Art, Socialism and the Division of Labour
by Nicholas Pearson

That Morris was a 'many-sided' man is both a cliché and the basis for the variety of contradictory assessments of his thought and work. He was a 'designer, craftsman, printer, pioneer, socialist, dreamer,' a 'robust and generous personality' and a man of 'extraordinary vitality', with 'creative concentration' and 'courage'. Whether all of these descriptions are true or not is not our purpose to discuss here; the point is that the possibility of treating different facets as separate can and has led to a misrepresentation of each. This has followed particularly in relation to his views on art and craft. His career as a lecturer on art and craft, from the late seventies to his death, coincides with the period in his life when he was moving from liberalism to a full socialist position, and, while his becoming a socialist grew in part from his experience as an artist craftsman, his views on art and craft, as expressed most coherently in his lectures, and fragmentarily in letters of the same period, are only comprehensible within the context of his wider socialist programme – as he himself makes abundantly clear. It therefore follows that any assessment of his statements on art and craft, and his programme for the arts and crafts, which leaves aside his analysis of capitalism and socialism, is bound not only to miss the point, but to suggest his programme as being faulty and inapplicable to the world we live in. Equally any assessment of Morris based on a judgement of what he himself produced as a craftsman, and relating this only to his general statements on art (ignoring his broad socialist critique) may also very justifiably, show his approach as archaic and impractical – and with such judgement Morris himself would probably have agreed.

1 William Morris Society, a statement of aims.
The separating of Morris's socialism from the art he produced and from his statements on art, and the separation of his statements on art from his socialism and his understanding of the medieval and the gothic revival began, as E.P. Thompson clearly demonstrates, well before his death. That this 'separation' of different aspects of Morris's thought still continues, despite the arguments of recent biographers and the accessibility of selections from his writings on socialism and art, is perhaps not surprising given the variety of ways in which Morris has been 'written off' in general books on art and art history.

Often the misrepresentation takes the form of subtly watering down positions which Morris genuinely held. Thus, in a recent book on the Bauhaus, Morris is given credit for his importance as a precursor of the school, but is said to have 'loathed the values of the steam age', and this condemnation of his age is said to have been 'backed by a highly developed social conscience' (my itals. N.P.). Morris is then paraphrased as saying that 'Nothing of value could be produced by machinery, since mass production brought in with it mass degradation'. Now these statements are almost true, and yet they make him out to be, in the end, only a romantic and well-meaning yet impractical man. In fact 'steam age' has been substituted for Morris's use of 'commercialism' and 'capitalism' and 'social conscience' has been substituted for 'socialist critique'. And certainly, if we ignore his socialism, it can only be said that he objected to machinery as such within the terms of his socialist critique of capitalism; however, it was not machinery as such he objected to, but particular sorts of machinery used to particular ends. As he said himself.

I know that to some cultivated people, people of the artistic turn of mind, machinery is particularly distasteful, and they will be apt to say you will never get your surroundings pleasant so long as you are surrounded by machinery. I don't quite admit that; it is the allowing machines to be our masters and not our servants that so injures the beauty of life nowadays.


and elsewhere he emphasised that it was the relations of production that he wanted to see changed, and not merely a form of machinery operated within those relations;

It is not this or that tangible steel and brass machine which we want to get rid of, but the great intangible machine of commercial tyranny which oppresses the lives of all of us.  

All this is much more than simply having a ‘social conscience’ and loathing ‘the values of the steam age’.

Again, in a book on Art Nouveau (a movement following closely from the Arts and Crafts Movement), we find it asserted that Morris did not realise that

hand-made products would be far too expensive for the masses, who under increasing industrialisation were becoming even poorer. He did not appreciate that Victorian society was in no way comparable to the Medieval one. Sincere as he was, his vision was doomed to failure.  

There is not much that can be said about such a statement; it is perhaps not all that commonly appreciated that Morris was only too well aware of the price of his goods, but no excuse can be offered for suggesting that he was confused as to which era in history he lived in.

