst the Victorians. Most of his contemporaries were content to criticise but not to act. Morris, however, was a practical man. He believed that thought without action was mere self-indulgence. For this reason he had little sympathy with the rhetoric of despair which was so often the final solution of social critics such as Carlyle, Arnold and even Ruskin. He regarded the need to educate people towards a rebirth in art as a mission that had been devolved upon him by fate. As he wrote in ‘The Beauty of Life’, it was something ‘as it seems, some chance-hap has charged me [with]’.41

Morris pursued two types of direct action between 1877 and 1883: one educative; the other interventional. The first was rooted in his pre-socialist conviction that a change in the basis of society could be achieved from within the arts, i.e. that art itself had revolutionary potential. It was his role to educate people that art was dying as a result of the dominance of capitalist ideals, and then to persuade them to change their own attitudes and do everything in their power to prevent this death of art becoming a reality. Morris believed that once people had accepted his diagnosis they would be morally obliged to treat the disease.

The thrust of Morris’s educational campaign relied on the logical extension of the artistic principles that Ruskin had expounded in The Stones of Venice. These were to discourage imitation or copying of any kind, to avoid an exact finish for its own sake, and never to ‘encourage the manufacture of an article not absolutely necessary, in the production of which invention had no share’.42 Morris developed these principles into a framework on which he based his attempt to regenerate the individual and society. If artists and craftsmen could be encouraged to produce only genuine works of art, manufacturers to cease the production of shoddy mass-produced articles, and the consumer to develop an artistic sensibility, then it followed that the whole basis of the commercial system could be undermined by a silent revolution in taste.

At the start of his campaign Morris placed the greatest onus on the artists and craftsmen working in the lesser arts, delivering lectures to the provincial Schools of Art and bodies such as the Trades Guild of Learning. He made their crucial role quite plain in ‘The Prospects of Architecture in Civilisation’ when he stated that ‘it has become the duty of all true artists . . . to sting the world, cultivated and uncultivated, into discontent and struggle’.43 Morris envisaged them fulfilling this role in two ways. Firstly, he felt they should educate themselves in the skills necessary to produce excellent workmanship and thus cultivate the artistic susceptibilities of the public. In this respect Morris recommended them to follow
the teachings of Ruskin and use as their models nature and ancient art. Secondly, they should learn how to produce intelligent art. To achieve this it was their responsibility to study at every opportunity past artistic creations, for ‘if we do not study the ancient work directly and learn to understand it, we shall find ourselves influenced by the feeble work through the copyists and without understanding it, which will by no means bring about intelligent art’.44

To give practical encouragement to the decorative arts Morris gave his support to the Department of Education and Science in its programme of setting up Art and Design Schools. The results, however, he found only partially satisfactory. He had hoped that these schools would give a general artistic education and thus improve the status of the decorative arts. However, when he came to consider their achievements in his lecture ‘The Progress of Decorative Art in England’, his reactions were mixed. While he felt that the first aim had been partly attained, and that there were a great many more qualified artists producing objects of beauty in the decorative arts, little had been done to break down the barriers between the higher and lesser arts. In fact he felt the methods of teaching employed in the Schools had actually reinforced these prejudices. A talented decorative artist was still regarded as an inferior individual, and if he sought to improve his artistic standing he had to turn his hand to the higher arts where his craftsmanship was lost. Worse still, although it could be said that the decorative arts had experienced something of a renaissance in Britain in the middle quarter of the nineteenth century, this had had little positive effect on the population at large: ‘I am afraid I must admit that the public in general are not touched at all by any interest in the decorative arts’.45

The other groups at whom Morris aimed his educational programme were the manufacturers and the middle classes. It is likely that his attention was focused on the former because of his own experiences in setting up and co-ordinating the activities of the Firm. His recommendations, as a result, are less controversial, and in some respects seek to justify his own activities as a capitalist. He argued that all the workman needed was regular employment, leisure, and sufficient wages to keep him from poverty. It was the manufacturer’s responsibility to provide his employees with these basic requirements. Once these were achieved the next step was for him to use his privileged position to make certain that only genuine works of art were produced by the work-force in his factory: ‘if a good few of our makers of common wares were so much touched by the importance of the decorative arts of England as to do this, it would mark a new era in that advance of the art [in which] . . . I do think we should be nearing our goal’.46

