

CULTURAL INTERACTIONS
Studies in the Relationship between the Arts

Edited by J.B. Bullen

Volume 20



PETER LANG

Oxford • Bern • Berlin • Bruxelles • Frankfurt am Main • New York • Wien

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William Morris in the Twenty-First Century



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Attractive Labour and Social Change: William Morris Now

In this chapter I will discuss the concept of work in the political writings and decorative practices of William Morris. Conventionally we may think of 'labour' and 'culture' as terms signifying eternal difference between necessity and desire. In opposition to this dichotomy Charles Fourier, the utopian socialist, coined the hybrid term 'attractive labour' as a progressive definition of unalienated work.¹ Morris acknowledged this source: '[Fourier's] doctrine of the necessity and possibility of making labour attractive is one which socialism can by no means do without.'² For Morris this meant a 'quality driven' idea of work modelled on the plastic arts – a type of work that challenges the distinction between mental and manual labour and offers prospects for radical social change.³ The political theory that emerges out of this has relevance for our own times.

- 1 See *The Utopian Vision of Charles Fourier: Selected Texts on Work, Love and Passionate Attraction*, ed. and trans. Jonathan Beecher and Richard Bienvenu (London: Jonathan Cape, 1971), pp. 271–328.
- 2 William Morris, 'The Hopes of Civilization' (1885), in *Political Writings of William Morris*, ed. A. L. Morton (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1973), p. 174.
- 3 The term 'quality-driven work' is used by Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman* (London: Allen Lane, 2008).

The Conditions and Culture of Labour

The achievement of pleasure in work is an essential aspect of what has recently been called the 'expressive life'.⁴ Decorative work for example is a way of relating to the world outside ourselves and a means of harnessing energy and skill in the enjoyment of making things. For Morris the work itself is not merely compensation for the alienated world around it, but rather something that forms an organic link between the self and the environment in which it takes place. The acquisition of skills grounded in a physical engagement with materials and the pleasures that attach to this formed the basis of Morris's politicized theory of art.

Since Morris the fault lines in modern society have shifted significantly, and yet in the twenty-first century the distinction between craftwork and art, between theory and practice and between creative and productive labour remains largely unchanged. Morris's intellectual grasp of these matters has continuing relevance to some of the great questions this century faces. He anticipated, for example, social and aesthetic improvements in everyday life but questioned the view that the arts would independently advance the wider causes he espoused. He recognized the limits of the reformist view that improved social conditions would compensate for hierarchical social divisions and the symbolic distinctions attaching to occupation and lifestyle. Craft ideals are synonymous with Morris but he knew a return to handwork and sentimental images of older ways of working could hardly wish the modern world away. In his commitment to what Rudolf Bahro later called the 'conditions and culture of labour' Morris addressed the links between culture and the labour process. For both men the society of the future will be one that requires

4 See Libby Brooks, 'Amid the economic rubble, a revolution is being knitted', in *The Guardian*, 10 July 2009. Brooks cited Bill Ivey as the source for the term 'expressive life'.

a more harmonious form of reproduction, i.e. a shift of priorities away from the exploitation of nature by material production towards the adaptation of production to the natural cycle, from expanded reproduction to simple reproduction, from raising of labour productivity to care for the conditions and culture of labour; development of a technique and technology that accords with nature and man, the re-establishment of proportionality between large-scale (industrial) and small-scale (handicraft) production.⁵

The centrality of the idea of *work* (and the prospects for its redefinition) is an indispensable theme in Morris's literary, artistic and political practices. The self-definition of 'man', formed through human activity, for Morris, had an importance beyond the production of things. Marx, similarly, pointed towards the ontological significance of labour: 'By producing their means of subsistence men are indirectly producing their material life ... as individuals express their life *so they are*.'⁶ For Marx labour is the means through which the human relationship with nature is formed. This connection is articulated in his early writings and in *Capital*: 'Labour is first of all a process between man and nature, a process by which man through all his actions, mediates, regulates and controls the metabolism between himself and nature ... Through this movement he acts upon external nature and changes it, and in this way he simultaneously changes his own nature.'⁷ And again Marx observes: 'industry is the real historical relationship of nature ... to man.'⁸ In a similar vein Morris noted:

But a man at work, making something which he feels will exist because he is working at it and wills it, is exercising the energies of his mind and soul as well as his body. Memory and imagination help him as he works. Not only his own thoughts, but the thoughts of men of past ages guide his hands; and, as part of the human race, he creates. If we work thus we shall be men, and our days will be happy and eventful.⁹

5 Rudolf Bahro, *The Alternative in Eastern Europe* (London: Verso, 1981), p. 407.

6 Cited by Chris Arthur, 'Personality and the Dialectic of Labour and Property – Locke, Hegel, Marx', in *Radical Philosophy Reader*, ed. Roy Edgeley and Richard Osborne (London: Verso, 1985), p. 54. My emphasis.

7 *Radical Philosophy Reader*, p. 54.

8 'The Economic and Philosophical Writings', in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 93.

