Murry, Marx and Morris

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I was stimulated to write this piece by recently reading, once again, of the leading role of Robin Page Arnot in the centenary year 1934 in insisting on Morris's Marxism and contesting the attribution to him of a social-democratic political philosophy. While not wishing to deny the influence of Page Arnot's work, attested to among others by E. P. Thompson, I seemed to remember that I had encountered a similar argument put forward by John Middleton Murry two years earlier, and I wondered, if this were really the case, why Murry's contribution had been ignored.

On checking in Gary Aho's excellent bibliography, I found that my memory had not played me false. Murry published four pieces on Morris in 1932, in all of which he asserted and supported Morris's uncompromising Marxism. Three of them appeared in The Adelphi, of which Murry was the editor. These were 'The Greatness of William Morris' in August, and two consecutive pieces on 'The Return to Fundamentals: Marx and William Morris' in October and November. In addition, he contributed a chapter on Morris to the collection The Great Victorians edited by H. J. Massingham and H. Massingham and published by Nicolson and Watson; the book was reissued by Penguin in 1938. Murry reprinted this chapter in The Adelphi in June 1934 for the Morris centenary, having also published in February a piece by Richard Rees called 'William Morris', which quoted Morris's 1893 lecture on Communism and argued that its warnings to the Left about compromise made it 'the most fitting tribute on his anniversary'.

Murry (1889-1957) was a very active literary journalist, the partner and later husband of Katherine Mansfield, and friend - and later critic - of D. H. Lawrence. In Between Two Worlds, published in 1935, he gave an account of his life up until about 1925 and there is no reference to Marxism or to Morris in that book, although Murry does refer at one point to 'what we Socialists call the State machine'. Earlier, indeed, he quotes from his own Journal for May 29th 1913 to the effect that he had been 'carried away by the statement of the Socialist ideal' in Philip Snowden's 'sane but completely uninspired book', Syndicalism and Socialism. But his 1935 comment is that he is amazed to find this statement, because he had been 'under the firm impression that I had been, up to 1930, indifferent to such things'. There is no evidence of his political engagement at the earlier time, when he was busily trying to launch his career as a literary journalist.

But it is clear that around 1930 Murry was one of the many whose thinking moved towards leftist politics, and that, unusually, his reading of Morris contributed importantly to this political development. (Unfortunately I have found no evidence of what Morris he actually read). The 1932 articles make this obvious. 'The Greatness of William Morris' is a single paragraph in a section of the journal called 'Commentary', and follows on from some remarks about the necessity for 'Socialist propaganda', particularly among the unemployed, 'with the set purpose of making not new riots, but new men'. The 'master of this propaganda', Murry goes on to say, was William Morris. 'And Morris was the only great Marxian Socialist this
country has produced'. Murry then criticises those Marxists who believe that Morris can be dismissed as a Utopian:

Because Morris wrote a Utopia, forsooth, he was a ‘Utopian Socialist’ in the sense in which Marx and Engels used the word. The argument is the last word in childishness; and the fact that it has passed muster as an argument for so many years in English Socialism, is in itself all the evidence we need of the necessity of a return to fundamentals. The simple realisation that William Morris was not merely an English Marxist but the English Marxist, is so important in its implications and its consequences that it may well serve by itself to be the spiritual foundation of the new Socialism - the English Communism.

The two articles on ‘The Return to Fundamentals’ follow directly on from this claim. In the first, published in October - the text, we are told, of a lecture to the Independent Labour Party (ILP) summer school in August - Murry tells his audience that his own ‘evolution into revolutionary Socialism’ has taken an unusual form, deriving from his belief that ‘man is just an organism’, that is to say, a part of the natural process. When this idea is transferred to history, he argues, we get Marxism:

Marxism is not primarily a doctrine of economics; it is a particular kind of understanding of human history, more fundamental and more comprehensive than any that had been before. (p. 22)

