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William Morris: Art, Work, and Leisure

Ruth Kinna

William Morris's most important contribution to British socialist thought is often said to be his elaboration of a plan for the socialist future. E. P. Thompson, for example, argued that Morris was "a pioneer of constructive thought as to the organization of socialist life within Communist society."¹ His vision of socialism, famously captured in his utopian novel *News From Nowhere*, was inspired by a number of principles, but perhaps its most notable feature was the demand that labor be made attractive.² As John Drinkwater noted shortly after Morris's death, Morris passionately believed that an individual who is "overworked, or employed all the while in degrading work ... cannot be himself." The message of his socialism, in Drinkwater's view "one of the profoundest and most inspiring that it has been given to any man to deliver," was that "in bringing back joy to their daily work [men] ... would put their feet on the first step towards ... true dignity and pride of life."³

Since Drinkwater's comments, Morris's ideas about the organization of labor in socialism have attracted a considerable amount of attention. Most scholars have argued that his ideas were underpinned by two separate concerns: his hostility to the effects of industrialization and his opposition to the division of labor. As Fiona McCarthy notes, Morris not only protested against the pollution, congestion, and "squalid industrial waste" produced by "uncontrolled factory production," he also spoke out against the "rigid organization of the factory

¹ E. P. Thompson, *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary* (New York, 1976), 682.

² See G. D. H. Cole, *A History of Socialist Thought* (5 vols.; London, 1974), II, 414-24; Fiona McCarthy, *William Morris: A Life For Our Time* (London, 1994), 584-88; Paul Meier, *William Morris: The Marxist Dreamer*, tr. Frank Gubb (2 vols.; Sussex, 1978), I, 288-394; A. L. Morton, *The English Utopia* (London, 1978), 202-24; Thompson, *Romantic to Revolutionary*, 682-98.

³ John Drinkwater, *William Morris A Critical Study* (London, 1912), 198-99; and Paul Bloomfield, *William Morris* (London, 1934).

which keeps the operative virtually chained to a single repetitive task.”⁴ Though both aspects of Morris’s work have generated considerable scholarly interest, the first has attracted more attention than the second. A. L. Morton preferred to examine Morris’s attacks on the effects of industrialization in order to counter the impression that his complaints were anti-modern or that his socialism required a return to premechanized methods of production.⁵ Others have argued, more positively, that the proposals Morris made for the reorganization and for the improvement of factory production in particular set him apart from his contemporaries.⁶ Recently, eco-socialist writers have developed this line of thought and extolled Morris as a precursor of green theory.⁷ By contrast, Morris’s views about the division of labor have not been seen as either controversial or distinctive. In some accounts his ideas are straightforwardly compared to Marx’s.⁸ Others suggest that his understanding of the division of labor was hazy. Paul Meier, for example, argues that Morris was unclear about the problems that the division of labor raised and that he only discussed it in a very general way.⁹ Both these approaches mistakenly emphasize the separateness of the two elements in Morris’s thought, and the relationship between his critique of industrialization and the division of labor has been neglected. I will argue that it is this relationship, and not the two respective parts, which holds the key to his demand for the realization of attractive labor.

Morris integrated his ideas about industrialization and the division of labor into a wider analysis of the relationship between work and leisure. He began to think about this relationship before he committed himself to socialism in 1883, but his mature thought was influenced by Fourier as well as Marx. The two led him to conceptualize the relationship in two distinct ways. In the first he contrasted work with leisure and suggested that attractive labor required the reduction of necessary labor time; in the second he identified work with leisure and defined attractive labor as the exercise and expression of human creativity. As will be seen, these two conceptions were not easily reconciled. The first led Morris to argue that the realization of attractive labor was dependent upon the division of labor and the increase in productivity which it fostered; the second convinced him that attractive labor required a change in working practices and

⁴ McCarthy, *Life For Our Time*, 356-57.

⁵ See especially Morton, *English Utopia*, 217-19.

⁶ See, for example, Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society 1780-1950* (Middlesex, 1971), 159.

⁷ See, for example, Derek Wall, *Green History* (London, 1994), 10.

⁸ Jack Lindsay, *William Morris: His Life and Work* (London, 1975), 348; A. L. Morton, “Morris, Marx and Engels,” *History of the Imagination Selected Writings of A. L. Morton*, ed. Margot Heinemann and Willie Thompson (London, 1990), 300-303; Thompson, *William Morris*, 690.

⁹ Meier, *Marxist Dreamer*, 357.

that its realization was blocked by the conditions which this very division imposed. Morris was aware of the tension in his work but was unable to resolve it. Nevertheless, his attempt to do so highlights the distinctiveness of contribution to late nineteenth century socialist thought.