As far as educating the people themselves into an appreciation of art Morris concentrated his attention almost exclusively on the middle classes. This was because he considered it pointless to address the working classes when their poverty effectively excluded them from any interest in art. He made this clear in a letter to Thomas Coglan Horsfall in February 1888. Horsfall had asked his advice as to the kind of art that poor people would have in their home. Morris’s reply was brief and to the point: ‘it is not possible at present for a man at 30/- a week (a father of a family at any rate) to have any share of art’.47 Even amongst the middle classes he felt that his programme of education was almost hopeless and limited his remarks to a discussion of how their possessions should be simple, solid and
honest: 'have nothing in your houses which you do not know to be useful or believe to be useful'. 49 These useful items he considered to be a bookcase, a table, a bench, a cupboard, pictures, engravings and a fireplace. If this advice was followed he thought it might have some benefit by improving the environment, giving people self-respect, and by breeding contempt for the sordidness that existed outside the home.

Morris soon realised that his educational campaign would be rendered meaningless if something was not also done to counter the destructive tendencies of capitalism itself. This led him to evolve parallel interventional modes of action designed to protect the few remaining positive features of society. The reasoning behind this was simple. If society was allowed to continue along its present path there was a real possibility that any rebirth in art would be pre-empted by a dreadful catastrophe in which society would be flung into a state of complete anarchy. At first he was unclear about the exact nature of this catastrophe, arguing only that people’s ‘blindness to beauty will draw down a kind of revenge one day’. 50 However, as time went on, he identified the terrible conditions under which the working classes were forced to live as a possible source for this revenge. As he wrote in ‘The Art of the People’, ‘hard necessity . . . works many of the world’s changes, rather than the purblind striving to see, which we call the foresight of man’. 51 It was the desire to ameliorate the dangerous excesses of capitalist exploitation and to prevent a destructive uprising that led Morris into practical politics.

One of the first campaigns to which he lent his support was that of environmental protection. He considered it essential to safeguard the natural environment as it provided artists with genuine models on which to base their attempts to revitalise art, it served as an example against which to contrast the squalor of city life, and it was through its study that people were able to gain an appreciation of beauty. If the natural environment was allowed to perish, with it would go any hopes for the rebirth of art. To prevent such a situation he at first concentrated his attention on supporting pressure groups such as the Kyrle Society and the Commons Preservation Society. However, he soon realised that the piecemeal work undertaken by these societies was insufficient to address the scale of the problem and began to advocate direct legislative action by the government. In his lectures he put forward a whole string of detailed environmental proposals which included the idea of the garden city, the need for effective implementation of smoke and pollution policies, the need to eradicate litter in city parks, the banning of the destruction of trees, and the removal of advertisements from city centres.

Similar considerations caused him to become actively involved in opposing the Victorians’ obsessive desire to ‘restore’ ancient buildings. Morris’s antipathy to the work of architects such as George Gilbert Scott had dated from the early 1870s. However, it was the threatened restoration of Lichfield Cathedral and the parish church of Burford in 1876 which first led him to contemplate the formation of a society aimed specifically at preventing restorations of this sort. When it was announced that Tewkesbury Abbey was to suffer a similar fate the following year he immediately wrote to the editor of the Athenæum suggesting the formation of ‘an association for the purpose of watching over and protecting these relics, which, scanty as they are now become, are still wonderful treasures’. 52 The result
of this impassioned letter was a public meeting held on 22 March 1877 at the which the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB) was constituted with Morris as its Secretary. Much to his satisfaction Morris was able to recruit the support of such notables as Carlyle, Holman Hunt and Ruskin for the new society. He himself drafted a Manifesto which reprinted extracts from Ruskin’s The Seven Lamps of Architecture.