9 William Morris, 'Useful Work Versus Useless Toil' (1888), in Morton, ed., *Political Writings*, p. 88.

Morris was interested in the concept of labour insofar as it represented the active or transforming part of existence which is the basis of life. The centrality of work inspired him in his reading of Marx in whose writing he found support for ideas already arrived at by other means. I make no great claims for Morris's originality in any one of the various activities that he pursued, and yet there is something exceptional in his capacity to see that cultural praxis (understood as labour power) offers a yardstick for the measure of social value.

Whilst Morris's artistic legacy is widely recognized in France he is not much celebrated in its political culture. This may be explained by the prominence that has been given, at certain times, to his decorative work but also by the fact that he did not write a conventional theoretical *opus*. The interest in his political theory may have been further negated by the doctrinal antipathy on the French left for 'utopian' socialism.¹⁰ The work of Paul Meier and Miguel Abensour on Morris are exceptions to this.¹¹ We might also note some parallels in the work and ideas of Henri Lefebvre who expressed a reading of everyday life centred on the propensities of working people when they manifest themselves as strategies of resistance. For example in an apposite connection with Morris, Michel Trebitsch refers

10 For a discussion of this see E. P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (London: Merlin Press, 1977 [1955]), p. 787.

11 See Paul Meier, *William Morris: The Marxist Dreamer*, trans. Frank Gubb, 2 vols. (New Jersey and Sussex: Humanities Press and The Harvester Press, 1978). Miguel Abensour's doctoral thesis 'Les Formes de L'Utopie Socialiste-Communiste' of 1973 is discussed by E. P. Thompson in his famous 'Postscript' to his 1977 edition of *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*. See also Miguel Abensour, 'William Morris: The Politics of Romance', trans. Max Blechman, in *Revolutionary Romanticism*, ed. Max Blechman (San Francisco: City Lights, 1999), and Perry Anderson's discussion of Thompson's 'Postscript' in his *Arguments Within English Marxism* (London: Verso, 1980). The question of Morris's lack of appreciation as political theorist in France is perhaps explained by his *fin de siècle* status as a proto-Art Nouveau decorative artist. The first major work by a French scholar on Morris's political achievements is Meier's great work which was published in 1972 as *La Pensée Utopique de William Morris*. Two biographies that challenge the traduced and depoliticized versions of Morris published in England are E. P. Thompson (1955) and R. Page Arnot, *William Morris: A Vindication* (London: Martin Lawrence, 1934). The latter was republished as *William Morris, the Man and the Myth* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1964).

to Lefebvre as having 'something of the brilliant amateur craftsman about him'.¹² Following Marx, Lefebvre shows that 'work constitutes man's essence as a creator; a being of needs who creates his own needs; and it is precisely work that alienation humiliates, atomises and overpowers'.¹³ Lefebvre also makes reference to Jean-Paul Sartre's idea 'to make and in making to make oneself', which is, he claims, widely accepted as a formulation of *praxis*.¹⁴ The Marxist sense of praxis is defined in relation to labour as a productive force that serves human needs and in so doing constructs human identity. The sense in which the subject makes itself is constrained by the quality of engagement in the particular task. As Lefebvre notes:

Making reduces social practice to individual operations of the artisan kind on a given material which is relatively pliable or resistant. During this operation, the producer or the creator – part artisan, part artist – discovers himself. By means of the object, he recognises his work and his own abilities. As he works, he forms his own abilities. This is true for traditional potters and weavers as it is for painters. When they make something, they make themselves.¹⁵

There is in Lefebvre's definition of 'making' a sense of duty to produce the necessities of life which tends in provident circumstances to combine with play and creative output. By contrast with this ideal industrial workers have, he claims, gradually lost the pleasure of 'direct and unmediated contact' with their tools and materials. In automated labour this contact disappears completely, so that:

When he makes something, the individual is no longer 'making' himself. He is 'made' in a complex totality of which making is only one part and one aspect. For all that, on the scale of society, production and production relations remain determinants. Moreover, whenever there is a 'work', no matter how modest – and not a 'product' – the value bestowed on the individual act by 'making' remains valid (including when it is in the caricatural form of a hobby, or do-it-yourself).¹⁶

12 See Michel Trebitsch, 'Preface', in Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, trans. John Moore, 3 vols. (London: Verso, 1991–2005), I, p. ix.

