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Title	Classic texts 'How I became a Socialist' by William Morris
Authors	Meade, Rosie R.
Publication date	2022
Original Citation	Meade, R.R. (2022) 'Classic texts How I became a Socialist by William Morris', Community Development Journal, 57(4) pp. 589–594. https://doi.org/10.1093/cdj/bsab054
Type of publication	Article (peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	https://academic.oup.com/cdj/article/57/4/589/6509042 - 10.1093/cdj/bsab054
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Download date	2026-11-04 11:13:06
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/16811



UCC
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Citation: Rosie Meade, Classic Texts: no. 11, 'How I became a Socialist' by William Morris, *Community Development Journal*, Volume 44, Issue 1, January 2009, Pages 123–127, https://doi.org/10.1093/cdj/bsn035

Classic Texts: 'How I became a Socialist' by William Morris

William Morris's essay, 'How I became a Socialist' was first published during June 1894 in *Justice* the Journal of the English Social Democratic Federation (SDF). Constructed as an account of his 'conversion' to the project of socialism, Rob Breton (2015: 23) maintains that the text is shot through with in-jokes and references to Morris's 'partial reconciliation' with a political organisation that he had left about a decade previously. It describes socialism as:

> a condition of society in which there should be neither rich nor poor, neither master nor master's man, neither idle nor overworked, neither brain-sick brain workers, nor heart-sick hand workers, in a word, in which all men would be living in equality of condition, and would manage their affairs unwastefully, and with full consciousness that harm to one would mean harm to all - the realisation at last of the meaning of the word commonwealth. (Morris, 2020: 202[1]).

Although the gendered language impoverishes his account somewhat, this exposition of socialism as a living praxis of expressive solidarity and equality might appeal to contemporary *CDJ* readers. The essay is included in the collection 'How I became a Socialist' (Morris, 2020), published by Verso with an excellent introduction by Owen Hatherley. The book juxtaposes the essay with some of Morris's other lectures and writings - including 'Art under Plutocracy', 'The Housing of the Poor', 'Why we Celebrate the Commune of Paris', 'Correspondence on Communism and Anarchism' - thus illuminating the historical context and political depth of his socialist ideas. There are, of course, other collections of Morris's works and my own first encounter with them came via a second-hand bookshop where I found a 'Centenary Edition' of selected writings. It includes 'stories in prose', the novel 'News from Nowhere', poems, 'lectures and essays' (Morris, 1944); these varied contents giving a sense of Morris's simultaneous engagement with the artistic and the intellectual, and his negation of the boundaries between the two.

It would be easy to dismiss the political and social commentator William Morris (1834-1896) – as opposed to his persona 'the artist William Morris' - as just another posh but wayward British Victorian, albeit an enviably talented and creative one[2]. By his own admission he was a 'well-to-do man' (2020: 203), who dressed in simple clothes and

[1] Page numbers cited here represent the pagination in the 'e-book' version published by Verso; other versions may vary. Given Morris's love for beautifully produced artefacts, he might be appalled by these references to a digitalised book.

[2] Michelle Weinroth (2018: 38) is interesting on Morris's later years; whether his immersion in the activities of his publishing house Kelmscott Press was a retreat from activism into the realm of the aesthetic or an engagement with a 'utopian model of socialist education'.

argued for simple living[3]. His 'Firm' designed expensive wallpaper and lovely things that were consumed by the bourgeoisie and, although he was an accomplished artist, his background of inherited wealth undoubtedly granted him the freedom to experiment with and wander between various visual, material and written artforms. His was an uncommon kind of freedom, unavailable to the majority of workers in 19th century England and still unavailable to most workers across the globe.