Ernst Gombrich also brushes aside Morris’s analysis of art and society, implying again that Morris was impractical and not of his age. Thus in *The Story of Art* he says that ‘Ruskin and Morris had still hoped that the regeneration of art could be brought about by a return to medieval conditions’, and adds that ‘many artists saw that this was an impossibility’, — a judgement with which Morris would have agreed. *The Story of Art*

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4 ‘How we live and how we might live’ (1888) In Briggs (ed) p.177. A note on quoted sources appears on p xx.


and architecture, that is, beautiful building properly ornamented; these
are only a portion of art, which comprises, as I understand the word,
a great deal more; beauty produced by the labour of man both mental
and bodily, the expression of the interest man takes in the life of man
upon the earth with all its surroundings, in other words the human
pleasure of life is what I mean by art. [LeMire p.94]

And in ‘The Worker’s Share of Art’, an article in Commweal
(April 1885) Morris offers a further definition;

Art is a man’s embodied expression of interest in the life of man; it
springs from man’s pleasure in his life; pleasure we must call it, taking
all human life together, however much it may be broken by the grief
and trouble of individuals; and as it is the expression of pleasure in
life generally, in the memory of the deeds of the past, and the hope of
those of the future, so it is especially the expression of man’s pleasure
in the deeds of the present: in his work. [Briggs pp. 140-41]

Thus, as a first step, we see he defines art in a way which relates
to the doing and practice of everything, and only marginally to
the high art or fine art of his own day.

Central to this definition of art, and his critique of the activ­
ities going under the name of art, was a critique of the division
of labour under capitalism. Thus in his lecture, ‘The Gothic
Revival, II’, he discusses what he saw as the existing poor stand­
ard of contemporary ornament;

It is because there is such a division of labour in our occupations now­
adays that there is a trenchant line of demarcation between artists and
workmen, even when the latter are engaged on what are considered
in some sense works of art. [LeMire p. 86.]

This division of labour is not simply that between the rich and
the poor, the owners and the makers, but the division of labour
within the work situation, between different aspects of work on
the same product, and between the mental and physical aspects
of the making of the product; thus he talks of the possibility of
the worker creating beauty as follows;

If there is to be any pretence of beauty in the work which is to pass
through his hands it will have been arranged for him by some one else’s
mind, and all his mind will have to do with the execution of it will be
to keep before him the fact that he has got to carry out his pattern
neatly perhaps, but speedily certainly under the penalty of his liveli­
hood being injured. [ibid]
and on the broader level he argued in a letter to the *Manchester Examiner* (14 March 1883) that the absence of popular art from his time

> betokens that fatal division of men into the cultivated and the degraded classes which competitive commerce has bred and fosters; popular art has no chance of a healthy life, or, indeed, of a life at all till we are on the way to fill up this terrible gulf between riches and poverty.

[Henderson p.165]

Thus far, therefore, Morris has argued that true art should be ‘the expression of man’s pleasure . . . in his work’ and he has argued that such an art, as a normal part of production, can only exist when the producer has control over what he produces; that is there can be no general art when the division of labour between mental work and manual work, and between different aspects of mental and manual work, negates the worker’s control over what he is producing.

Morris’s arguments over the nature of the Gothic make this position very clear, and demonstrate forcibly that what he was talking about was not stylistic change, but a change in the relations of production.

Morris participated in the Gothic Revival, admired medieval building and work, and frequently lectured upon it. He perceived in medieval products a greater simplicity and beauty than in most of what he saw around him but, for the purpose of our exposition, what is important is why he could use the medieval as an example for a possible future, or as a test case against the present, and in what sense he used his analysis of the relations of production of medieval society as an empirical example to set against the present.

In what we could describe as the classic archetypical medieval situation the workman, as master, owned the tools, produced goods for use, and negotiated directly with the purchaser. As an apprentice you learnt under the supervision of the master, to become yourself a master, and controller of your own work situation. Even under the later less democratic phase of the guild system, Morris argued, you may, as worker, have had fewer privileges, but you nevertheless were still master of your own work. Thus Morris argues
Now if you have followed me you will take note that these are the conditions under which artists work; and in fact the craftsmen of the middle ages were all artists.  

emphasising again that art is a way of working in a situation of workers control over the product. Thus Gothic art

was the work of free craftsmen working for no master or profit-grinder, and capable of expressing their own thoughts by means of their work, which was no mere burden to them but was blended with pleasure. [ibid]

Under these conditions of production, when there were not special men called 'artists', and there was not a division of labour between mental and manual, or between different aspects of each, it was possible for art to be popular art, to be a part of everyday life and things, and to be part of the expression of pleasure in life.

