Morris’s view of the history of Industrialism

by Alan K Bacon

The aim of this article is to examine the extent of Morris’s debt to Karl Marx’s Capital in his ideas concerning, and attitude towards, the history of industrialism. It is an area of thought in which Morris unquestionably did learn of Marx, but on the other hand, Morris preserved a point of view that was clearly distinguishable from that of Marx, and this difference between the two men has been insufficiently recognized.

There is ample evidence in Morris’s writings from 1883 onwards that he read and was influenced by the sections of Capital which deal with the relation between the division of labour system operating in the eighteenth century and the factory system of his own day. Firstly, as evidence that Morris actually read the relevant sections of Capital, there is a manuscript sheet of notes in the William Morris Gallery at Walthamstow which clearly represents notes made by Morris on a section in Capital about the division of labour.

In the section of Capital from which Morris was working Marx quotes extensively from other writers on the subject of division of labour, so that the possibility does exist that Morris was here using Capital as a source-book for various writers’ ideas. Quotations are made from Adam Smith’s An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations (1776), from Garnier, the French translator of Smith’s work, from J.D. Tuckett’s
A History of the Past and Present State of the Labouring Population (1846) and from D. Urquhart’s Familiar Words (1855).

Furthermore, Morris has carefully preserved in his notes the original sources of the ideas and facts. For example, the fact that some eighteenth-century employers made a point of employing very unintelligent people for jobs where they thought trade secrets might be at risk is ascribed thus: “J.D. Tuckett says Karl Marx, accordingly a certain number of manufacturers about the middle of the 18th Century preferred (sic) to employ for certain processes in which lay their trades secrets, workmen who were half-witted” (Walthamstow, MS. J 151).

Nevertheless, despite the fact that Morris may here have been using Capital as a source-book for other writers’ ideas, the proof remains that Morris did actually read the part of Marx’s Capital dealing with the history of industrialism. Also, the first item in Morris’s notes is ascribed solely to Marx showing that Morris was interested in Marx’s own views: “It is not only the labour that is divided, subdivided, and portioned out betwixt divers men: it is the man himself who is cut up, and metamorphosed into the automatic spring of an exclusive operation, Karl Marx” (Walthamstow, MS. J 151).

Evidence of the extent to which Morris himself believed he was influenced by Marx on questions concerning the history of industrialism may be found in his lectures and articles. For example, E.P. Thompson and Eugene D. LeMire are surely right in their assertions that the “great man” referred to in the following quotation was Karl Marx:

The exigencies of my own work have driven me to dig pretty deeply into the strata of the eighteenth-century workshop system, and I could clearly see how very different it is from the factory system of to-day, with which it is commonly confounded; therefore it was with a ready sympathy that I read the full explanation of the change and its tendencies in the writings of a man, I will say a great man, whom, I suppose, I ought not to name in this company, but who cleared my mind on several points (also unmentionable here) relating to this subject of labour and its products.

In an article in The Fortnightly Review, “The Revival of Handicraft,” there is a passage which parallels very closely a section in
Marx's *Capital*, and Morris described the development in similar terms on several other occasions. Here he wrote: "The latter half of the eighteenth century saw the beginning of the last epoch of production that the world has known, that of the automatic machine which supersedes hand-labour, and turns the workman who was once a handicraftsman helped by tools, and next a part of a machine, into a tender of machines" (Works, XXII, 335). Marx had written: "In handicrafts and manufacture, the workman makes use of a tool, in the factory, the machine makes use of him. There the movements of the instrument of labour proceed from him, here it is the movements of the machine that he must follow. In manufacture the workmen are parts of a living mechanism. In the factory we have a lifeless mechanism independent of the workman, who becomes its mere living appendage" (Marx, I, 398). The processes of development described by the two writers are identical.