Acceptance involves ‘conscious submission to the historical process, here and now’. Murry then briefly describes one part of that historical process, the transition from feudalism to capitalism, against which the ‘great peasant rebellion of Tyler and Litster (sic) was directed’ (p. 24). Marxism, by demonstrating that the idea of private property is not natural and inevitable but historically conditioned, shows inspiringly that it can be replaced by something better. Since under capitalism, ‘production is a communal process’, it follows that ‘the system of law, the conception of justice, must be so changed that all may be enjoyed by all’ (p. 25). To bring about this change would constitute a revolution. But - and here Murry turns to attack the Communists in Britain such a revolution could take a peaceful form. Murry argues that orthodox Communists ‘have not the intellectual freedom to understand the creed of Marxism which they profess. They dare not believe in Marxism unless it comes to them with the imprimatur of Moscow’ (p. 26). Because they refuse to accept that the political situation in Britain is different from that which obtained in Russia, their ideas will fail.

Not that Murry is complacent about twentieth-century British political developments: ‘Instinctively we feel that forty years of political Socialism - so called - have brought us nowhere. We are no nearer the essential Social Revolution than we were at the time of the Dock Strike’ (p. 27). Under the circumstances it is easy to contrast the failure of Reformation with the potential of Revolution. ‘Yet’, Murry insists, ‘the word Revolution is as ambiguous and deceptive as it is necessary’ (p. 27). In his view it means ‘the gaining and holding of power by a body of men resolved to introduce economic and social equality’ (p. 27). In Britain this is not likely to come about through violence, but as a result of ‘a situation in which the really active
intelligence of this politicised society in which we live has been really prepared to desire ... the establishment of social and economic equality' (p. 28). Given the commitment of such ‘local leaders’ - presumably to come from the ranks of the ILP, since ‘the Labour Party is not and cannot be for equality, whereas we are’ - revolution can be brought about without ‘talking or thinking in terms of blood and machine guns’ (p. 28). It is not merely a matter of education: ‘The political fight, properly conducted, on principles, not personalities ... on fundamentals, not palliatives, is itself our propaganda’ (pp. 28-9). The parliamentary approach of the Labour Party, Murry argues, has failed - ‘ignominiously failed’ - because it was not truly Socialist. The Labour movement in Britain ‘never was permeated by the revolutionary resolve to create a new order of society’; indeed, the election of the two Labour governments in Britain so far has depended precisely on the abandonment by the Socialist movement of its Socialism’ (p. 29). In this part of the lecture there is no reference to Morris, but the presence of his brand of Marxism can be felt throughout, in the emphasis on history and the account of the end of feudalism, in the stress on the Social Revolution and equality and the dismissal of ‘palliatives’, and in the insistence on the necessity of creating an informed commitment to Socialism within the Labour movement. In some ways Murry is asking the ILP to take on the role Morris saw for the Socialist League - though Morris would have looked askance at Murry’s undemocratic statement - only too reminiscent of the Leninist Communists he was criticising - that ‘I am not speaking at all of the conversion of the majority of the electorate. I am speaking of the conversion of the creative intelligences, the creative men...’ (p. 28).

The second part of ‘The Return to Fundamentals’ follows directly from the first, opening with the assertion ‘The Labour Party never was Socialist’,11 and here the presence of Morris is made explicit. Murry tells the ILP audience that its aim must be to create true Socialists believing in a new social order, whose integrity will refuse all forms of compromise. Only such Marxism can save the Labour movement from failure, but it is to be distinguished from the ‘facile and superficial Marxism’ (p. 101) of the Communist Party which thinks of the October Revolution in Russia as the only prototype for the necessary Social Revolution. ‘Our problem, our opportunity’, Murry claims, ‘is utterly different’ (p. 101). He had seen evidence that the ILP might become ‘the appointed instrument for the embodiment in action of that flexible, generous essential Marxism of which I so deeply felt the necessity’ (p. 101). He had found the Party’s recent Bradford Conference encouraging in this respect, but had been distressed at it to discover that ‘The few people I met who held a high opinion of Marx, thought nothing of Morris; and the few who thought the world of Morris, had no opinion of Marx’ (p. 102). He attributes this in part to the continuing acceptance of H. M. Hyndman’s claim to represent the Marxist position, and to ‘the strangely mistaken notion that because Morris had written an inspiring Socialist Utopia in News from Nowhere, he was therefore a Utopian Socialist in the deprecatory sense in which Marx and Engels used the phrase’ (p. 102). In fact ‘Morris was a revolutionary Socialist, and a Marxist’ who responded deeply to Marx’s reading of history which chimed exactly with his own. ‘For Morris himself was a most penetrating historian, with a unique imaginative eye. He had studied history not in written documents, but in the works of men’s hands...’ (p. 102).