Popular art

is the art of the people: the art produced by the daily labour of all kinds of men for the daily use of all kinds of men. ['Of the Origins of Ornamental Art'. LeMire p. 137]

and it is this Morris felt the division of labour under capitalism, and production geared to the creation of surplus value, rather than goods designed for use, had destroyed.

While Morris himself admired medieval art, and distinctly felt that poverty under the medieval system was preferable to poverty in a late Victorian city (which for him also meant degradation and dehumanisation) medievalism was not for him an answer. His socialist writings are sharp and practical and, while growing out of his historical analysis of the medieval, are not an advocacy of revamped medievalism:

We know that a condition of poverty has not always meant overwork and anxiety, but under modern civilisation it does, and with modern civilisation we have to deal: we cannot turn our people back into Catholic English peasants and Guild craftsmen, or into heathen Norse bonders.

rather

8 LeMire (ed) p.88. Note that in the manuscript 'workmen' is substituted for 'craftsmen'.

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commerce has bred the Proletariat and uses it quite blindly, and is still blind to the next move in the game, which will be that the Proletariat will say: we will be used no longer, you have organised us for our own use. [Henderson p.208.]

That Morris’s socialism is essential to an understanding of his views on art is well demonstrated in considering his comments on the Gothic Revival, and his own work as an artist-craftsman.

What Morris saw as hopeful in the Gothic Revival was the increasing historical knowledge of the basis of the original style that it followed from it; for, by itself, a merely stylistic innovation did not affect the social relations or work. Broadly the Gothic Revival, he argued, had remained a stylistic innovation, for

In spite of all the talk among Artistic people, the real style of the day, Victorian Architecture, is in full swing; or in other words miserable squalor and purse-proud, rampant vulgarity divide our architecture between them. ['The Gothic Revival II'. LeMire p.81]

and criticising cheap ornament, he went on to advocate a line very close to that taken by the Bauhaus stylistically;

at present I say build big and solid and with an eye to strict utility; you will find that will be expressive work enough, and will by no means be utilitarian. [ibid p.83.]

Why he should take this position, which would seem to be in many ways the antithesis of the Gothic style is made clear in his comments on a church built in the Gothic style by a friend. In these comments Morris makes clear again that it is the relations of production that mattered to him most; for there to be true art the worker must control his work and hence be involved in that which he produces. Talking of the church Morris says that

as I looked at it I began to get tired of it although I could find no fault with its design at all; and why was that? Well there were dozens of figures in the niches, which indeed filled their places: but when you looked at them you knew very well what they were; they were carving not sculpture. That is we have today to use two words which mean the same thing to indicate two different things: so I say they were carving, that is they were done by men who really had nothing to do with the design of them who cut them unfeelingly and mechanically without troubling their heads as to whom they represented, with no trace
in them of my friend the architect's enthusiasm for the Middle Ages, by men who would just as soon have cut 18th century grave stone cherubs, or apples and amoretti in a new club house; in short they were just mechanical dolls nothing more. [Ibid]

This illustrates very clearly the sense in which Morris had ceased to be the protagonist in a battle for changes in style, but rather was advocating a change in work relations as a precondition for a different sort of art — a different sort of production under which there would not be a division between artists and non-artists.

The bar to a real Gothic Revival in the 19th century was that

so far from beauty being a necessary incident to all handiwork, it is always absent from it unless it is bargained for as a special separate article having its own market value. [Ibid p.88]

This is crucial to the understanding of Morris's analysis; for while art or ornament is not a necessary and normal part of a commodity, and is but an addition to that commodity, art will be nothing but a frill for which the rich pay extra. While art is a luxury and an extra, and has little to do with the basic utility and making of objects, and the way the object is made, there could for Morris be no real art. Morris points out⁹ that the Gothic Revival of his time was largely one of cultivated men seeking art through art, instead of art through life of the people. And there was in his view no hope for the revival unless art could be found through the people. But the division into rich and poor, cultivated and uncultivated, is 'necessary for the existence of the present commercial capitalist system'. And thus while that lasts, he concludes, there is no hope for a Gothic Revival:

the progress, nay the very existence of art depends on the supplanting of the present capitalist system by something better, depends on changing the basis of society. [Ibid P.93.]