Morris started to write about the relationship between work and leisure and the idea of attractive labor in the late 1870s and early 1880s, a few years before his turn to socialism. Morris's first considerations of this question, as of most social issues, was mediated by his understanding of art and his personal experience. His art was driven by two forces, a sense of unyielding resolve and a seemingly inexhaustible talent. His determination to become a craftsman first became apparent in 1857, when he moved into Red Lion Square with Edward Burne-Jones. Since the rented rooms were unfurnished, Morris set about designing some furniture developing his new interest in parallel with his literary career. In 1860, two years after the publication of *The Defence of Guenevere*, he moved into the Red House in Bexley Heath. Discovering that he could not find manufacturers who could provide suitable furnishings, Morris disciplined himself to work in accordance with his motto "if I can" and provide his own.¹⁰ Mocking him, his one time student Dante Gabriel Rossetti suggested that the maxim should be "since I can't." Yet though Morris had failed in his bid to become a painter, Rossetti's suggestion soon proved to be well wide of the mark. When Ford Maddox Brown suggested that the friends set up in business together, Morris demonstrated that his will to master the crafts was matched by extraordinary ability. In Morris, Marshall, Faulkner, & Co., he embarked on a career that would lead him to become one of the most versatile and influential designers, dyers, weavers, and printers of his age.

When Morris first explained his ideas about work and leisure, he used his personal insights and motivations as starting points for his analysis. In the articles collected together in *Hopes and Fears for Art* he identified two sources of motivation. The first was material and corresponded to his sense of purpose—Morris knew that he needed to make a living. Putting the point negatively, he wanted to avoid "the fear of starvation or disgrace."¹¹ His second and stronger impulse, which matched his talent, was pleasure. Aside from the need to support himself and his family, he was, he declared, born to labor in culture.¹² Without his work he would "die of despair and weariness."¹³

Leisure, Morris suggested, could also be considered in two ways. If work was seen as a necessity then leisure could be thought of as non-work or free

¹⁰ J. W. Mackail, *The Life of William Morris* (2 vols.; London, 1912), I, 148-49; McCarthy, *Life For Our Time*, 166.

¹¹ "The Prospects of Architecture," *Collected Works of William Morris* (24 vols.; London, 1992), XXII, 142.

¹² "Making the Best of It," 82.

¹³ "Prospects of Architecture," 142.

time. Alternatively, if it was considered as pleasure, then leisure could be thought of as an extension of work, or voluntary labor. In both cases leisure was a form of rest, but in the first it implied inactivity or, more precisely, any pastime which did not have a manual component. In the second, by contrast, leisure was productive. Before he declared himself to be a socialist in 1883 Morris clearly preferred the second, active, form of leisure—voluntary labor—to the first. Free time spent inactively, he claimed, was work's least important reward. Admittedly, his poetry in particular suggested a different priority. *The Life and Death of Jason*, *The Earthly Paradise*, and *Sigurd the Volsung* were full of adventure and excitement, but they also emphasized the joy of peaceful reflection. For his own part Morris, too, guiltily confessed to spending some of his free time “as a dog does—in contemplation.” Nevertheless, he insisted that he preferred to spend the greater part of his leisure time doing work “which ... gives me just as much pleasure as my bread-earning work.”¹⁴ To reinforce the point he added that his friends also believed that the “only idea of happy leisure was other work,” and he suggested that they differed from him only because they liked the “dog-like leisure less and the man-like labour more.”¹⁵

Morris extrapolated from his personal motivations to the population at large. Work in society, he argued, was driven by two forces: the first, nature, reflected his concern to make a living; and the second, desire, paralleled his love of art. Individuals, he argued, worked in order to live. But even though work was an inescapable fact of life, Morris argued that it also satisfied a hedonistic impulse. To make his point he returned to the dogs, this time using them as exemplars of pure pleasure-seeking. Just as “the dog take pleasure in hunting, and the horse in running, and the bird in flying,” so the “natural and rightful” motive for labor in mankind was the “desire for pleasure.”¹⁶ In a similar vein he argued that the majority of individuals preferred their leisure to be active than not. Morris granted that some occupations, for example, ploughing, fishing, and shepherding, were inherently “rough” and workers employed in these roles might need periods of complete “dog-like” rest in order to recuperate from their activities. In these cases Morris conceded that the hardship work involved required “certain conditions of leisure, freedom, and due wages being granted.”¹⁷ But in general he argued that leisure should be considered as an extension of work and not a release from it. In his essay “The Art of the People,” written in 1879, he observed:

[Work] is necessary toil, but shall it be toil only? Shall all we can do with it be to shorten the hours of that toil to the utmost, that the hours of

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ “The Art and the People,” *Collected Works of William Morris*, XXII, 42-43.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 45.

leisure may be long beyond what men used to hope for? And what then shall we do with the leisure, if we say that all toil is irksome? Shall we sleep it away? —Yes, and never wake up again, I should hope, in that case.¹⁸