Then, in his review in *Commonweal* of a book of essays, *Fabian Essays in Socialism*, Morris specifically referred to Marx in connection with the history of industrialism. He wrote: "Mr. Sydney Webb has ignored the transition period of industry which began in the sixteenth century with the break up of the Middle Ages, and the shoving out of the people from the land. This transition is treated of by Karl Marx with great care and precision under the name of the ‘Manufacturing Period’ (workshop period we might call it)."

Thus, Morris read with interest what Marx had to say in *Capital* about the various stages in the process of development which had led up to the factory system of his own day. He used the ideas that he found in Marx for his own writings, and he publicly acknowledged the ideas that he believed he had derived from Marx. On the other hand, as we shall see, the congruence of Morris’s ideas here was incomplete; it was certainly less complete than E.P. Thompson supposed when he wrote that Morris was not against the machine, but against capitalism, and went on: "in more than one lecture he referred to the eighteenth-century workshop system as being a blacker and more degrading period for the workman than the factory system of the nineteenth-century which at least provided the possibility of the lightening of toil which production for profit, specialization and mechanical"
(Thompson, p. 643). This summarizes quite accurately the view expressed by Marx in *Capital*, but Morris's response was usually different. Although he was sometimes rather equivocal, it may be said that Marx was not opposed to the use of machinery and believed that, with the overthrow of capitalism, machines would be used more and more, to the workers' great advantage. Further, he seems to have believed that the factory system was preferable to the particular manifestations of manufacture, handicrafts and domestic work which immediately preceded it. He wrote that England was now experiencing the conversion of these forms of work "into the factory system, after each of those forms of production, totally changed and disorganised under the influence of modern industry, has long ago reproduced, and even overdone, all the horrors of the factory system, without participating in any of the elements of social progress it contains" (Marx, I, 446).

To turn to Morris, there is one passage which supports Thompson's thesis that he saw the eighteenth century, with its division of labour system, as worse than the machine industry of the nineteenth century. Talking of the worker in his lecture, "Art and its Producers," he said: "the system of division of labour was brought to bear on him in the seventeenth century and was perfected in the eighteenth, and . . . as that system drew near to perfection, the invention of automatic machinery changed the workman's relation to his work once more, and turned him, in the great staple industries, into the tender of a machine instead of a machine (which I think was to him an advantage)". (*Works*, XXII, 348 – 349).

On the other hand, there are a number of occasions when Morris expressed a different opinion on the relative merits of the two systems. In the following piece from "*Architecture and History,*" the development is described in the same way, deriving from Marx, as in the quotation from *Art and its Producers*, but the verdict is the opposite:

> whereas under the eighteenth-century division of labour system, a man was compelled to work for ever at a trifling piece of work in a base mechanical way, which, also, in that base way he understood, under the system of the factory and almost automatic machine under which we now live, he may change his work often enough,
may be shifted from machine to machine, and scarcely know that he is producing anything at all: in other words, under the eighteenth-century system he was reduced to a machine; under that of the present day he is the slave to a machine. (Works, XXII, 311.)

At least an eighteenth-century workman had some slight understanding of the work he was engaged in. In nineteenth-century factories, even this slight understanding had gone.

Similarly, in Art under Plutocracy, Morris gives the verdict definitely in favour of the workshop system having been better than that of the machine industry:

in the eighteenth century, the special period of the workshop-system, some interest could still be taken in those days in the making of wares. The capitalist-manufacturer of the period had some pride in turning out goods which would do him credit, as the phrase went ... even his workman, though no longer an artist, that is a free workman, was bound to have skill in his craft, limited though it was to the small fragment of it which he had to toil at day by day for his whole life.

But commerce went on growing ... and pushed on the invention of men, till their ingenuity produced the machines which we have now got to look upon as necessities of manufacture, and which have brought about a system the very opposite to the ancient craft-system ... the system of the Factory, wherethe machine-like workmen of the workshop period are supplanted by actual machines ... . This system is still short of its full development, therefore to a certain extent the workshop-system is being carried on side by side with it, but it is being speedily and steadily crushed out by it; and when the process is complete, the skilled workman will no longer exist. (Works, XXIII, 178 - 179.)