This is the crux of Morris's critique, and it is worthwhile recapitulating what has been said so far. First he has defined art as pleasure in life expressed in mental and material production. This art should be a necessary and normal part of produc-

⁹ LeMire (ed) op. cit. pp. 89-93.
tion. Second he has argued, using the medieval relations of production as an empirical case to set against the present, that the division of labour between the mental and the manual, and between different aspects of each, destroys the producer’s control over his product, and the destruction of that control is the destruction of the pleasure in work, and the possibility of that work embodying a true popular art. Third he has pointed out that what art there then was was an addition to a product — something with an extra value. That is, art had become merely another commodity which, in a class divided society, could be purchased by the richer members of that society.

The present art was, therefore, a frill, and moreover it was a frill which was not produced by men who were truly involved in the production of it.

It has been suggested 10 that in this analysis Morris is really talking only of ‘ornamental art’ and is thus ignoring the fine art (paintings, sculpture, etc) of his own day. And to an extent this is true, for he was challenging the very existence of a notion of art that confined the term to a limited range of aesthetic objects. Art was not something for him that was confined to painting and sculpture.

He did, however, pass comment on what he called ‘artists’ art’, but indicated that such art was subject to the same problems as the popular art he normally talked of. For the artist, as a special kind of man, was part of that division of labour; and he had become so specialised and forced into individualism that he was cut off from the sources of his work. Talking of ‘artists’ art’ he said

I can’t help thinking that it does produce something worthier than was turned out in the 18th century; but I know that if it does it is because of the revolutionary spirit working in the brains of men who at least will not accept conventional lies in anything with which they are busied: and whatever it is I fear it produces little effect on the mass of the people who at present, since popular art lies crushed under money bags, have no share in the pleasure of life either in their work or their play.

[‘Art and Labour’, 1884. LeMire p.111]

and writing to Andreas Scheu he stressed that an art founded

10 E.P. Thompson, op. cit. Appendices.
on individualism could have no real continuity:

in spite of all the success I have had, I have not failed to be conscious
that the art I have been helping to produce would fail with the death
of a few of us who really care about it, that a reform in art which is
founded on individualism must perish with the individuals who have
set it going... art cannot have a real life and growth under the present
system of commercialism and profit-mongering. [Henderson
p.187]

Thus returning to the argument that a healthy art must have
collective roots, and that workers must individually and jointly
have control over producing goods for use not for profit.

Morris is ‘infamous’ for his opposition to machinery, and it is
this supposed opposition that has led to many superficial dis­
missals of his work. This ‘infamy’, however, is founded on a
failure to grasp that it was machinery under capitalism that he
opposed, not machinery as such.

Under capitalism the machine was a means of creating grea­
ter profit, and the effect of the machine was to displace the
worker through eroding further the worker’s control over his
work; the worker became a slave to the machine, as part of his
being a slave to the system. Thus Morris says in ‘Art and Soc­
ialism’

And all that mastery over the powers of nature which the last hundred
years or less has given us: what has it done for us under this system?
In the opinion of John Stuart Mill, it was doubtful if all the mechani­
cal inventions of modern times have done anything to lighten the toil
of labour: be sure there is no doubt, that they were not made for that
end, but to ‘make a profit’... Those machines of which the civilised
world is so proud, has it any right to be proud of the use they have
been put to by Commercial war and waste? 11

and in ‘Useful Work versus Useless Toil’ he emphasises that
however great the increase in machinery, the effect under cap­
talism is to further degrade the worker, reduce his skill in work
and hence his power over his product:

The multiplication of labour has become a necessity for us, and so
long as that goes on no ingenuity in the invention of machines will be

11 Quoted in P. Faulkner, William Morris and Eric Gill,
of any real use to us. Each new machine will cause a certain amount of misery among the workers whose special industry it may disturb; so many of them will be reduced from skilled to unskilled workmen, and then gradually matters will slip into their due grooves, and all will work apparently smoothly again; and if it were not that all this is preparing revolution, things would be, for the greater part of men, just as they were before the new powerful invention. [Briggs p.125.]