After his turn to socialism Morris continued to argue both that work was necessary and that it met a human desire. Individuals, he argued, had to labor in order to live and to ensure that they provided at least the means of their own subsistence. The choice, Morris argued, was to “labour or perish.” Nature, he continued, “does not give us our livelihood gratis; we must win it by toil of some sort or degree.”¹⁹ At the same time workers ought to take pleasure in their labor. When he looked forward to the future organization of socialism, he anticipated that free time would not be a sufficient guarantee for leisure. Writing in 1884, he argued:

When class-robbery is abolished, every man will reap the fruits of his labour, every man will have due rest—leisure, that is. Some Socialists might say we need not go any further than this.... But though the compulsion of man’s tyranny is thus abolished, I yet demand compensation for the compulsion of Nature’s necessity. As long as the work is repulsive it will still be a burden which must be taken up daily, and even so would mar our life.... Nature will not be finally conquered till our work becomes a part of the pleasure of our lives.²⁰

Yet now Morris began to reconsider the importance of leisure. As he did so reevaluated the importance of free time and began to concede that periods of rest were as necessary to all workers as their labor was. In contrast to his original discussion, he agreed that one of the rewards for labor was the promise of inactivity. Rather than always regarding leisure as an extension of work, he now admitted that all work had “some pain” in it and that one of the compensations for “animal pain” was “animal rest.”²¹ In short, as a socialist Morris not only explicitly acknowledged two different conceptions of the relationship between work and leisure but also defended both of them simultaneously. On the one hand, recognizing the stressfulness of labor, he contrasted work with leisure and argued that leisure as free time was labor’s reward. On the other hand, maintaining the pleasure to be derived from work, he defined leisure as voluntary or unforced production, comparable with labor and the fulfillment of desire.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 33.

¹⁹ “Useful Work versus Useless Toil,” *Collected Works of William Morris*, XXIII, 98.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 107.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 99.

In the course of the 1880s Morris further developed these ideas about work and leisure under the influence of Marx and Fourier. Morris drew on Marx's work in order to explore the ways in which the amount of free time could be increased. Even though, as he confessed towards the end of his life, he had been unaware of Marx's work at the time of his turn to socialism, he soon made up for this gap. Morris began to read Marx sometime in early 1883, starting with the first volume of *Capital*, which was then available in French translation. Though, to his regret, his German was not good enough to enable him to read all of Marx's published work, with the aid of H. M. Hyndman, Andreas Scheu, and Ernest Belfort Bax, he soon became familiar with many of those writings which had not yet been translated. Like many others, Morris found Marx's work difficult, but he was immediately impressed by it. In particular Marx's work gave his conception of leisure as free time a firmer theoretical foundation and a clearer direction. Specifically, it convinced him of two central propositions: that the key to the maximization of free time was the abolition of capitalist exploitation, and that this exploitation would be brought to an end by the advances in productivity which sprang from the division of labor.

Morris had moved towards these positions even before he read *Capital*. In the essays in *Hopes and Fears for Art*, published in 1882, he had consistently argued that the commercial system was based on exploitation. Under commerce, work was not driven by natural necessity but by the "fear of death by starvation" engendered by human greed and the profit motive.²² Workers did not labor simply in order to provide for their own needs, still less because they wanted to. They were they were driven to labor by capitalists. Morris admitted that commercial production was based on a contractual arrangement between workers and their employers, but he contested the fairness of the contracts and the freedom with which they were entered into. Though the workers received "food, clothing, poorish lodgings and a little leisure" in return for their labors, their work secured "enormous riches to the capitalists that rent them."²³ The evident imbalance of this exchange convinced Morris that the majority of workers were "engaged for ... the most part of their lives in work, which ... is mere unmitigated slavish toil, only to be wrung out of them by the sternest compulsion."²⁴

Morris located the main evil of the commercial system in the "tyrannous Organization of labour" which had accompanied its development.²⁵ In commercial society workers could not possibly work freely for their employers because they had become subject to a strict division of labor. He argued that this division operated in two divergent ways. For privileged workers like himself it forced an unnecessary degree of diversification. Although he derived considerable plea-

²² "Prospects of Architecture," 141.

²³ "Making The Best of It," 115.

²⁴ "The Beauty of Life," *Collected Works of William Morris*, XXII, 66.

²⁵ "Prospects of Architecture," 150.

sure from his labor, Morris insisted that he would never have chosen to undertake such a huge range of work had it not been for the division of labor. He had, he said, been “compelled to learn many crafts, and ... forbidden to master any.”²⁶ For the great mass of less fortunate workers, the division led to specialization. In this sense, he argued, the division of labor was a “technical phrase for ... always doing one minute piece of work, and never being allowed to think of any other.”²⁷ This, Morris argued, was the most important and iniquitous effect of the division of labor. It condemned the majority to piecework and deprived him of skilled craftsmen to help him in his labors.