In practical terms the success of SPAB in preventing restoration was limited. While the widely publicised national and international campaigns – particularly its organisation of the opposition against the demolition of the west front of St. Mark’s in Venice – did have some effect, this was not reflected on a local level. According to Paul Thompson, despite the opposition of SPAB, over 2,500 British churches were restored between 1877 and 1885. SPAB’s real achievement lay not so much in its success in protecting ancient buildings but in changing the public’s attitude to restoration and training architects in relevant techniques to avoid future damage to ancient structures. This was indicated by the editorial published in the Times on the death of Sir Gilbert Scott. After paying respect to Scott’s contribution to nineteenth century architecture, the writer went on to say that while his work was sincere ‘its application was unfortunately and sometimes disastrously narrow’. He concluded that he hoped that ‘other restorers will follow him with more instructed tastes and with a more reverent regard for the historic continuity of ancient buildings’.

However, the most important insight that Morris gained from his participation in national politics was an appreciation of the revolutionary potential of the working class. Following Ruskin, Carlyle and Arnold he entered upon his political career with the view that the working classes were a vast unorganised, uneducated, anarchic mass whose very presence threatened the continued existence of society. He believed that if civilisation was to avoid some unimaginable social upheaval it was incumbent upon the middle classes to do all in their power to defuse this social time-bomb. This could only be achieved if the middle classes acknowledged the appalling social consequences of their unbridled pursuit of capitalism. As he wrote in his ‘Address to the Men and Women’s College, Queen’s Square’: ‘all that the nation that breeds them can do is to be anxious and troubled about its own unequal miseries and burdens, and to be of goodwill to palliate and, if only it were not blind, to cure them: history has taught us what happens to nations that do less and worse than this: and the terrible vengeance that time stores up for them’. It was to be Morris’s subsequent rejection of patronisation in favour of direct appeals to the workers themselves which was to mark him out from other contemporary social critics.

The first step in this direction occurred as a result of his experiences as treasurer of the Eastern Question Association (EQA). This body was formed at a conference held at St. James’s Hall on 8 December 1876 to protest at the brutal suppression by the Turks of a Bulgarian nationalistic uprising. It is clear from his two lectures on the subject – his ‘Address to English Liberals’ and ‘Our Country Right or Wrong’ – that his original motivation for joining the association was the defence of liberty. He argued that the ‘war-party’ – those eager that Britain should enter into war with Russia on behalf of Turkey – were justifying their position by a false appeal to the traditional British support of the ‘weaker’ side. He believed that in reality
there were three protagonists in the dispute: Russia, Turkey and the enslaved states of the Ottoman Empire. It was the liberty of the latter states which Morris regarded as the central issue, and he maintained that if Britain entered into war on the side of Turkey she would be guilty of ‘the suppression of just insurrection against tyranny’.56

Despite these high-minded ideals, Morris soon found himself embroiled in party politics as the subsequent agitation degenerated into a scramble for popular support. These events were to greatly damage his faith in parliamentary politics. He appears to have entered the campaign with the belief that all politicians had a moral responsibility to listen to the voice of the people and do all in their power to eradicate injustice. In ‘Our Country Right or Wrong’ he argued that genuine politicians should always seek to achieve ‘Peace, Retrenchment and Reform’.57 Not surprisingly the whole Conservative party – and Disraeli in particular – were soon condemned on precisely these grounds as they ‘found Reform dull, Retrenchment mean, and Peace in-glorious’.58 He also feared that the Liberal Party might also lack the conviction to oppose injustice. In a letter addressed to Charles Faulkner, written in February 1878 following the success of the war-party in disrupting meetings of the EQA, he declared, ‘I am full of shame and anger at the cowardice of the so-called Liberal party’.59 Soon his disappointment at the failure of the campaign led him to question the whole parliamentary system. He even believed for a while that abstention from politics was the only course to be adopted by ‘worthy men’.60

As Morris’s faith in the parliamentary system waned it was replaced by a growing respect for the working classes. From the start the leaders of the EQA had realised that the success of their agitation depended on their ability to mobilise working class support, and this led them into close contact with groups such as the Labour Representation League. The latter’s stand against the war – in marked contrast to the vacillations of the Liberals in Parliament – greatly impressed Morris. It was probably his meeting with the leaders of the League at the Cannon Street Hotel on 2 May 1877 which prompted him to issue his own Manifesto ‘To the Working Men of England’ nine days later. This was the first occasion on which he appealed directly to the working classes:

If you have any wrongs to be redressed, if you cherish your most worthy hope of raising your whole order peacefully and solidly, if you thirst for leisure and knowledge, if you long to lessen those inequalities which have been our stumbling-block since the beginning of the world, then cast aside sloth and cry out against an UNJUST WAR, and urge us of the Middle Classes to do no less.61

A year later he praised the EQA’s ‘working-men allies (who all along have been staunch and sagacious)’.62

Although Morris’s Manifesto ‘To the Working Men of England’ has often been cited as a turning point in his attitude to the working classes, its significance has been exaggerated. Its tone is still to some extent patronising, and seen in the context of the wider agitation its appeal to the workers must be viewed with some suspicion. The reasons for this were that it was issued at a time when the success or failure of the agitation depended on the sheer number of people that could be persuaded
to attend anti-war meetings, that Morris was still sufficiently dedicated to the idea of parliamentary reform to realise that the power of the working classes was severely limited because they did not possess the vote, and because he recognised that it was only a minority of the working classes who were effectively organised and that the remainder could be mobilised in support of reaction by appealing to ‘sham’ sentiments such as patriotism. At the end of the agitation he was to reflect ruefully that despite all the efforts made by the EQA, Disraeli was ‘really adored by four-fifths of the English nation’. When he recalled the Eastern Question crisis in a letter written to Andreas Scheu on 15 September 1883 he remarked that although he had made the acquaintance of a number of working class leaders at the time, he ‘had found they were quite under the influence of the Capitalist politicians, and that, the General Election once gained, they would take no forward step whatsoever’. The main change in Morris’s attitude to the working classes occurred as a result of his experiences as Treasurer of the National Liberal League (NLL). This largely working-class body was formed in the late summer of 1879 out of the various radical factions who had amalgamated themselves earlier in opposition to the Eastern policy of the Conservative government. Although it advocated specific policies such as electoral reform, changes to the Land Laws and municipal government for London, its primary aim was to keep the new Liberal government to the radical manifesto on which it had campaigned during the election of 1880. Its subsequent failure to influence the government, and the latter’s pursuit of increasingly reactionary policies in both Egypt and Ireland, was responsible for finally destroying Morris’s faith in the Liberal party. Following his dissatisfaction at the government’s handling of the Irish Land Bill he wrote to Janey in February 1881 that he no longer felt ‘any confidence in the Government & only half confidence in the Liberal Associations’. His work for the NLL, and the subsequent Radical Union did, however, bring him in contact with Trade Union leaders such as Henry Broadhurst and George Howell. This experience greatly impressed him, and during 1881 and 1882 he believed for a while that the key to the transformation of society lay in the constructive use of the Trades Unions’ collective power. In ‘The Prospects of Architecture in Civilisation’ he envisaged ‘a time when these great Associations, well organised, well served, and earnestly supported, as I know them to be, will find other work before them than the temporary support of their members and the adjustment of due wages for their crafts’. This was to be a short-lived hope, for two years later he was to write in ‘Art Under a Plutocracy’ (1883) that the ‘Trade Unions, founded for the advancement of the working class as a class, have already become conservative and obstructive bodies, wielded by the middle-class politicians for party purposes’. He rejected Trades Unionism, as he had both liberalism and radicalism, because they limited themselves to short-term political gain rather than fundamental social change. However, his experience with both the National Liberal League and the Radical Union convinced him of the organisational potential of the working classes.

Although Morris was not to resign as Treasurer of the NLL until early in 1882, from the summer of 1881 he began to express increasing sympathy with the political groups and individuals on the fringes of society. He was particularly impressed by
the trial of Johann Most which took place during June 1881. Most was the German anarchist editor of the London paper *Freiheit* who was brought to trial for publishing an article which praised the assassins of Tsar Alexander II. In the trial that followed Most was accused of subversive political beliefs and harshly sentenced. The event had a profound effect on Morris. On hearing the verdict he wrote to Georgiana Burne-Jones expressing his belief that the trial represented the kind of reactionary tyranny that made ‘thinking people so sick at heart that they are driven from all interest in politics save revolutionary politics: which I must say seems like to be my case’.