There had, then, been a continuous deterioration in the workman's lot since the breakdown of the craft system, and the deterioration had not yet been halted.

Lastly, in a Commonweal article entitled Unattractive Labour Morris was talking about, and attributing much ugliness to, wage-labour, wage-slavery, but he went on to say that: "Until that wage-slavery was completed and crowned by the revolution of the great machine industries, there was some attractive-
ness in the work of the artisan." It is thus clear that, despite E.P. Thompson, Morris did not usually regard the era of machine industry as an improvement on the age immediately preceding it, whatever he may have thought about the potential for good which the machine had.

In the passage quoted above from *Art under Plutocracy*, Morris noted that the system of machine industry was still short of its full development, and that to a certain extent the workshop system was co-existing with it. This was a point made by Marx also, but their opinions on whether this was an advantage or disadvantage to the workers were directly opposite. Morris, as we have seen, saw in the final and complete overthrow of the workshop system: the death of the skilled workman, and his replacement by "machines directed by a few highly trained and very intelligent experts, and tended by a multitude of people, men, women and children, of whom neither skill nor intelligence is required." He saw this as a change for the worse. Marx, on the other hand, saw the survival of the practices of the workshop period into the machine age as the cause of the continuing degradation of the workers. Like Morris, he believed that these practices would die out, and the machine age come to its full development, but unlike Morris, he welcomed this development. Machinery made it possible to release men from the bondage of doing just one task all through the working day: "Since the motion of the whole system does not proceed from the workman, but from the machinery, a change of persons can take place at any time without an interruption of the work" (Marx, I, 397).

It was because of capitalism that the practices of the eighteenth-century division of labour had continued into the nineteenth-century, and the machine had not been able to set men free: "Machinery is put to a wrong use" (Marx, 1, 398). This would inevitably change, however, and the change would be to the workers' advantage. Modern industry "imposes the necessity of recognising, as a fundamental law of production, variation of work, consequently fitness of the labourer for varied work, consequently the greatest possible development of his varied aptitudes.... Modern Industry, indeed, compels society, under pen-
alty of death, to replace the detail-worker of to-day, crippled by life-long repetition of one and the same trivial operation, and thus reduced to the mere fragment of a man, by the fully developed individual, fit for a variety of labours, ready to face any change of production” (Marx, I, 458).

Thus, whereas Morris regretted the final demise of the skilled craftsman with the onset of machine industry, Marx welcomed the ending of the system under which, even in the eighteenth-century, the various crafts had often been called “mysteries,” and men spent their lives practising one of them. Marx saw the machine as bringing “variation of work, consequently fitness of the labourer for varied work, consequently the greatest possible development of his varied aptitudes.” Morris, on the other hand, although making the need for diversified occupation one of his perennial themes, certainly did not conceive of this diversified occupation in the same way as Marx. Marx had in mind a picture of people working with machines, but although Morris did not advocate the abandonment of all machinery, the whole basis of his vision was that people would spend a great deal of time doing handwork, and as little time as possible working with machines.

On the subject of the history of industrialism, then, Morris was interested in Marx’s Capital, read it and made notes on it. He acknowledged a debt to Marx when setting out his own ideas on the question, and indeed it is easy to see that both writers’ outlines of the development from the ancient craft-system to the factory are the same. However, the two men’s opinions concerning the relative merits of the various systems of work differed radically.

Errors and omissions. There were some crossed references in the Key to Oxford Street Plan which illustrated Margaret Fleming’s Where Janey used to Live in our last, for which we apologise. No. 9 should be Symonds’ Livery Stables (present 8); No. 11 should be King’s Head Yard (present 9) and No. 8 should be St. Helen’s Passage (present 11).