After reading Marx, Morris refined these ideas. Exploitation, he now argued, had its roots in the pattern of property ownership in society. In any given historical period society was divided into rich and poor. The former not only possessed more income than the latter, they also effectively controlled their lives. Crucially, they controlled the means of production—the tools, land, and factories—necessary for work. Non-owners, by contrast, controlled only their labor-power. Like Hyndman, Morris referred to this situation as monopoly and, drawing on his earlier ideas, he argued that it was unjust because it reduced the workers to the level of slaves. In order to labor usefully, Morris argued,

two matters are required: 1st, The bodily and mental powers of a human being, developed by training, habit and tradition; and 2nd, Raw material on which to exercise those powers, and tools wherewith to aid them. The second matters are absolutely necessary to the first; unless the two come together, no commodity can be produced. Those, therefore, that must labour in order to live, and who have to ask leave of others for the use of the instruments of their labour, are not free men but the dependents [*sic*] of others, *i.e.*, their slaves.²⁸

With a greater interest and awareness of the capitalist class structure and the mode of production, Morris clarified two of his earlier arguments. First, having agreed that all labor was necessary—or forced—he distinguished between the force exercised by nature and that which sprang from the uneven pattern of ownership in society. Monopoly, he suggested, was driven not simply by profit but by the capitalists’ desire to escape the natural necessity of labor. In Morris’s view it was not subsistence which forced the majority of workers to labor—though a subsistence wage was all they received—it was the necessity of providing the monopolists with sufficient means to allow them to live a life of leisure. Dividing the population into three classes, Morris observed that the rich “do no

²⁶ “Making the Best of It,” 82.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 115.

²⁸ “Monopoly: or, How Labour is Robbed,” *Collected Works of William Morris*, XXIII, 248.

work, and make no pretense of doing any,” the middle classes “work fairly hard, though with abundant easements and holidays, claimed and allowed,” while those of the working class “work so hard that they may be said to do nothing else than work.”²⁹

Morris’s second point of clarification concerned the division of labor. In a further refinement of his ideas he distinguished between the specialization he longed to be able to enjoy personally and the specialization that he believed the majority of workers were forced to endure. The distinction corresponded to the difference between pre- and post-capitalist organization. Before the rise of capitalism, Morris argued, workers had been divided by their “various crafts.” Drawing directly on *Capital*, he argued that carriage makers, for example, had been organized by into particular trades.³⁰ Each worker—the wheelwright, coach-builder, and upholsterer—worked “at his own occupation” and the labor of the total work-force was “combined into one article.” Under capitalism, by contrast, “the employer ... employs the whole...as one machine in the simultaneous production of one article....” Whereas workers had once perfected a particular craft, under capitalism each component of the “workman-machine” was apportioned part of the process of production.³¹ It was this kind of specialization, which forced workers “to do day after day the same tasks, without any hope of escape or change,” that Morris deplored.³²

In his most important revision of his early work Morris set his refined understanding of capitalism within a evolutionary account of development. Impressed by the historical analysis presented in *Capital*, Morris credited Marx with the “full development of the complete Socialist theory ... ‘scientific’ Socialism.” Marx, he suggested, had made two particular contributions to socialist thought: he had recognized the importance of class struggle and the role of conflict in the process of social change, and he had plotted the “historical evolution of industrialism.” In Morris’s view, Marx’s work revealed a more general “law of evolution” namely, that “evolution was still going on, and that, whether Socialism be desirable or not, it is at least inevitable.”³³

Morris used Marx’s science to argue that capitalism was heading towards an unavoidable, fatal crisis, which would release the mass of the work-force from the necessity of labor; and following Marx, he anticipated that this crisis would be conflictual and violent. He accepted that the tendency of capitalism was toward the increasing modernization of industry and toward ever greater

²⁹ “Useful Work,” 99.

³⁰ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, I, tr. Sam Moore and Edward Aveling, *Collected Works*, ed. Frederick Engels (50 vols.; London, 1995), XXXV, 341.

³¹ William Morris and E. Belfort Bax, *Socialism From the Root Up, William Morris Political Writings: Contributions to “Justice” and “Commonweal” 1883-1890*, ed. Nicholas Salmon (Bristol, 1994), 593-94.

³² “Useful Work,” 112.

³³ “The Hopes of Civilization,” *Collected Works of William Morris*, XXIII, 75.

efficiency in production. On this basis he also believed that the rate of profit would inevitably fall over time and that capital would come to be concentrated in fewer and fewer hands. The situation, Morris argued, was bound to lead to class war, at first within classes but ultimately between them. As growing numbers of owners fell into bankruptcy and non-owners were thrown into unemployment, capitalism was destined to collapse. He painted a picture which was both vivid and apocalyptic:

[W]hat is visible before us in these days is the competitive commercial system killing itself by its own force: profits lessening, businesses growing bigger and bigger, the small employer of labour thrust out of his function, and the aggregation of capital increasing the numbers of the lower middle class from above rather than from below, by driving the smaller manufacturer into the position of a mere servant to the bigger. The productivity of labour also increasing out of all proportion to the capacity of the capitalists to manage the market or deal with the labour supply: lack of employment therefore becoming chronic, and discontent there-withal.³⁴