Nonetheless, Morris sought to use his personal freedom in the service of revolutionary ideas and, perhaps less successfully, revolutionary practice (Hatherley, 2020; also, Bellamy Foster, 2020; Davidson, 2019; Rowbotham, 2008; Weinroth, 2018). A lecture called 'How We Live and How We Might Live' - first delivered in 1884 to a London branch of the SDF and included in the 2020 collection – rejects the false consolations and promises of reformist politics, while asserting that revolutionary socialism needs to work with and inspire people with the 'two great passions' of 'fear' and 'hope':

> to give hope to the many oppressed and fear to the few oppressors, that is our business; if we do the first and give hope to the many, the few *must* be frightened by their hope; otherwise we do not want to frighten them; it is not revenge we want for poor people but happiness…(Morris, 2020: 72, original emphasis)

Committed to collective action outside of and beyond parliamentary politics, Morris doubted the capacity of liberal democracy, as it was emerging at his time, to support or even entertain the structural transformations[4] necessary for the advancement of the working class. These were not merely theoretical questions for Morris, but instead questions of purpose and strategy that demanded the attention of all 'practical socialists', including the diverse and often divided membership of the *Socialist League* of which he was a member. John Bellamy Foster (2020: 97) maintains that Morris's problematisations of reformism, electoralism and the character of the really-existing state preceded and initially exceeded those of Marx and Engels, and were founded on his conviction that 'the struggle required an extended period of education and building of the movement at the level of civil society' (Bellamy Foster, 2020: 122). Socialism could not be gifted by Parliament, 'that degraded and degrading twaddle-shop' (2020: 109), or by well-meaning Whigs and Democrats. Instead, as outlined in Morris's 1886 lecture 'Whigs, Democrats and Socialists', socialism was a project in the making, centred around grassroots processes of education and consciousness raising:

> to help educate the people by every and any means that may be effective; and the knowledge we have to help them to is threefold – to know their own, to know how to take their own, and to know how to use their own. (Morris, 2020: 135)

Morris was a critic of imperialism and of the British Empire specifically, but his support for Irish (and Italian) self-determination was tinged with concern that 'national' liberation would be captured by bourgeois interests 'fanatically attached to the rights of

[3] Owen Hatherley (2020) is very good on the apparent, and much maligned, contradictions between Morris's politics and his occupation as a designer, and on the interrelationship between his arts and his politics.

[4] What Morris (2020: 72) referred to as 'change of the basis of society'.

private property' (2020: 102). His foresight in this regard is underscored by contemporary Irish governments' anaemic responses to our housing crisis and their unwillingness to confront the power of landlords, whether global vulture funds or indigenous property speculators. Across the collection, Morris's words evoke his 'hatred' (2020: 204) of the conditions created by capitalist modernisation as it manifested during his own time, but there are plenty of resonances for 21st Century readers; particularly in his accounts of the social, emotional and environmental costs of unsustainable economic growth and consumption.

Among the 'obvious evils of modern society' (2020: 108), its 'incredible filth, disorder and degradation' (2020: 92), Morris highlights industrial capitalism's despoliation of meaningful work through its relentless demands for productivity, competition and profit. His 1887 lecture, 'The Society of the Future' articulates a critique of capitalism with a prescient ecological consciousness that is sensitive to the material *and* ideological consequences of unfettered growth. Capitalism

> has covered the merry green fields with the hovels of slaves, and blighted the flowers and trees with poisonous gases, and turned rivers into sewers; till over many parts of Britain the common people have forgotten what a field or flower is like, and their idea of beauty is a gas-poisoned gin-palace or a tawdry theatre. (Morris, 2020: 177)

Obviously, this intervention could be viewed as yet more 'high-minded' condemnation of the leisure habits of the working class; as evidence of a socialism that is in perpetual despair about the antics of its favoured historical subject. But Morris's socialism is not one of despair and his Utopian novel 'News from Nowhere' proposes and describes a post-revolutionary society still to come[5]. For John Bellamy Foster (2020: 148) the novel demonstrates the originality and radical holism of Morris's socialist imaginary and the depth of its 'ecological outlook': i.e. in 'News from Nowhere' revolutionary transformation meant 'overcoming human alienation in relation to three primary forms of the division of labour – social production, town and country and gender relations'. Crucially, as Bellamy Foster explains (2020: 148), Morris didn't expect that the future revolution would automatically take this 'holistic' turn, rather his novel was itself a political and educational intervention, designed to raise awareness among his own contemporaries of the distinct but interrelated dimensions of the struggle ahead (also Davidson, 2019; Hatherley, 2020).