Thus the steady increase in the use of the machine, under capitalism, Morris saw as a process through which the worker lost greater and greater control over his work and labour; it follows that the increasing use of machinery under capitalism diminishes constantly the number of those able, at least in part, to produce art in the sense that Morris has defined it.

Also machinery under capitalism not only reduces the skill of the worker, but increases the precariousness of his life through the creation of a reserve labour force:

They are called ‘labour-saving’ machines — a commonly used phrase which implies what we expect of them; but we do not get what we expect. What they really do is to reduce the skilled labour to the ranks of the unskilled, to increase the number of the ‘reserve army of labour’ — to intensify the labour of those who serve the machines. [Ibid.]

While machinery under capitalism degraded the worker and was a means towards greater production for profit, the machine under socialism was the precondition for building a better society.

It was true that

Our epoch has invented machines which would have appeared wild dreams to the men of past ages.

and under a different social system

these miracles of ingenuity would be for the first time used for minimising the amount of time spent in unattractive labour, which by their means might be so reduced as to be but a very light burden on each individual. All the more as these machines would be very much improved when it was no longer a question as to whether their improvement would ‘pay’ the individual, but rather whether it would benefit the community. [Ibid.]

And thus he stresses that not only does the machine mean and do a different job under different social relations, but the different priorities and requirements lead to the creation of different sorts of machines.
Under a different social system, however, Morris did hope for the limitation of machinery. Initially he thought that machinery would multiply to take on new tasks but, once there was time to reconsider, he saw machinery as being limited to basic heavy manual work and the worker taking on a more direct relationship again with his product:

I have a kind of hope that the very elaboration of machinery in a society whose purpose is not the multiplication of labour, as it now is, but the carrying on of a pleasant life, as it would be under social order — that the elaboration of machinery, I say, will lead to the simplification of life, and so once more to the limitation of machinery.

([*How we Live and How We Might Live*, 1888. Briggs p.177]

It is this wish to use but to limit machinery which has led to allegations that Morris’s views were archaic. Emphasis has been laid, on the contrary, on the need to design for machinery, and to accept the machine as given.

This is, however, to miss the gist of Morris’s understanding, which was based on a full grasp of the political nature of assembly line production. However attractive, or otherwise, a product designed for machine production was or is, that product remains something designed by a limited number of people, while others merely ‘service’ the machine, package the goods, and send them to anonymous warehouses — a situation over which they have no control. The designer and the worker are separated from each other and from the product; the purchaser is separated from the producers. Morris is arguing that there is not art in that, and there is not pleasure in that. Under a social system with different priorities, greater producer control, work should be creative and enjoyable as should be leisure. Pleasure and art require that machinery should be used by men, and not be an instrument in the domination of men by men, That is not archaism.

As has been said, for Morris

the chief source of art is man’s pleasure in his daily necessary work, which expresses itself and is embodied in that work itself; nothing else can make the common surroundings of life beautiful, and whenever they are beautiful it is a sign that men’s work has pleasure in it, however they may suffer otherwise. [*The Worker’s Share of Art*. Briggs p.140]
and it was this essential art, as part of everyday work and life, that had been strangled under capitalism. Thus, whatever else may be going on in art as practised by specialists (men under the division of labour called artists) the basis for popular art was, for Morris, lacking already.

But just as capitalism was antagonistic to popular art, Morris felt that those who were called artists were prevented from producing anything of real worth; rather the artist was forced back into reviving past styles, or into sentimentalising.