Morris's hopes that the collapse of capitalism would inaugurate a new epoch of rest were grounded on the assumptions he made about its productive capacity. Like all economic systems, capitalism was founded on the "necessity of man conquering his subsistence from Nature by labour."³⁵ In that sense it represented a stage in the development of mankind's battle to secure economic well-being. For all practical purposes (since Morris admitted that socialism denied "the finality of human progress") it was the final stage.³⁶ Crucially, by constantly modernizing and subdividing the workforce into increasingly specialized groups, capitalism had expanded production to its greatest possible level. By the introduction of "fresh machines," Morris commented, capitalism "increases the productivity of skilled labour" and "makes it possible to substitute unskilled in its place." As a result, skilled artisans were driven from their positions and forced "to accept that of the unskilled labourer."³⁷ Though capitalism could not sustain itself as a system, the productive forces it had unleashed meant that, in socialism, it could provide the basis for a new abundance. With the enormous optimism common to most nineteenth-century socialists, Morris argued that, once there was no longer any need to make profit, there would be a "mass of labour-power available" for production and that the "most obvious

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 79.

³⁵ "Dawn of a New Epoch," *Collected Works of William Morris*, XXIII, 124.

³⁶ Morris and Bax, *Socialism From the Root Up*, 622.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 604.

necessities will be ... easily provided for.”³⁸ In socialism all those workers who had been made redundant by machines would be able to work. At the same time the productive capacity of the machinery would be released in order to reduce the total amount of necessary labor. In short there would be abundant free time and rest for all.

While Morris drew on Marx to show how the further division of labor could reduce necessary labor time, he turned to Fourier for an insight into how pleasure of voluntary labor could be enhanced. In particular, Fourier’s work underpinned the distinction he sought to draw between labor that was free—in the sense that it was only forced by nature—and labor that was undertaken voluntarily or “freely, and for the love of the work and for its results.”³⁹

Morris was first introduced to Fourier’s work, shortly before he declared for socialism, by John Stuart Mill’s *Chapters on Socialism*. In his retrospective account of his transition to socialism Morris suggested that Mill had been largely critical of Fourier. In reality Mill was not as harsh as Morris implied. Though Mill rejected Fourier’s cure for the social ills, he supported much of his diagnosis of their cause.⁴⁰ Morris’s position was similar. Like Mill, he thought that Fourier’s social criticism was “valuable.” But Morris came to this conclusion by a different route. Unlike Mill, Morris interpreted Fourier’s work largely in the light of the criticism Engels had made in *Socialism Utopian and Scientific*. In line with Engels’s categorization of socialist thought Morris argued that Fourier’s work was naive. Admittedly, for a utopian Fourier had shown an unusual “insight into the historical growth of Society.”⁴¹ But he had failed to capitalize on this insight and, like most early socialists, had mistakenly believed that he could realize his goals by voluntary agreement and by persuading others of the “desireableness of co-operation.” In Morris’s view Fourier harbored the equally mistaken belief that he could construct a new artificial society from the “materials which capitalistic society offered.”⁴²

However, whereas Engels celebrated Fourier as a satirist, Morris was most impressed by Fourier’s notion of attractive labor. Aware that Fourier’s ideas about work were often ridiculed,⁴³ he nonetheless argued that his “doctrine of the necessity and possibility of making labour attractive” was one that “Socialism can by no means do without.”⁴⁴ Morris used his notion of attractive labor very much as he used Marx’s theory of history: in order to clarify his own idea that the key to unforced labor lay in the transformation of work through art.

³⁸ “Useful Work,” 111.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 116.

⁴⁰ Stephan Collini (ed), *J. S. Mill “On Liberty,” with “The Subjection of Women” and “Chapters on Socialism”* (Cambridge, 1989), xxiv.

⁴¹ Morris and Bax, *Socialism From the Root Up*, 567.

⁴² “Hopes of Civilization,” 74.

⁴³ *News From Nowhere, Collected Works of William Morris*, XVI, 91.

⁴⁴ “Hopes of Civilization,” 73.

Here too, Morris's conviction that art held the key to voluntary work predated his conversion to socialism. Echoing Ruskin, Morris had argued as early as 1879 that art was "the expression by man of his pleasure in labour." From this premise he concluded that "the chief duty of the civilized world to-day is to set about making labour happy for all."⁴⁵ In this particular context the kind of art that Morris had in mind was craftwork. Elsewhere and in more tortured prose, Morris asked,

[W]hat is an artist but a workman who is determined that, whatever else happens, his work shall be excellent? Or, to put it in another way: the decoration of workmanship, what is it but the expression of man's pleasure in successful labour?⁴⁶

At this early stage in his career, Morris had suggested that the transformation of labor through art depended on the extent to which work could be made intelligent. Accordingly, he defined intelligent labor as that which made the laborer's "work-hours pass pleasantly." More specifically, intelligent labor gave the worker "at least some control" over production.⁴⁷ Morris admitted that by contrast to imaginative labor, which granted the individual worker unrestricted freedom of expression, intelligent labor was only partly creative. But it still provided some scope for the development of the worker's creativity. Moreover, like imaginative labor, it demanded that workers were both educated and dedicated to their work and that methods of production were sufficiently flexible to respond to individual work patterns.