It is unlikely that we shall ever know the exact sequence of events that led Morris to join the Democratic Federation in January 1883. His letters of the period are strangely unilluminating, and the only detailed account of his conversion is to be found in ‘How I Became a Socialist’, an article published in *Justice* on 16 June 1894. In this he characterised his pre-socialist propaganda as based on a tension between his ideals and his aspirations. His ideals he believed to have been socialist from the very start of his involvement in politics, but he had been denied any hope of their realisation through his pursuit of inappropriate forms of political action. It was only when he rejected the politics of amelioration that he was able to embrace socialism. The crucial event in this process he claimed to have been his reading of J. S. Mill’s critique of Fourier’s utopian socialism. Paradoxically, Mill’s fairness in presenting Fourier’s arguments convinced him ‘that Socialism was a necessary change, and that it was possible to bring it about in our own days’. He dated his conversion ‘to some months’ before he joined the Democratic Federation, which suggests that it occurred during the summer of 1882.

Despite this account it has been argued that Morris’s conversion could not have been achieved without some prior knowledge of scientific socialism. Norman Kelvin, for example, has suggested that at some point between the summer of 1881 and the end of 1882 Morris was alerted to such arguments through discussions with radical politicians who had already embraced Marxist ideas. To argue such a case is both to underestimate the sophistication of the theoretical conclusions Morris had reached in his pre-socialist writings and to ignore his own unambiguous remarks on the subject. In ‘How I Became a Socialist’ he was adamant that the ideological position he had reached prior to joining the Democratic Federation was quite sufficient to make him a socialist in principle. As he put it, ‘all I had to do ... in order to become a Socialist was to hook myself on the practical movement’. He was equally candid about his lack of knowledge about the economic basis of socialism: ‘I had never so much as opened Adam Smith, or heard of Ricardo, or of Karl Marx’. Perhaps the time has come to acknowledge that Morris was actually a unique thinker and a political philosopher of considerable stature.

NOTES

1 Eugene D. LeMire (ed.), *The Unpublished Lectures of William Morris*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press 1969), pp. 291–298. As a supplementary source also see A. K. Bacon’s ‘Some additions to E. D. LeMire’s calendar and


3 Commonweal, 28 August 1886, p. 170.


7 Commonweal, 12 June 1886, p. 87.


11 ibid., p. 200.


13 Hopes and Fears for Art, op. cit., p. 107.

14 ibid., pp. 2-3.

15 ibid., p. 91.


17 ibid., II, p. 67.

18 The Unpublished Lectures of William Morris, op. cit., p. 58.

19 Hopes and Fears for Art, op. cit., p. 190.

20 Cambridge Chronicle and University Journal, 23 February 1878, p. 4.

21 ibid., p. 4.


23 Hopes and Fears for Art, op. cit., p. 80.

24 ibid., pp. 79-80.

25 ibid., p. 82.

26 ibid., p. 82.

27 ibid., p. 84.

28 ibid., p. 84.

29 ibid., p. 188.

30 ibid., p. 188.

31 ibid., p. 88.


33 Hopes and Fears for Art, op. cit., pp. 207-208.


35 ibid., pp. 205-206.

36 Cambridge Chronicle and University Journal, 23 February 1878, p. 4.

37 Manchester Guardian, 21 October 1882, p. 5.

38 Hopes and Fears for Art, op. cit., p. 52.

40 ibid., II, p. 66.
41 Hopes and Fears for Art, op. cit., p. 72.
43 Hopes and Fears for Art, op. cit., p. 174.
44 ibid., p. 20.
45 Manchester Guardian, 21 October 1882, p. 5.
46 ibid., p. 5.
48 Hopes and Fears for Art, op. cit., p. 108.
50 Hopes and Fears for Art, op. cit., p. 47.
53 Times, 28 March 1878, p. 9.
54 ibid., p. 9.
56 ibid., II, p. 382.
57 ibid., II, p. 61.
58 ibid., II, p. 60.
60 ibid., I, p. 476.
63 ibid., I, p. 475.
64 ibid., II, p. 229.
65 The Letters of William Morris to his Family and Friends, op. cit., p. 144.
66 Hopes and Fears for Art, op. cit., pp. 198-199.
67 The Collected Works of William Morris, op. cit., XXIII, p. 188.
68 The Letters of William Morris to his Family and Friends, op. cit., p. 149.
71 William Morris: Selected Writings and Designs, op. cit., p. 36.
72 ibid., p. 34.