13 Lefebvre, II, p. 62.

14 Lefebvre, II, p. 366.

15 Lefebvre, II, p. 232.

16 Lefebvre, II, p. 233.

Both Morris and Lefebvre frequently turned to the life of the senses as a way of expressing the connection between art, work and leisure. They both emphasized that aesthetic value is not merely a substitute for labour (as it appears in Romantic escapism) but an aspect of 'expressive life' in its wider sense. Morris's use of the term 'art' to refer to an extension of the aesthetic dimension into the everyday is echoed by Lefebvre writing at the end of the 1950s: 'At one and the same time art must fulfil itself and then supersede itself. Ultimately it must disappear ... Once superseded art would be reabsorbed into an everyday which has been metamorphosed by its fusion with what had hitherto been kept external to it.'¹⁷ Writing in a similar tone in 1884 Morris argues: 'In times when art was abundant and healthy, all men were more or less artists; that is to say, the instinct for beauty which is inborn in every complete man had such force that the whole body of craftsmen habitually and without conscious effort made beautiful things, and the authors of intellectual art was nothing short of the whole people.'¹⁸ In his patient mapping of Marx's critique of alienation Lefebvre again echoes Morris in attacking art as an 'alienated activity' serving the needs of 'exceptional individuals external and superior to everyday life.'¹⁹ The spirit of both men was rooted in an almost emotional response to what they considered the inauthenticity of the world. Both looked towards history for a constructive way forward, and both adapted Marx's critique of political economy to their own philosophical and political interventions. The widespread failure to see the way art is inscribed in the social relations of production was resisted by Morris and Lefebvre as both in their different ways sought to return the terms of this debate to industrialized experience. Both also sought to imagine a society in which, as Lefebvre excitedly proclaimed, 'everyone would rediscover the spontaneity of natural life and its initial creative drive, and perceive the world through the eyes of an artist, enjoy the sensuous through the eyes of a painter, the

17 Lefebvre, II, pp. 36-7.

18 William Morris, 'Art Under Plutocracy' (1884), in Morton, ed., *Political Writings*, pp. 61-2.

19 Lefebvre, II, p. 36.

ears of a musician and the language of the poet.'²⁰ In opposition to the tendency to treat 'making' in a de-historicized or abstract way Lefebvre warns against generalizing 'techniques' as the 'givens of all activities which make anything, without examining the implications and conditions or the consequences and results in themselves.'²¹ In this comment Lefebvre was referring to the quality of work experience which always has a social as well as a purely physical or psychological value.

Romanticism and Utilitarianism: A False Dichotomy

Morris's early Ruskinian faith in the aesthetic education as a means to the liberation of the senses was subsequently modified. The purely aesthetic response to dehumanizing labour was too one-sided in its unreconstructed view of class. Although aesthetics might offer an alternative to a purely instrumental attitude to work the social and material base of society could not be altered by it. The Romantic ideal of the beneficent and healing effect of art was thus rejected by Morris and his later political projects were a strategic assault on aesthetic ideology as an end itself. By the early 1880s he began to see that his 'holy crusade against the age' which had inspired him to take up craftwork and design as a way of fighting 'the flood of philistinism in one field of Victorian life' was deficient.²² E. P. Thompson has noted, 'the age had not flinched in the face of this form of attack.'²³ The artistic life was no antidote to the age of shoddy.

Morris joined the Democratic Federation in 1883 and began to read Marx in the same year. The Romantic revolt that had inspired his earlier thinking turned to class struggle and the life of practical socialism. The

20 Lefebvre, II, p. 37.

21 Lefebvre, II, p. 233.

22 Thompson, *William Morris*, p. 248.

23 Ibid., p. 248.

'practical' turn was not, however, a movement away from art. It was in part an assimilation of the ideas of Marx which had the effect of buttressing his earlier idealism in some key aspects of his thinking. The concept of the 'maker' and the role of art remained crucial factors in Morris's political writing after his conversion to socialism. He retained the idea (derived in part from Ruskin) that the productive body is essential to the ontology of art. This last point notwithstanding Morris became increasingly impatient with the absence of political vision in the pragmatic goals of social reformers in this period. He repudiated regressive models of Romantic anti-capitalism and turned to a Marxist view of the labour process. Apart from accepting the liberating potential of the machine he recognized the need to analyse the contradictory nature of capitalist technology. Insofar as it destroyed the positive and creative conception of making it was an alien force. Insofar as it reduced the drudgery of making it was a force for good. He could also see industrialization as a force for change with a potential for its own destruction. He thus shifted from an idealized view of art as a piecemeal compensation for alienated labour (reformist praxis) to a *total praxis* which embodies the idea of revolution. The distinction here lies in the opposition between the reformist who broadly accepts production relations as given and the revolutionary who (in Lefebvre's words) would bring 'pressure to bear on their contradictions, in order to transform them'.²⁴

Morris brought a new kind of emphasis on the role of art in the political discourse in which he positioned himself in the 1880s. Emphasis on human sensory capacities and the role of art presented aesthetic pleasure as a component part of the labour process. Looking back at Morris it now seems that our own struggle with the aesthetic is still bound up with the questions he raised. Sensitivity to nature and the recognition of the fragility of its social usage is clearly an urgent contemporary issue. The question of the continuing relevance of Morris for the present century can be found in the struggle to address the false dichotomies of the practical and the aesthetic, the utilitarian and the poetic, the brute facticity of the real versus the capricious idealism of the dilettante. Caroline Arscott has noted

24 Lefebvre, II, p. 241.

that because of his background Morris was uniquely placed to 'articulate aesthetic positions that are inherent in Marxist theory'.²⁵