Morris saw one of the principle obstacles to the realization of intelligent labor in the mechanization of production (though he also acknowledged, rather unhelpfully that machine work was enjoyable "if it be not too mechanical").⁴⁸ In spite of his "boundless faith in their capacity," he insisted that machines "can do everything—except make works of art."⁴⁹ In the workplace mechanization was responsible for the "slavery of mind and body," and it was inimical to intelligent labor.⁵⁰ Indeed, it was the instrument through which the division of labor operated. Without this burden workers would be set free from the division and the specialization it imposed. Each would become

a craftsman who shall put his own individual intelligence and enthusiasm into the goods he fashions. So far from his labor being "di-

⁴⁵ "Art of the People," 42-43.

⁴⁶ "The Lesser Arts," *Collected Works of William Morris*, XXII, 23.

⁴⁷ "Prospects of Architecture," 145.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 143.

⁴⁹ "Art and the Beauty of the Earth," *Collected Works of William Morris*, XXII, 166.

⁵⁰ "Prospects of Architecture," 149.

vided,” ... he must know all about the ware he is making and its relation to similar wares; he must have a natural aptitude for his work.... He must be allowed to think of what he is doing, and to vary his work as the circumstances of it vary, and his own moods. He must be for ever striving to make the piece he is at work at better than the last. He must refuse at anybody’s bidding to turn out ... even an indifferent piece of work.... He must have a voice, and a voice worth listening to in the whole affair.⁵¹

Morris’s reconsideration of the question of voluntary or unforced labor may have been affected by his own manufacturing experience. In 1881 Morris established new workshops at Merton Abbey, near London. This move enabled him to take direct control of the production of the tapestries, dyes, wallpapers, and fabrics he marketed through Morris & Co. It also provided him with a forum for the practical implementation of his Ruskinian ideas. Yet from the start Morris insisted that the workshops at Merton Abbey could not meet his ideals and that his employees could not work freely, as he wanted them to do so. It was, he told the American poet and essayist Emma Lazarus in 1884, impossible to produce art “in this profit-grinding Society.”⁵² Nevertheless, within the limits that capitalism imposed, he attempted to make conditions at Merton Abbey as relaxed as possible. Workers were allowed to come and go as they pleased. They had access to a collection of “fine books, finely printed and bound.” And “in the summer season the roses nodded in upon them at the open windows.”⁵³

In the light of his manufacturing experience and Fourier’s work Morris significantly expanded the conditions necessary for the realization of voluntary or unforced labor. If work was to become synonymous with leisure, four conditions would have to be met. First, work would have to meet a vocation; second, it would have to be performed in pleasant surroundings; third, it would have to allow some scope for variation; and fourth, it would have to be useful. On the first point Morris argued that each individual should be able “to choose the work which he could do best.”⁵⁴ For the most part free choice would not leave any jobs undone. Morris cited with approval Fourier’s suggestion that children “who generally like making dirt-pies and getting into a mess, should do the dirty work of the community.”⁵⁵ Moreover, echoing Fourier’s belief that individuals fell into one of 810 basic personality types, each with a different range of interests and abilities, Morris suggested that “people’s innate capacities are pretty much

⁵¹ “Making the Best of It,” 115-16

⁵² Morris to Emma Lazarus, *The Collected Letters of William Morris*, ed. Norman Kelvin (4 vols.; Princeton, 1987), II, 276-77.

⁵³ James Leatham, *William Morris: Master of Many Crafts* (London, 1994), 74.

⁵⁴ “Attractive Labour,” *Political Writings*, 94.

⁵⁵ Morris and Bax, *Socialism From the Root Up*, 567.

as various as their faces are.”⁵⁶ This variation of character, he suggested, ensured that individuals would opt to undertake a range of different tasks and that no community would be left with a job undone.

Whatever their chosen occupations, all individuals would work in pleasant surroundings. On the model of Merton Abbey, factories would be made clean, spacious, light, and airy, and they would be set within green fields rather than concentrated in urban areas or “congeries of towns.”⁵⁷ Like Fourier (and Marx), Morris believed that they would also become centers of education as much as they were units of production. In the future factories would have “ample building for library, school-room, dining hall and the like.” People would gather there not only to work, but in order to take part in “social gatherings” such as “musical or dramatic entertainments.”⁵⁸

The third condition for work to be synonymous with leisure was that labor should be varied. This condition meant that all work would contain both a mental and a manual aspect. Throughout his life, Morris remained skeptical about the value of purely intellectual labor. But instead of considering the problem egocentrically as he had done earlier, he began to examine the division between mental and manual work from the point of view of the manual worker. Guiltily comparing his own position to that of a bricklayer, Morris realized that he was fortunate to be able to combine his mental labor with “strong physical exercise.” After a hard day’s writing, he could “take a boat out and row for a couple of hours or more.” The hodman, by contrast, was too exhausted for mental relaxation and fit only for “beer and sleep.”⁵⁹ In socialism, by contrast, when labor was performed freely, both men would be able to enjoy the same opportunities. Since some of the hodman’s work would be performed by writers like Morris, he would be able to utilize his free time in more constructive pursuits.