Morry had found it hard to convert the British working class to revolutionary Socialism because of what Marx had noted as ‘the bourgeoisification of the English
proletariat' (p. 103). This historical fact accounts for the difficulties of British Socialism from its early days to the situation in 1932. Morris had foreseen the dangers of compromise as early as 1890. Murry then quotes a lengthy passage from what he calls Morris's 'farewell to the Socialist League' (p. 104) in that year, on the need to keep the Socialist ideal alive in a period of likely compromise, ending: 'Therefore, I say, make Socialists. We Socialists can do nothing else that is useful' (quoted, p. 106). Murry then goes on to state that Morris had eventually come to accept 'Parliamentarism' as a necessary means, but argues that this can only work if 'an entirely different kind of Parliamentarism' from that currently obtaining can be brought into existence (p. 106). This is the great challenge of the movement: to develop a party of uncompromising integrity such as Morris was trying to create. Only with such leaders - 'filled with the Marxist sense of historical necessity' (p. 108) - can the Social Revolution be brought about. By returning to the fundamentals that unite Marx, Morris and Lenin, Murry concludes, Socialism in Britain can fulfil its potential by inspiring its members with 'the common profession of a faith that satisfies the heart and mind at once' (p. 109).

Murry's chapter on Morris in the book The Great Victorians is less rhetorical than his summer school speech, but still vigorous and positive. It gives a biographical account of Morris, refuting the notion of him as 'an antiquarian' and asserting the link between his enthusiasm for the Gothic and his later Socialism. Murry remarks, justly in the context, that 'few men have been more grievously - I sometimes think, more deliberately - misunderstood than Morris'. For Morris, the past was deeply significant, but only in relation to the imagined future. Because of his profound understanding of the historical process, Morris was 'the one man in England capable of really understanding' Marx's philosophy of history: 'Marxism was the philosophy of his own life-experience' (p. 329). Murry gives a vivid picture of Morris making the decision to devote his energies to politics, and describes his decision to do so as 'heroic'. He then summarises well the final stage of his career:

He was too complete a Socialist for [contemporary] Socialism. It was beginning to pass into Labour politics and Fabianism - historically necessary phrases, no doubt, in which the bankruptcy of Socialism that is not revolutionary and 'religious' should be made plain to all seeing eyes - but phases with which, though he saw them to be inevitable, the necessities of his own nature forbade him to compromise. (p. 334)

Morris's life was thus an 'apparent failure' (p. 334), and his political ideas have been neglected for some fifty years, as Murry neatly puts it, 'The middle class have accepted his art and ignored his revolution; the working-classes and their leaders have turned away from his vision to barren practicality' (p. 334). Even those who regret this put the blame on the rejection of Marx rather than of Morris. But the two are inseparable, for 'Morris was the truest Marxian Socialist this country has ever had' (p. 335). Murry is quoted on the necessity for 'fearless rest and hopeful work' (p. 335), and found to be unanswerable. The criticism of his Socialism as Utopian is rejected on the convincing grounds that 'If Socialism is to be called Utopian because it shrinks from political chicane, then all genuine Socialism is Utopian: Marx's and Morris's and Lenin's' (p. 336).
Murry goes on to assert the accuracy of Morris’s view of the likely evolution of British politics, again quoting from the 1890 ‘Where are we now?’ (pp. 337-8), linking this to his view of the demeaning position of the modern artist, who ‘has gone on creating ever more esoteric art for the solace of the middle-class acedia and has been unaware of his own degradation’ (p. 337). He quotes from Morris’s letter to Georgiana Burne-Jones of August 1883, dissociating himself from the politicking of Hyndman, and stating his own view, that ‘the aim of Socialists should be the founding of a religion, towards which end compromise is no use, and we only want those with us who will be with us to the end’ (quoted, p. 338). Murry builds on this to argue that ‘Unless Socialism is a religion, it is nothing’ (p. 338), and that Morris was one of the few to realise this. By the depth of his commitment, he belongs with Marx and Engels. The fact that this is not accepted on the Left, that Morris is not thought to stand with Marx and Engels, is ‘merely another proof of the superficiality of Socialist and Communist thought in England’ (p. 340). So Murry ends by asserting, with some rhetorical flourish, that Morris and Marx ‘are the precise counterparts of each other. They represent simply a typically German and a typically English discovery of a universal truth: they converge, are one, and yet themselves, in the catholicism of the future’ (p. 341).