In a critical essay on E. P. Thompson, John Goode has analysed how we should read the political projects of Morris. Goode addresses the Marxian connection with Morris and draws attention to the changing interpretations in the two editions of Thompson's monumental biography of Morris: the 1955 and the 1977 versions. In 1955 Thompson noted how Morris moves beyond moral critique of industrial capitalism and takes up a position that separates him from the artistic-cum-literary tradition with which he had hitherto been associated – a tradition that links him with a Romantic critique of industrial society. The 1955 reading of Morris foregrounds 'an abrasive and disruptive' Morris who is now driven beyond 'critique' to a position of open revolt. Goode thus quotes Thompson (in 1955) on Morris as a man who had mastered a 'qualitatively new revolutionary content to the current of profound social criticism of industrial capitalism'.²⁶ Goode draws out an important distinction that says as much about Thompson as it does about Morris. The struggle to try to find a more nuanced and hybrid cultural politics in 1977 – a kind of Morrisian Marxism – indicates a desire (in Thompson) to re-evaluate the role of politics, religion and art and to question the idea that economic determinations alone form the real basis of society. One of the implications of Thompson's 1955 perspective is that Morris (and others working in the literary tradition of Romanticism) only superficially belonged to the institutional opposition to the utilitarian tradition. According to Thompson, writing in 1955, Morris no longer belongs to this Romantic opposition because what he saw in it was aesthetic withdrawal and despair. Rejecting this Romantic negation Morris (according to Thompson) turned to political radicalism as 'a superior rationality'.²⁷ This is, as Thompson saw it in 1955, explicitly a conversion to Marxism.

25 Caroline Arscott, *William Morris & Edward Burne-Jones, Interlacings* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008), p. 135.

26 Cited by John Goode, 'Thompson and the Significance of Literature', in *E. P. Thompson: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Harvey J. Kaye and Keith McLelland (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), p. 195.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 195.

The 1955 political turn, according to Goode, marks Morris off from 'the literary tradition'.²⁸ Goode reminds us that 1977-Thompson reverses this logic in the revised biography and makes claims for a version of what he considers to be Morris's continuing brand of Romantic anti-capitalism that somehow extends revolutionary socialism 'beyond Marxism'. The implication is that Morris was in some way a new type of revisionist Marxist. Goode concludes that the 1977 Morris is a less 'abrasive and disruptive' figure than the revolutionary of 1955. In a similar way Thompson is accused by Perry Anderson of pushing Morris into the position of a morally political utopianism that relies on an uncritical acceptance of the antithesis of 'Utilitarianism' and 'Romanticism'. Anderson seeks to reconcile the opposition: 'This sense of dialectical complementarity of Utilitarianism and Romanticism is what distinguishes classical Marxism from the many attempts by socialists at one time or another to construct an opposition to capitalism from either standpoint ... The duty of socialists today is not to pit one against the other [but rather] ... To prepare practically the conditions for the long-awaited blessing of their mutual end.'²⁹ In deviating from 'classical Marxism' Thompson had opted for the view that Morris's 'unique contribution' was an ethical enrichment to the Marxist tradition – a tradition which at mid twentieth century was resistant to the utopian flavour of this perspective.³⁰

The struggle for the intellectual ownership of Morris is symptomatic of the increasing value attaching to his achievement and the significant recognition of his standing as a politicized theorist of art. Thompson's assessment of Morris may be inconsistent and problematic but it opened up a rich vein of cultural politics that was largely absent before either version of his biography. Goode, in his critical response to Thompson, reminds us not to underestimate Morris's decorative (and literary) work as if it were only a supplementary part of his political project. This is interesting

28 Ibid., p. 195.

29 Anderson, *Arguments Within English Marxism*, p. 169.

30 See E. P. Thompson, 'The Communism of William Morris', a lecture given on 4 May 1959 in the Hall of the Art Workers' Guild, London (London: The William Morris Society, 1965), p. 6.

because Thompson's tendency to privilege the political reading of Morris does, nevertheless, contrast with the more familiar depoliticized version. In contrast with this trend Thompson's biography of Morris famously rehabilitated the poet as a crusading and original interpreter of Marx. Goode attempts, correctly in my view, to reconcile the two views.

In a similar way the research of Paul Meier in the 1970s built on the work of Thompson and is a contribution to a type of leftist politics that foregrounds the role of art and culture. At the centre of this formation is the desire to focus on *work* as the key radical principal in both aesthetic and political debate. Indeed, the privileging of the aesthetic in socialist theory is an antidote to the orthodox view that art is merely a reflection of the economic basis of society. The new perspective was a turn to what Meier has called a dialectics of art and history in which art is a part of the production of human life.³¹ In bringing to the forefront the role of art, Morris reinstated some of the key principles in the early writings of Marx including the worker's relation to the product of his labour, the alienation of labour, the degradation of industrial wage labour, and the creation of two great classes: propertied and unpropertied.³² The overcoming of alienation is analysed by Marx in a description of communism as the 'positive expression of the overcoming of private property'.³³ The critique of the division of labour and the promise of a diversity of occupations in the society of the future outlined by Marx echoes the thinking of Fourier (and of Morris). Marx's well-known views on the iniquities of exclusive occupation forced upon the worker in a system of private property ownership is contrasted with the image of a society in which it is possible 'to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning and fish in the afternoon,

31 See the chapter 'Dialectics of Art and History', in Meier, pp. 444–88.

32 These texts were posthumously published and not read by Morris. For reference to Morris's contact with Engels see Meier, pp. 201–44, and Thompson (1977), *passim*. See Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology*, Part One and Part Two, with Selections from Parts Two and Three, ed. C. J. Arthur (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1974). See also the 'Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts', in McLellan, ed., *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, pp. 75–112.