The artists, the aim of whose lives is to produce beauty and interest, are deprived of the materials for the works in real life, since all round them is ugly and vulgar. They are driven into seeking their materials in the imagination of past ages, or into giving the lie to their own sense of beauty and knowledge of it by sentimentalising and falsifying the life which goes on around them. [Ibid p.141]

Further the artist, who it will be remembered Morris defined earlier as being in a position of control over his own work and products in a manner equivalent to that of the medieval workman, has nevertheless to be in a state of constant struggle in order to produce something worthwhile. This struggle, which in the rhetoric of the myth of the artist is now seen as being the fight to express true and deep feelings, Morris saw as being an inevitable waste of energy under the commercial system, energy which could better have gone into his work:

whatever is produced that is worth anything is the work of men who are in rebellion against the corrupt society of today, rebellion sometimes open, sometimes veiled under cynicism, but by which in any case lives are wasted in a struggle too often vain, against their fellowmen, which ought to be used for the exercise of special gifts for the benefit of the world. [Ibid]

Thus Morris saw the state of art in the 1880s as being one in which there was little popular art, little art expressed as a constituent part of daily production, and what remained as 'high' or 'intellectual' art was suffering from the degradation of surroundings, from its own social exclusiveness, from having to use past ages as inspiration, or else to sentimentalise the present. And, above all, the only possibility of an art under capitalism was an individualist art which 'must perish with the individuals who have set it going'.

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What art could or would be under socialism Morris refused to specify. What he would and did specify were the preconditions for a vigorous art. But, at various times he commented that for a new birth of art to take place there would, perhaps, first have to be a total death of it; this for two reasons; first to unlearn the habits of the past and second in order that a new society could be built. Thus a period of strict utilitarianism might be necessary as a foundation for the new society.

The experiment of a civilised community living wholly without art or literature has not yet been tried. The past degradation and corruption of civilisation may force this denial of pleasure upon the society which will arise from its ashes. If that must be, we will accept the passing phase of utilitarianism as a foundation for the art which is to be. If the cripple and the starvelling disappear from our streets, if the earth nourish us all alike, if the sun shine for all of us alike, if to one and all of us the glorious drama of the earth - day and night, summer and winter - can be presented as a thing to understand and love, we can afford to wait awhile till we are purified from the shame of the past corruption, and till art arises again amongst people freed from the terror of the slave and the shame of the robber. ['Useful Work versus Useless Toil'. Briggs p.133]

Thus, seeing the birth of a new society, Morris was prepared to accept as a consequence

the seeming disappearance of what art is now left us; because I am sure that that will be but a temporary loss, to be followed by a genuine new birth of art, which will be the spontaneous expression of the pleasure of life innate in the whole people. [Henderson pp. 355-7.]

Art could not be kept alive 'by the action ... of a few groups of specially gifted men and their small circle of admirers', for, while the feeling of artists for art was, he said, genuine, the artist had to work in the midst of

the ignorance of those whose life ought to be spent in the production of works of art (the makers of wares to wit), and of the fatuous pretence of those who, making no utilities, are driven to 'make believe'. [Ibid]

What a new art could be Morris may have refused to specify; but note in the following comment his attitude to the quality of the art of past ages, *in spite of* and not *because of* the system under which people lived. The medieval system may have given greater worker control, but it was by no means ideal:
No one can tell now what form that art will take; but as it is certain that it will not depend on the whim of a few persons, but on the will of all, so it may be hoped that it will at last not lag behind that of past ages, but will outdo the art of the past in the degree that life will be more pleasureable from the absence of bygone violence and tyranny, in spite and not because of which our forefathers produced the wonders of popular art, some few of which time has left us. [Ibid.]

Morris’s socialism was founded in the understanding of the nature of work, the purpose of work, and the worker’s control over his work. While he welcomed increases in living standards and amenities for workers, this was not for him anything to do with socialism. This is an important point, for it was his experience of work as an artist-craftsman, and his understanding of the division of labour in the work situation, that led him to be so mistrustful of parliamentarianism and reformism among socialists. It is not, as has been suggested, that he was a ‘purist’ in his socialism, but rather that he saw parliamentarianism and reformism as leading to only an increase in living standards under capitalism while trade was good; and that had nothing to do with the worker’s control over his product, and hence had nothing to do with ‘pleasure in life’ and with art.

Between 1888 and his death Morris’s attitude to the parliamentary process varied, but always there is that suspicion that not only were gradual reforms nothing to do with control over the means of production, but also that certain reforms were inevitable under capitalism anyway.