Variation also required mixing indoor and outdoor pursuits. In many of his later writings Morris mapped this stipulation onto his prohibition of the division between mental and manual labor. In an ideal world, he argued, brain workers would find relaxation in primarily agricultural pursuits. Although there were always likely to be some “obstinate refusers” (as he called them in *News From Nowhere*), most workers would willingly turn themselves towards “easy-hard work,” and especially to haymaking.⁶⁰ There were, Morris believed, “few men ... who would not wish to spend part of their lives in the most necessary and pleasantest of all work—cultivating the earth.”⁶¹ Elsewhere he painted a picture that was positively idyllic:

⁵⁶ “Attractive Labour,” 94.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁵⁸ “Work in a Factory As It Might Be,” *William Morris: Artist Writer Socialist*, ed. May Morris (2 vols.; New York, 1966), II, 137.

⁵⁹ “The Reward of ‘Genius,’” *Political Writings*, 196.

⁶⁰ *News From Nowhere*, 173.

⁶¹ “Useful Work,” 112.

Surely almost everyone would wish to take some share in field or garden work besides his indoor occupation, even if it were no more than helping to get in the harvest or save the hay; and such occasions would become really the joyous and triumphant festivals which the poets have dreamed of them as being, and of which pleasure there is still some hint or, it may be, survival in *barbarous* countries.⁶²

Morris outlined the requirements for his fourth and final condition, the need for labor to be useful, by contrasting it with useless toil. He considered the uselessness of existing labor from two points of view. Just as Fourier distinguished between acts of positive destruction and acts of negative creation, Morris distinguished between those jobs he considered definitely harmful from those which were simply wasteful. The first category included the production of armaments and of “adulterated food and drink.”⁶³ The second category was largely directed towards the production of luxury items or other consumer goods which Morris thought unnecessary. A whole mass of people, he argued, were “occupied with ... miserable trumpery.”⁶⁴ This category also included work which was directed towards the “temporary palliation” of unemployment. In times of crisis, Morris observed, workers were often employed in “relief works” which meant, for example, “just digging a hole and filling it up again.” This was not useful work but a “make-believe of real work.”⁶⁵ Useful work enhanced the well-being of the community while at the same time meeting a genuine need. It produced goods which were fit for a particular purpose, not a passing fad. Because it enhanced the worker’s self-esteem, useful work also produced goods that were designed both to be durable and to give pleasure to their owners. Once all these conditions had been met, leisure would no longer be considered as relief from work. It would transcend labor and in time, and “people would rather be anxious to seek work than to avoid it.” Indeed, under socialism work would be characterized by “merry parties of men and maids.”⁶⁶

Having invoked Fourier to pursue his understanding of work as voluntary labor, Morris needed to reconcile this conception with his Marxist understanding of leisure as free time. He attempted to do so by arguing that, once necessary labor time had been reduced, socialist society could move towards the organization of unforced labor, or labor as art. He admitted that this further transformation (to what he called communism) was uncertain. It was possible that where

⁶² “Attractive Labour,” 94-95.

⁶³ “Art and Socialism,” *Collected Works of William Morris*, XXIII, 195.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ “Notes on Passing Events,” *William Morris Journalism: Contributions to “Commonweal” 1885-1890*, ed. Nicholas Salmon (Bristol, 1996), 136.

⁶⁶ “How We Live and How We Might Live,” *Collected Works of William Morris*, XXIII, 21.

labor was free, in the sense of being compelled by nature alone, work might nevertheless continue to be organized as it had been under capitalism. In “a free community” individuals might “work in the same hurried, dirty, disorderly, heartless way as we do now.” But his answer was that anybody would be content with this state of affairs. Such a partial revolution “would mean that our new-won freedom of condition would leave us listless and wretched.”⁶⁷ In any case, though the realization of unforced labor was not inevitable, Morris was confident that its prospect provided one of the strongest impulses for revolutionary change. The primary liberation of labor from capitalism, he argued, “would not leave ... art untouched” because “the aims of that revolution ... include the aims of art—viz., abolishing the curse of labour.”⁶⁸