33 McLellan, ed., *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, p. 87.

rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner, just as I have a mind...'³⁴ In a similar fashion Morris frequently condemned the 'hierarchy of compulsion' that forced workers into a single life-long occupation.³⁵

Pleasure in Labour as the Fount of Art

In the process of re-thinking Morris for the twenty-first century we may note his manner of working in the present (in the here and now) as a prefiguration of a future world and an endorsement of the belief that people can live in radically different ways. His projections of a communist future represent a major contribution to what Anderson has called 'a shift from the axis of values to that of institutions'. What this signals is a recognition that the 'practical complexities' involved in social organization and the minutiae of personal life have a force of attraction lacking in the more totalizing visions of the left.³⁶

Anderson alludes to feminism and the ecological movement as indicative of areas of contestation that make practical objectives (gender equality and relations between humanity and nature) part of the wider project of human emancipation. For Anderson this presents a more nuanced class politics in which sensitivity to lived experience is inscribed in the project of educating socialists. Morris's quest for a form of cultural politics connects the present with a plausible projection calculated to take the movement forward by its strength of argument and its manner of delivery. The continuing struggle to assimilate Morris (which is in evidence in the Goode versus Thompson debate) is a symptom of the perceived need to find a style of

34 Ibid., p. 169.

35 William Morris, 'Attractive Labour' (1885), in *Political Writings: Contributions to Justice and Commonweal 1883-1890*, William Morris, ed. Nicholas Salmon (Bristol: Thoemmes Press, 1994), pp. 94-5.

36 Perry Anderson, *In the Tracks of Historical Materialism* (London: Verso, 1984), p. 104.

politics that recognizes past failures to foreground aesthetics in the struggle for change. Caroline Arscott notes, 'for Morris the requirement of labour could not be seen as prior to another department of human life concerned with artistic feeling and aesthetic pleasure because labour was itself (ideally) the locus of pleasure; pleasure in labour was the fount of art.'³⁷ The great attraction of Morris *now* is to be found in the way his thinking broadens the range of Marxism. The foregrounding of activities not immediately connected with economic goals seems to privilege activities that in the past were marginalized as non-work, as in Anderson's more inclusive definitions of work in post-industrial societies where market rationality gives way to a version of socialism that allows individual self-realization. André Gorz refers to the 'realization of physical, sensuous and intellectual capacities' in the making of things with 'non-commodity use-values'. Domestic work and the crafts for example will have a primordial rather than subordinate place in a post-industrial society. Gorz recommends 'an inversion of the scale of priorities, involving a subordination of socialized work governed by the economy to activities constituting the sphere of individual autonomy.'³⁸ Morris's utopianism is abundant in its descriptions of exactly these kinds of inversions. He attached importance to activities (often traditional feminine ones) that despite his efforts still remain marginal areas of aesthetic pleasure. Arscott has noted how Marxism can be 'understood to envision a social order which permits the full functioning of the aesthetic.'³⁹ Her reading of Marx – from a Morrisian point of view – establishes a bridge between the science of political economy and aesthetics by emphasizing the connection between work and free expression in a way that satisfies the psycho-physical capacity of the human subject. This strategy was also presented by Meier who noted the impossibility of excluding socio-political questions from the

37 Arscott, *Interlacings*, p. 149.

38 André Gorz, *Farewell to the Working Class: An Essay on Post-Industrial Socialism* (London and Sydney: Pluto Press, 1983), p. 81.

39 Caroline Arscott, 'William Morris: Decoration and Materialism', in *Marxism and the History of Art: From William Morris to the New Left*, ed. Andrew Hemingway (London and Ann Arbor, MI: Pluto Press, 2006), pp. 15-16.

consideration of aesthetics.⁴⁰ Arscott speaks of 'expanded consciousness' and 'enhanced somatic experience' somehow caught up in the flesh of a world which Morris's decorative work seems to define.⁴¹

The aesthetic ideal of sensory life as a component part of routine work is the missing term in the present order of things. Areas of technical education overlap with wider questions about the amateur/specialist distinction which Morris addresses in his analysis of the functions of the arts in earlier societies. In turning his hand to sex-specific skills such as weaving and embroidery he raised important issues about gendered distinctions between the decorative and the intellectual arts. This is important in the present conjuncture where the sexual division of labour impacts on areas of work that enjoy institutional recognition. Cheryl Buckley has argued 'capitalism and patriarchy interact to devalue' work made in the domestic environment.⁴²

We might note how Morris's engagement with the sensuous properties of things, in visual and poetic form, is convergent with his socio-political concerns. He had an intuitive understanding that in the sensuous act of making things matter and consciousness can be united. Arscott's critical disavowal of idealist aesthetics reinforces this point. She argues that privileging *reason over sensuality and feeling* (or merely insisting on their separation), splits the subject into the false opposites of mind and body. In taking up the case of Morris she argues that privileging reason over feeling causes a divided subject which she rejects. In reference to Morris she notes, 'bodily experience of pleasure and pain, appear to take over from ratiocination' in a way that avoids the separation of the two things.⁴³ According to Arscott: 'The solution is to recombine these two halves and the potential of communism is that the choice between objective existence and subjective experience need no longer be made.'⁴⁴ That Morris was an artist has

40 Meier, p. 446.

41 Arscott, *Interlacings*, pp. 23, 24.

42 Cheryl Buckley, 'Made in Patriarchy: Towards a Feminist Analysis of Women and Design', in *Design Discourse: History, Theory and Criticism*, ed. Victor Margolin (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 253.