In 1932, the year of his Morris articles, Murry also published a short book entitled The Necessity of Communism. In it he argues clearly and vigorously for an English form of Communism. The Foreword tells us that ‘Communism will inevitably come to this country... No power on earth can stop it’ (p. 9). But it does not have to come in the Russian form. Indeed, it is both unlikely and undesirable that it should do so. ‘For the horrors of Russian Communism have been, and still are, inhuman. Let no irresponsible sentimental sympathiser with the U.S.S.R. delude himself about conditions there’ (p. 11). Many did, but Murry was not among them. But he does not want this to detract people in Britain from awareness of the appalling sufferings caused by capitalism. The capitalist system must be replaced by a better one, what Murry calls ‘human Communism’ (p. 14), based on a fuller reading of Marx than is usual at the time: ‘The fact is that Marxism has suffered a deplorable degradation both in England and in Russia. In England it has been quietly emasculated; in Russia noisily coarsened’ (p. 15). The Leninist Marxism of the Soviet Union is ‘valid for Russia, ridiculous in England. “Communism” in this country has become imitation Leninism, and is perfectly futile’ (p. 15). It is Murry’s endeavour to create an English Communism that will do justice to the complexity of Marx’s thought in a way that Leninism does not do. It becomes obvious why Murry was dismissed or ignored by the Communist Party of Great Britain.

For Murry always retained a religious dimension to his thinking, which became more prominent as the Thirties passed. Things to Come, his 1928 book of essays, had mainly been concerned with religious matters, and when he reissued it in 1938 he added an introductory chapter called ‘On Love: Human and Divine’. Now, he says, ‘although I have become an altogether much more orthodox Christian than I was, I have also become a much more revolutionary one’ (p. i). His declaration of faith in Christianity - which for him implies pacifism - includes an assertion of the importance of Marx. He concludes his account of his development by insisting on how significant Marxism has been to him in showing him the immorality of the prevailing economic system: it had convinced him that its ‘impending doom’ was
'righteous' (p. xxvii). He calls Das Kapital 'a denunciation by a great Jewish prophet of the radical corruption and inevitable catastrophe of the modern world', and states that if Christianity dismisses or ignores Marxism it will not only be irrelevant but eventually 'the accomplice and the slave of Fascism' (p. xxvii). In the last even more flamboyant sentence he portrays Marx as 'the new John the Baptist of the revolutionary Christ, who is the same today, yesterday and for ever, bidding us flee the judgment of wrath by the revolution of love' (p. xxviii). If this may point forward to liberation theology, it is certainly remote from the orthodoxies of Thirties British Communism, so that it is hardly surprising that Murry came to be dismissed on the Left as a muddled mystic.17

The books he published later in the decade such as Heaven and Earth (1938) and The Defence of Democracy (1939) continue the attempt to bring together Christian and Marxist insights. The earlier of the two is relevant here because in it Murry completes his account of what he sees as the Christian civilization of the West with a revised version of his article on Morris in The Great Victorians, now entitled 'Morris: the Church Re-Edified'.18 Murry's aim in the book is of the largest ambition; nothing less than to bring together into a renewed Christianity the severed energies of the Catholic and Protestant traditions as they have worked themselves into modern ethics and politics. He proceeds by giving a cultural history of the West through key figures: Chaucer, Montaigne, Shakespeare, Cromwell, Milton, Rousseau, Goethe, Godwin, Wordsworth, Shelley and Marx. The search is for 'the re-creation of an acknowledged spiritual authority' (p. 19) to save civilization from its impending destruction. Morris is presented as the culminating voice in this tradition because he challenges the church 'to make amends for its betrayal of the common man' (p. 375). His Dream of John Ball, Murry argues, called for 'a complete renewal of the Christian religion' (p. 375). Morris was aware of the medieval period, it is suggested, as 'a time ... when men lived, however hardly, in real community with one another and with God' (p. 375). Murry's Morris is now a man who had a religious vocation but who saw that it could only be fulfilled outside the priesthood:

He was not mistaken. By his craftsmanship he restored to the Church some substance of 'the beauty of holiness', and by his imagination he made the idea of the Church once more central to social idealism. You cannot think of Morris's Socialism save as the adumbration of a community in which the Christian profession and social practice are in harmony once again. (p. 376)

By this time Morris has become a barely recognisable figure in Murry's new religious creation.

This does not, however, detract from the value of his 1932 writings on Morris and their uncompromising assertion of his Marxism. Perhaps one reason why this has not often been acknowledged is the attack on Murry by Page Arnot in his 'William Morris versus the Morris Myth' in The Labour Monthly for March 1934 - quickly expanded into the short book William Morris: A Vindication, also in 1934. Writing from the perspective of the Communist Party, Arnot is keen to reclaim Morris from the bourgeoisie who ignore his politics and from what he calls the 'Labour Party and I.L.P. myth' of Morris the 'gentle Socialist'.19 Arnot wants to conflate the Labour
Party and the ILP, while, as we have seen, Murry conceived of the ILP as a possible alternative to Labour. Arnot’s attack is sweeping:

William Morris was hardly dead before this myth began to be built up by Bruce Glasier and many others, until at the present day it is being spread by literary ghouls like J. Middleton Murry - whose prolonged sessions on the grave of Morris, however, will neither give him the life blood of Morris nor distort the memory of what Morris was. The main burden of this myth, as it has lasted for over thirty years, is that Morris was ‘not a Marxist,’ and if there is now some assimilation of Morris and Marx in their scribblings, it is only because they have at length created a mythical Marx to fit in with their mythical Morris.  

The criticism of Bruce Glasier has a reasonable basis - though it is worth remarking that it is May Morris who states in her Preface to Bruce Glasier’s William Morris and the Early Days of the Socialist Movement of 1921 that ‘Marxian economics - apart from Marx’s historical survey - is little read or understood except by his foreign disciples. William Morris’s criticism of modern society was fundamentally ethical...’ (p. 332). Whether Arnot’s criticism of Murry is equally valid, or should be attributed rather to the tensions between various groups on the Left in Britain at the time, readers of this article may judge for themselves from the evidence offered. Certainly the fact that it is Arnot rather than Murry whose insistence on Morris’s Marxism is most commonly invoked must owe a good deal to Arnot’s having had the effective support of the Communist Party, while Murry pursued his idiosyncratic way towards his re- edified church.

NOTES


5 ibid., p. 257.

6 ibid., p. 258.

7 Adelphi, 4, no. 5, p. 774.

8 ibid.

9 ibid.

10 Adelphi, 5, no. 1, p. 19. Subsequent page references to this article are given in brackets.

11 ibid., 5, no. 2, p. 97. Subsequent page references to this article are given in brackets.
The passage is a slightly abbreviated form of Morris's 'Where are we now?' in *Commune* for 15 November 1890; see N. Salmon (ed.), *William Morris: Political Writings*, (Bristol: Thoemmes Press 1994), pp. 491-4.


Murry was acutely aware of his unsteady reputation in the literary world. As early as 1927, when Jonathan Cape reissued his 1920 book of essays *The Evolution of an Intellectual* in the Travellers' Library series, Murry was showing awareness of how he was regarded. In the 1927 Prefatory Note he writes, of the book's title: 'It is an unattractive title; but then I once was that unattractive thing, an "intellectual", and these essays record the first and painful stages by which I became something else. Perhaps I never was a genuine "intellectual"; but I had the reputation of being one. Now, if I have any reputation, it is simply that of a mystic, as I am called by those who are kind to me, or an emotional crank, as I am called by those who are not. My own opinion is that I have become a reasonable man.' (pp. 9-10)


*Labour Monthly*, 16, no. 3, p. 179.