Morris's scepticism about mechanisation, his attacks on industrialised society and the grimness of much city life, and his tendency to celebrate life and work as centred around the guild system, ran the risk of fetishizing Medieval social relations. Raymond Williams, while affirming the anti-capitalist foundations of Morris's proto-environmentalism, worried that it harboured 'the delusion that before factory production, before industrial and mechanical production, there had been a natural, clean, simple order' (Williams, 1988/2018: n.p.; also Hatherley, 2020). From the vantage point of the twenty first century, with its scale of urbanised living, it is difficult to imagine how Morris's 'retro-

[5] Chapter XVII of *News from Nowhere* sketches out 'How the Change Came' during the mid-twentieth century.

utopia', as Owen Hatherley (2020: 18) calls it, might be either practicable or desirable. Nonetheless, Morris's work is profoundly generative in its questioning of the ecological costs of capitalist extractivism, consumerism and profit-led models of production. And for that, he deserves to be recognised as an important early contributor to an eco-socialist theory and praxis that is still in the process of becoming (see Bellamy Foster, 2020; Fraser, 2021).

Community Development is beset by ongoing dilemmas about funding and the extent to which it hinders or enables collective action for social change (McCrea and Finnegan, 2020 for an overview). Morris had strong views on this matter and his unsparing attack on 'Philanthropists' was published in *Justice* in 1884. The essay argues that philanthropy both emerges from and sustains the fiction that 'society cannot be altered' (Morris, 2020: 99). It distinguishes between older and newer forms of philanthropic giving: older variants, informed by religious ethics, tended towards fatalistic acceptance that the poor are always with us. Newer forms of philanthropy are dubbed 'economical' and here too Morris notes divergent tendencies: philanthropists of a sanctimonious stripe who use their paltry but flashy donations as an excuse to lecture and regulate the poor versus 'philanthropists proper' (2020: 99). While the latter may be more sincere in their convictions, they remain complicit in their refusal to challenge capitalist exploitation while also disregarding and overriding the agency of the working class. This analysis closely resembles that of Paulo Freire's (2005: 45) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, which rejects 'false charity' too because it ultimately condemns 'the fearful and subdued, the "rejects of life," to extend their trembling hands'.

My engagement with Morris's work was originally stimulated by an interest in cultural democracy and participatory arts. However, his extraordinary lecture 'Art Under Plutocracy', dating from 1883, travels far beyond the usual community arts-type invocations of the necessary democratisation of the production, consumption and distribution of art. Instead, in a radical reinterpretation of what work was, is and can be, Morris proposes that any and every worker could, under alternative relations of production, be recognised as an artist. His definition of art is broad enough to encompass 'the shapes and colours of all household goods, nay even the arrangement of the fields for tillage and pasture' so that it covers 'the aspect of all of the externals of our lives' (2020: 37). Roughly distinguishing between 'decorative' and 'intellectual art', the former serving the body the latter the mind, Morris argues (2020; 38) that under previous 'healthy conditions there was an intimate connection between the two' but that under capitalism they have become detached from each other. Wage slavery, over-production, profit and mechanisation have robbed workers of their/our (decorative) artistry, while intellectual art has been claimed and mystified by small cadre of 'artists'.

Here again we can track Morris's inclination to celebrate Medieval work arrangements (Bellamy Foster, 2020; Hatherley, 2020; Williams, n.d.) and he probably did not anticipate the extent to which the intellectual arts themselves would be colonised by capitalist rationalities and relations. But even though he may not have been entirely correct about either the past or the future, I find his writing on art/work profoundly affecting and relevant. It urges us to think critically about the ways by which our own jobs and workplaces undermine our capacities for community and autonomy; how

capitalism's relentless demands for enhanced productivity generate waste and overwork; and how our skills and artistry are being displaced through new technologies, some of them obviously mechanical others more nebulous and intimate. Morris recognises that 'labour-saving machinery is elliptical, and means machinery which saves the cost of labour, not the labour itself' (2020: 54). And, he asserts that we must collectively organise with others if we want to restore or claim the meaningfulness, the dignity and the artistry of our own labour.

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