43 Arscott, *Interlacings*, p. 25.

44 *Ibid.*, p. 135.

significance since it gives a certain value to his conception of work and not least so because it centres on the figuration of the human body as a central factor in both his politics and his decorative work. Arscott states: 'Rather we can consider the vocational location of this individual in the art world as something that gave him a particular opportunity to articulate (in his rough and ready style) the aesthetic positions that could be said to be inherent in Marxist theory – made him, in a way, a privileged exponent of this aspect of Marxist theory.'⁴⁵

The recognition that 'beast-like pain' is a natural accompaniment of work in most of its forms is often noted by Morris as well as his invocations of pleasure. Animal rest undisturbed by anxiety is the corollary of this. The idea of satisfaction for Morris is a mix of intelligence, harmonious co-operation, and the 'hope of pleasure in the work itself', all of which are the linked imperatives in a project that centres on the body.⁴⁶ The human body is fundamental to our understanding of the historical relation between subject (the human) and object (nature). The development of the human subject in its species-character is a product of its interactions with nature and in the dialectic of nature the human subject is formed. As Morris observes: 'Let us grant, first, that the race of man must either labour or perish. Nature does not give us our livelihood gratis; we must win it by toil of some sort or degree. Let us see, then, if she does not give us some compensation for this compulsion, since certainly in other matters she takes care to make acts necessary to the continuance of life in the individual and the race not only endurable, but even pleasurable.'⁴⁷

The reputation of Morris as a craftworker has perhaps worked against his authority as a social theorist and political strategist.⁴⁸ It may seem obvious to readers of his political writings that the various strands of Morris's work are connected in a project that challenges the separation of disci-

45 *Ibid.*, p. 135.

46 William Morris, 'Useful Work versus Useless Toil' (1888), in Morton, ed., *Political Writings*, p. 88.

47 *Ibid.*, pp. 86–7.

48 For a positive assessment of Morris as a political strategist see Anderson, *Arguments Within English Marxism*, pp. 176–207.

plines (into intellectual and decorative arts) and the hierarchy of genres that sustains this separation. The caricature of Morris as a sentimental socialist is hard to eliminate just as his powerful influence on the formation of revolutionary socialism in Britain and his persuasive reading of Marx in the 1880s still demands recognition. In the lecture 'How I Became a Socialist' he writes:

But the consciousness of revolution stirring amidst our hateful modern society prevented me, luckier than many others of artistic perceptions, from crystallizing into a mere railer against 'progress' on the one hand, and on the other from wasting time and energy in any of the numerous schemes by which the quasi-artistic of the middle classes hope to make art grow when it no longer has any root, and thus I became a practical socialist.⁴⁹

Morris was profoundly shaped by his connections with Marxist-infused debates in the 1880s and by his participation and political agitation. He spoke himself of his conversion to Marxism. This in itself proves nothing but it is important (as Matthew Beaumont has shown) to keep this in mind when assessing the utopian character of his work.⁵⁰ It is perhaps enough to consider how far the Marxist critique of utopian thought opens up issues and problems that still influence the nexus of politics and art. As I have noted the symbolic distinction between mental and manual labour is central to contemporary debate as it was in the past. This may explain why Morris's work in its various forms has captured the imagination of leftist scholars. Andrew Hemingway has recently referred to 'a new wave of Marxist scholarship on Morris's thought and practice'.⁵¹

The celebration of craftwork features strongly as a model of disalienation in the current revival of Morris.⁵² Craftwork of a certain order

49 William Morris, 'How I Became a Socialist' (1894), in Morton, ed., *Political Writings*, p. 245.

50 See Matthew Beaumont, *Utopia Ltd: Ideologies of Social Dreaming in England, 1870-1900* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2005).

51 Hemingway, ed., *Marxism and the History of Art*, p. 4.

52 There are two dominant approaches to Morris which tend to split him into either artist or political strategist. I wish to underline recent attempts to recombine political and

in particular circumstances is a way of harnessing materials and human aptitudes for social use. Morris's view of work in its most exalted form is perhaps typified by his own work. He struggled to find a way of making his instinctive feeling for crafts the basis of his political projections. However, it was the 'second career' of Morris 'as a socialist agitator' that finally separated him from the Arts and Crafts reformers 'clustered in the backwaters of the British Left'.⁵³

