

William Morris and Iceland's Hydrogen Economy

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Much has been written about William Morris's fascination with Iceland's landscape, history, literature, and culture. I would like to suggest here that there is an emerging connection between Morris's concern with profit-driven environmental degradation and the current attempt in Iceland to construct the world's first hydrogen energy base.

Morris argued that profit-driven industrialisation and 'development' almost invariably make natural and built environments ugly and unhealthy.¹ His writings on these topics are still influential in contemporary green politics.² Morris and his contemporary, August Bebel, a founder of the German Social Democratic Party, suggested that eco-friendly technologies could only be propagated widely within socialist relations of production.³ In his utopian novel, *News from Nowhere*, Morris envisioned a society where large transport vehicles – 'force barges' – are not powered by fossil fuels.⁴ Although Morris could not have anticipated that anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions would cause global climate change which threatens to decimate or destroy humanity, this probably wouldn't have surprised him. His characterisation of the culmination of profit-driven industrialisation as a counting house on top of a cinder heap aptly describes the effects of globalisation.⁵

Iceland's attempt to construct a hydrogen energy base is obviously related to Morris's vision of a society whose machines do not burn polluting fossil fuels. Icelandic authorities hope to replace fossil-fueled engines on all of the country's buses, lorries, cars, and fishing boats with hydrogen-burning engines that do not produce greenhouse gases.⁶

Morris's view that capitalist relations of production often preclude widespread propagation of eco-friendly technologies is also relevant to the participation of major capitalist corporations in Iceland's hydrogen initiative. Jón Knútur Ásmundsson has recently noted that 'investors such as DaimlerChrysler, Norsk Hydro and Shell Hydrogen, have entered into a joint venture with Vistorka (Eco Energy Ltd.), an Icelandic holding company, to create Icelandic New Energy . . .'⁷ Will a successful transition to a hydrogen energy base in Iceland give capitalism, not to mention humanity, an example which promises a respite from the danger posed by global climate change? This question will interest eco-socialists as well as those who are convinced that 'market forces' can be harnessed to protect the environment.⁸ It is the sort of question that certainly would have interested Morris.

The following excerpt from the platform of Iceland's Left-Green Movement is also clearly relevant to Iceland's hydrogen initiative: '. . . it is of great importance that Icelanders can produce all the energy that they need in the future. We reject

further building of power plants for the use of polluting large scale industry and demand conservation of the highlands'.⁹ In the last Icelandic election, the Left-Greens received 9.1% of the vote, and six Left-Greens now sit in the *althing*.¹⁰ Although Morris eschewed parliamentary politics, his eco-socialism is perhaps reflected in the platform of the Icelandic Left-Greens.

To the best of my knowledge, tours to Iceland by members of various William Morris Societies have not yet focused on connections between Morris's eco-socialism and Iceland's hydrogen initiative. Future tours might include meetings with representatives of Iceland's Left-Green Movement to discuss Iceland's hydrogen initiative from an eco-socialist perspective.

NOTES

- ¹ For example, see Morris's 1878 lecture, 'The Lesser Arts', in Asa Briggs, ed., *William Morris: Selected Writings and Designs*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962), pp. 84-104.
- ² See David Ransom, 'Red and Green: Eco-Socialism Comes of Age', *New Internationalist* 307 (1998), pp. 7-10.
- ³ Dennis Bartels, 'Renewable Energy Technologies in the Socialist and Communist Societies Envisioned by William Morris and August Bebel', forthcoming in *Material History Review* (2003).
- ⁴ William Morris, *News from Nowhere* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970 [1890]), p. 140.
- ⁵ See William Morris, 'How I Became a Socialist', in Asa Briggs, ed., *William Morris: Selected Writings and Designs*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962), pp. 33-37.
- ⁶ Seth Dunn, 'The Hydrogen Experiment', *Worldwatch* (November/December, 2002), pp. 15-25.
- ⁷ Jón Knútur Ásmundsson, 'Will Fuel Cells Make Iceland the "Kuwait" of the North?', *World Press Review Online* (<http://www.worldpress.org/europe/0123iceland.htm>). Retrieved 29 November 2002.
- ⁸ See Vijay Vaitheeswaran, 'The Invisible Green Hand', in 'How Many Planets?', *The Economist* 364: 8280 (6 July 2002), pp. 15-17.
- ⁹ Website of Iceland's Left-Green Movement (www.vg.is). Retrieved 29 November 2002.
- ¹⁰ Website of Iceland's Left-Green Movement (www.vg.is). Retrieved 29 November 2002. The *althing* is Iceland's parliament.