Morris was suspicious of reformists as such, for they were only individuals:

though here and there a few men of the upper and middle classes, moved by their conscience and insight may and doubtless will throw in their lot with the working classes, the upper and middle classes as a body will by the very nature of their existence, and like a plant grows, resist the abolition of classes. [Henderson (ed) p. 190]

for the capitalist

...can only be destroyed, it seems to me, by the united discontent of numbers; isolated acts of a few persons of the middle and upper classes seeming to me (as I have said before) quite powerless against it. [Ibid p.175.]
Even in 1893, when to some extent Morris had modified his antagonism to parliamentary action, he remained highly sceptical about reform that was not simply an extension of general agitation and change outside parliament. Thus he discussed the growth of public acquirement of parks and other open spaces, planting of trees, establishment of free libraries and the like. [‘Communism’, 1893. Briggs p.154]

and, while admitting these to be a ‘great gain’, saw them as merely the ‘machinery’ of socialism. Most important was ‘how such reforms were done; in what spirit; or rather what else was being done, while these were going on, which would make people long for equality of condition; which would give them faith in the possibility and workableness of Socialism’. [Ibid.]

He was worried about the manner in which the reforms were carried out for he considered that

the Society of Inequality might . . . accept the quasi-Socialist machinery above mentioned, and work it for the purpose of upholding that society in a somewhat shorn condition, maybe, but a safe one. [Ibid.]

This suspicion towards what reformers hailed as gains for the working classes extended to other areas; the capitalist system Morris saw as being able to absorb and transform any achievement into something suitable to its own ends. Thus he talks of education and of craftsmanship as follows:

Just as the capitalists would at once capture education in craftsmanship, seek out what little advantage there is in it, and then throw it away, so they do with all other education. A superstition still remains from the times when ‘education’ was a rarity that it is a means for earning a superior livelihood; but as soon as it has ceased to be a rarity, competition takes care that education shall not raise wages; that general education shall be worth nothing, and that special education shall be worth just no more than a tolerable return on the money and time spent in acquiring it. [Commonweal, 1888. Briggs p. 146]

All these suspicions of reformism and the aims of some of his fellow socialists were not merely a matter of difference in aims and priorities. For Morris the reality of socialism was that people should hold the power; a crucial area for the exercise of that power was over the use of their own labour-power and time. Any reform in housing, health or education that did not
touch the division of labour and the workers control over his work was simply an amelioration of conditions (a welcome amelioration) but one that under capitalism could be made to serve the commercial system.

The totalness of his socialism, as illustrated in his attitude to Parliament and reformism, and which has by some been seen as an uncompromising 'purism' (a dogmatism verging on the impractical) must be understood, as he understood it, within the context of the analysis of capitalism and the preconditions for a socialist society, and not simply as a dispute over tactics among socialists in the late 1880s and 1890s. For beneath the dispute over the tactics for gaining power lay fundamental differences of understanding as to what socialism could be, and what the forces tending towards the construction of socialism were.

Socialism was not, for Morris, a matter of a more palatable sharing out of the national cake; it was a matter, rather, of who controlled the making of that cake and, even more importantly, who controlled what sort of cake that was to be. Thus the workers' control of production was not to be simply that workers shared the profits, but that they would also control what and how and to what end they were to produce. And here again Morris's experience as an artist-craftsman, and his insistence that art could be and should be an integral element in the production of all goods — material and mental — is central. Art was a way of working and using, and the pre-conditions for a healthy art and the pre-conditions for socialist construction were, for Morris, one and the same.

A healthy art is not something plucked from somebody else's conception of a 'national heritage' and displayed for people to stare at and consume; it is something, in Morris' terms, to be made by people for use by the people. For just as public parks and libraries do not exist outside specific social relations, so art was not and is not a thing in the abstract. Rather it is, in its production and use and meaning, a product of a specific historically defined set of social relations. For the reasons Morris could express his concern about public services and facilities — which today would also include the Arts Council and the Crafts Advisory Committee.
Socialism was not for Morris a matter of ameliorating conditions, of welfare benefits, or of state provision and definition of culture. All these were compatible with a capitalist commercial system, and did not touch that division of labour, and the production of goods for the creation of surplus-value rather than use, which he saw as being the root cause of people’s inability to create their own lives and their own art.

Note
Sources for the material quoted are as follows
E. D. LeMire (ed), *The Unpublished Lectures of William Morris* (Detroit 1969)