When Morris poured cold water on the idea of an Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society in 1886 his feelings were guided by a wider view of the matter. His attack on industrial slavery and the degradation of work became increasingly important in forming a link between industrial manufacture and the need for the social organization of labour. The emergent craft revival was supported by Morris but it served only to remind him of the contradictions it brought more clearly into profile. He wished the Arts and Crafts Movement success but wanted more than an improvement in public taste and a rise in the profile of the decorative arts. He struggled with the perception that he was himself merely a tastemaker with an eye to the market. In his ambition for what he called 'the worker's share of art' he called for a more expansive role for the visual arts modelled on the practices of the past:

aesthetic discourse in Morris studies. I should also mention that Morris has become a central figure in the work of the contemporary artist David Mabb. The most comprehensive revision which seeks to combine aesthetic and political analysis is Caroline Arscott's *William Morris & Edward Burne-Jones, Interlacings*. I refer also to: Steve Edwards, 'The Trouble with Morris', *The Journal of the William Morris Society*, 15.1 (Winter 2002), pp. 4-11; Stephen F. Eisenman, 'Class-Consciousness in the Design of William Morris', *The Journal of the William Morris Society*, 15.1 (Winter 2002), pp. 17-37; David Mabb, *William Morris* (Manchester: Whitworth Art Gallery, 2004), an exhibition catalogue with essays by Steve Edwards and Caroline Arscott. The exhibition featured original work by Mabb and was curated by him. The essays are Caroline Arscott, 'Four Walls: Morris and Ornament', pp. 58-69, and Steve Edwards, 'The Colonization of Utopia', pp. 13-39.

53 T. J. Jackson Lears, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture, 1880-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 62, 63.

Art is 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 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 present; in his work.⁵⁴

Morris's campaign for political change was original in its polemical attack on the separation of designer and executant which he saw as parallel with the distinction between the maker and user. He was one of several important design reformers in this period more or less connected with the aesthetic movement's disdain for the decline in taste in the market for popular goods. He wanted, nevertheless, to see beyond the aesthetic interests of the craft revivalists and the reformers of the day. In contrast with other wealthy aesthetic types of Victorian society Morris campaigned for revolutionary change in a way that challenged the privileging of cultural labour. The nostalgic aestheticism of the period is self evident in Morris's taste for Gothic art but this has an important political inflection since he saw in the craftworkers of the Middle Ages a level of imaginative agency quite lacking in the modern artisan. For Morris the medieval craftworker (despite the hardship of his task) was an artist. With the image of the ancient craftworker in mind he argued that: 'Men would follow knowledge and the creation of beauty for their own sakes, and not for the enslavement of their fellows, and they would be rewarded by finding their most necessary work grow interesting and beautiful under their hands without being conscious of it.'⁵⁵

Morris's much quoted self-criticism that he served the swinish luxury of the rich signals his acute awareness of class-politics. It also signals how far he recognized his part in the fashioning of contemporary taste. The idea of art (including applied or decorative art) as a term which defines a bourgeois profession separated from a critical evaluation of the concept of work in its widest sense was rejected by Morris. Insofar as such separation is still very much taken for granted in both the institutional structures of art and the marketplace for cultural goods we are still faced with Morris's dilemma.

54 William Morris, 'The Worker's Share of Art' (1885), in Salmon, ed., *Political Writings*, p. 84.

55 William Morris, 'The Society of the Future' (1884), in Morton, ed., *Political Writings*, p. 202.

Politics and Design Unified As Coherent Whole

From a political perspective the problems that he addressed must have seemed insuperable and yet Morris doggedly returned to the view that in the experience of work the human subject is formed. In our present context we may identify with the deeply sensual feel of the physical qualities expressed in Morris's wallpaper and textile design. Caroline Arscott and Stephen F. Eisenman have rekindled an interest in Morris's decorative work amongst leftist scholars who have tended to separate this side of his activity from his political writing.⁵⁶ Both Arscott and Eisenman insist that the decorative work is seen as integral to his political theory. Arscott notes the study of the 'fleshy depth' in the designs of Morris produces interaction between nature and the productive body.⁵⁷ Even in purely aesthetic statements Morris seems to be saying something expressive about a prospective life beyond the immediate task: 'Run any risk of failure rather than involve yourself in a tangle of poor, weak lines that people can't make out. Definite form bounded by firm outline is a necessity of all ornament.'⁵⁸

The wallpapers and fabrics of Morris create a sense of growth in which plant forms extend beyond themselves. The metaphorical sense of organic movement is significant in its departure from the habitual separation of art and politics into discrete objects of historical interest. Arscott shows how 'narrative' forms a part of Morris's decorative work. Rather than merely thinking of the decorative as a schematic and generalized effect it becomes *explicit* in its meaning. She detects a dynamic in the relation of form and content and speaks of the decorative 'reaction and counter movement' of intertwining leaves and stems that constitute a way of thinking about 'the grand themes of human endeavour'.⁵⁹ Morris's political and decorative work comes to look more like a coherent whole. His designs have a deep significance which, like painting, can afford a temporal and narrative reading:

56 See footnote 52.

57 Arscott, *Interlacings*, p. 133.

58 Cited by Graeme Shankland, 'William Morris: Designer', in *William Morris: Selected Writings and Designs*, ed. Asa Briggs (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), no pagination.

