

William Morris:
Visionary Communist



Although Britain is the country where industrial capitalism first arose and where Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels spent most of their lives it has not produced many notable thinkers in the Marxist revolutionary tradition. In this respect Lenin commented on "the English distaste for theory". A notable exception to this depressing trend was William Morris (1834-96). Morris remains an outstanding revolutionary Marxist activist and thinker and his writings are still worth studying.

As a young man William Morris became interested in and a practitioner of the design of household furnishings and objects. His designs for wallpaper and fabrics in particular became popular and remain so to this day. Morris found much of the surroundings and objects being produced by industrial capitalism to be aesthetically repellent, i.e. ugly. He aimed to reverse this negative trend by means of his design work and he inspired others to do so and this led to the founding of the Arts and Crafts Movement. Morris thought that living in an ugly man-made environment diminishes people's morale.

He also thought that people who had to produce unattractive artefacts did not experience a sense of satisfaction from carrying out their work but on the contrary found such work tedious and frustrating. This was the case with mass production factory-type work. Not only were people materially impoverished by the low wages they received but additionally their creative impulses were stifled by being forced to carry out such work. Morris considered that most work carried out under capitalism prevented human beings giving full expression to our natural creative urges. It dehumanises us. His analysis of the part

played by work in our lives is very similar to Karl Marx's analysis of *alienation* although Marx's writings on this essential topic were not available at that time.

Only in middle age did William start to get involved in the political issues of the day. He rapidly moved towards a socialist outlook and in 1883 joined the Social Democratic Federation, the first explicitly Marxist political organisation in Britain. Already he was a popular public lecturer on topics to do with art and design and then he expanded his range of topics to include presentations on capitalism and communism. Morris lectured up and down the country and inspired many people to take up a more radical political outlook. He was a highly effective propagandist.

For Morris bringing about socialism and communism was not simply a case of people having more material goods but of life becoming qualitatively better in terms of creative working activity and our relations with each other. In 1890 he wrote *News from Nowhere*, a fictional depiction of a future communist society in Britain. Subsequently countless millions of people have read this work and been inspired by it to commit themselves to the revolutionary communist project.

The necessity to get rid of capitalism and proceed along the socialist road towards communism is greater than ever before. In order to rouse people to participate in this revolutionary project we need to deepen our grasp of Marxism and do so in a way which has wide popular appeal. Studying the writings of William Morris can help us to do so.

SELECTED READING LIST

WEBSITES

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Morris

<http://williammorrissociety.org/>

<https://www.marxists.org/archive/morris/index.htm>

<http://www.morrissociety.org/morris/writingsChronological.html>

COLLECTIONS

William Morris: *Selected Writings and Designs*, ed. A. Briggs, Penguin Books, 1962

Political Writings of William Morris, ed. A.L. Morton, Lawrence & Wishart, 1973

BIOGRAPHIES

KINNA, R., *William Morris: The Art of Socialism*, University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 2000.

MacCARTHY, F., *William Morris: A Life for Our Time*, Faber & Faber, 1994.

THOMPSON, E.P., *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*, Parthenon Books, New York, 1976.

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