59 Arscott, *Interlacings*, p. 25.

'William Morris's presentation of thriving organic systems therefore reformulates time ... mind and agency are not eliminated ... they are on the contrary emphasized, amplified and broadcast across physical substance.'⁶⁰ The dialectical interplay between the sensual pleasures of the decorative and the 'grand themes' which Arscott discovers is characteristic of the tension at work in Morris's world. In his writing and in his art work we see the pleasures of reverie and repose which often turn to their opposite: action and the dynamic mode.⁶¹ The interactions of work and leisure form the basis of the imaginative tensions in much of Morris's thinking. Closely connected to this is the inversion of the protestant ethic in the defence of attractive work. He notes: 'it has become an article of creed of modern morality that all labour is good in itself – a convenient belief to those who live by the labour of others.'⁶² Morris identified the various kinds of 'anti-work' strategies (bohemian or otherwise) with the idle rich. Insofar as artists belong to a privileged social order and enjoy the blessings of leisure and distinction they are caricatured by Morris. He expected that a post-revolutionary future would have little need to exalt artists above their occupational status in life. Good work would in any case bring its own reward and its value would be appreciated and praised by the communities that it served. In this sense the arts were for Morris always an organic extension of the rudiments of life and a working model for his visionary speculations.

The plainness and straightforwardness of Morris's views on the role of art were rooted in his reading of history. His tendency was to see the individual (including the artist) as always being dissolved into an ensemble of relations so the work of art has some humility in the general scheme of things. The tendency in Morris is to play down 'individualism' as a bourgeois construct. In this way the artist – just like anybody else – is the

60 Ibid., p. 25.

61 This opposition is suggested in Meier's subtitle description of Morris as a 'Marxist Dreamer'.

62 William Morris, 'Useful Work Versus Useless Toil' (1884), in Morton, ed., *Political Writings*, p. 86.

bearer of the historical process, a subject rooted in material conditions.⁶³ His historical analysis of labour centres on the dialectic of nature in which human action is motivated by necessity and yet where freedom of some kind is secured it finds expression in fantasy and the mediation of desire. The progressive force of primitive action in the formation of early societies fascinated Morris. In circumstances that allow for it playfulness (expressed in decoration) and the satisfactions of the body were embroidered into the day-to-day work of ancient societies. One of the great gifts of Morris's political writings is to be found in the way he exposes the hypocrisy of a society in which the compulsion to work is driven by arrangements of social class that perpetuate differential levels of mental and physical pain. His relevance to the twenty-first century may be reducible to this: he could see beyond the meanness of the lives of most people on earth. His reflection on the abundance of the world and its unequal levels of distribution is still felt by many today. We live in a world where automated work generally fails in its utopian mission to increase leisure and on a world scale exploitation intensifies. Barry King has recently observed how 'in the sweatshops and Enterprise zones of the Third World, the old disciplines of harsh manual labour have returned with an intensity that recalls the early nineteenth century, rather than the techno-utopias of the futurologists.'⁶⁴ One of the key attractions of the arts is that in their working methods they seem in some degree resistant to the industrial model of production.⁶⁵ Morris made little effort to promote the fine arts. Instead he drew critical attention to the vertical divisions of labour that had marginalized craftwork, degraded labour and debased the built environment. His outlook was often pessimistic – 'there is in the public of today no knowledge of art and little love

63 See Sadish Padiyar, 'The Shadow of Agency: Derrida, Marx, David', in *As Radical as Reality Itself: Essays on Marxism and Art for the 21st Century*, ed. Matthew Beaumont, Andrew Hemingway, Esther Leslie, and John Roberts (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2007), p. 53.

64 Barry King, 'Modularity and the Aesthetics of Self-Commodification', in Beaumont et al., eds., *As Radical as Reality Itself*, p. 319.

65 See my discussion of this point in, 'Neverwork! The Situationists and the Politics of Negation', in Beaumont et al., eds., *As Radical as Reality Itself*, pp. 217–50.

for it' – and yet he kept the flag flying for what he calls a new birth of art, or rather a version of popular and ornamental art as a constituent part of a future society.⁶⁶

For Morris the concept of work is inscribed in the totality of his project in all its variety of forms. Decorative work, political pamphleteering and critical engagement with Marxism were all parts of his wider struggle to make sense of the world. Indeed, the twenty-first century may need to follow Morris in his return to origins and first causes. He still has much to offer when we look back at the devastation of the environment and the programmes of modernization on both sides of the cold war that have left death and destruction in their wake. His plea for an ecological approach to socialism seems somehow modestly appropriate when confronted, as we are, by the delusions of mass culture and the neo-liberal view of capitalism as a project without end.

Morris is one of the world's great diagnosticians of alienation and his work in its various branches represents a way of theorizing the relations between ordinary work and cultural labour. His importance for the twenty-first century is rooted in the degree to which he recognized the political problem of making socialist art in a capitalist society. His continuing relevance can be measured in the powerful political and aesthetic strategies he deployed in his way of addressing this.

INTERLUDE

66 William Morris, 'Art Under Plutocracy' (1884), in Morton, ed., *Political Writings*, p. 61.