On this optimistic note Morris anticipated a two-stage revolution in which the second stage would develop and improve on the first but not transcend it. Like Marx, Morris assumed that a certain amount of necessary production would remain even in communism and that the realm of freedom could only be realized once a residual amount of necessary labor had been performed. In Morris’s view the likely pattern of future development was for machinery to “go on developing, with the purpose of saving men labour, till the mass of the people attain real leisure enough to be able to appreciate the pleasure of life.” Once they had “attained ...mastery over Nature,” they “would soon find out that the less work they did (the less work unaccompanied by art...) the more desirable a dwelling-place the earth would be.”⁶⁹

He described the resulting organization of work and leisure in communist society in some detail. Individuals would spend most of their time engaged in some sort of voluntary labor. Anticipating the future and—once again—using himself as a model, he argued:

And I may say that as to that leisure ... I should often do some direct good to the community with it, by practicing arts or occupations for my hands or brain which would give pleasure to many citizens; in other words, a great deal of the best work done would be done in the leisure time of men relieved from any anxiety as to their livelihood, and eager to exercise their special talent, as all men, nay, all animals are.⁷⁰

True to his earliest beliefs, Morris continued to believe that this voluntary labor would remain largely unmechanized. Individuals could use machines if these suited their purposes, but in most cases workers would be able to perform their

⁶⁷ “Useful Work,” 116.

⁶⁸ “The Aims of Art,” *Collected Works of William Morris*, XXIII, 93.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ “How We Live,” 19.

work more easily without them. It was not, he argued, “the making of a real work of art that takes so much ingenuity as the making of a machine for the making of a makeshift.”⁷¹

While individuals could pass the majority of their time in voluntary work, in communist society some periods would be reserved for necessary labor. In some respects Morris’s ideas about the organization of this work were vague. For example, he did not specify whether a part of each day would be given over to this work or whether it would be organized in irregular periods. Similarly, he did not decide whether the work would be organized by rote or whether it would simply be performed by volunteers. But however it was organized, he did not believe that the existence of necessary labor would be either particularly onerous or difficult to organize. For one thing there would be very little of it. Communism would abandon all those tasks which were “artificially fostered for the sake of making business for interest-bearing capital.”⁷² This residual amount of necessary labor would also be performed very easily. None of it would be “extracting on mental capacity,” and since it entailed the “minimum of responsibility on those engaged in it,” it did not require any particular training.⁷³ Moreover, much of it could be done with the aid of machines. Whilst machinery was not suitable for voluntary labor, it could relieve the burden of necessary work. Admittedly, in commercial society, Morris argued so-called “‘labour-saving’ machines ... really ... reduce the skilled labourer to the ranks of the unskilled.” But in “true society” he suggested that these same “miracles of ingenuity would be for the first time used for minimizing the amount of time spent in unattractive labour.”⁷⁴

Morris’s picture of communist society has often been described as utopian.⁷⁵ The elements of the picture that he took from his understanding of work and leisure support this view. His was an Arcadian vision. Workers might sometimes labor in the new factories, but they would no longer be found in such high concentrations as capitalism demanded. As the mode of production changed, so too would the cities; and much of the existing infrastructure would collapse. Instead of being forced to live in a “horrible muck-heap” like London, individuals would inhabit a “few pleasant villages on the side of the Thames.” Similarly, where they now had to travel in haste by rail, in the future they would have more time to indulge themselves and “travel in a tilted waggon [*sic*] or on the hindquarters of a donkey.”⁷⁶

⁷¹ “The Society of the Future,” *Artist, Writer, Socialist*, 461.

⁷² Morris and Bax, *Socialism From the Root Up*, 614.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ “Useful Work,” 117.

⁷⁵ See K. Kumar, “News From Nowhere: The Renewal of Utopia,” *History of Political Thought*, 14 (1994), 133–43.

⁷⁶ “The Society of the Future,” 461.

Clearly this vision can be, and has been, criticized for its lack of realism. Yet the problems arising from Morris's understanding of communism go further than this. Many arise from the contradictions of his understanding of attractive labor. Notwithstanding his confidence that the organization of leisure as free time would give way to the realization of voluntary labor, or labor as art, in the end Morris was unable to reconcile his two conceptions of work and leisure. The tension between the two is shown both in his ambiguous attitude towards machinery and in his estimates of the amount of work communists would be required to perform. Morris made no attempt to develop a coherent position on the mechanization of production and maintained that it could be avoided in pleasurable pursuits whilst still being used to diminish irksome duties. But he was aware that the existence of both voluntary and necessary labor in communism threatened to saddle individuals with an intolerable burden. Considering the organization of labor in socialism, he questioned:

So, you see, I claim that work in a duly ordered community should be made attractive by the consciousness of usefulness, by its being carried on with intelligent interest, by variety, and by its being exercised amidst pleasurable surroundings. But I have also claimed, as we all do, that the day's work should not be wearisomely long. It may be said, "How can you make this last claim square with the others?"⁷⁷

Part of Morris's inability to provide a satisfactory answer to his own question stemmed from the high priority he gave to art and his tendency to equate necessary, forced labor with all non-artistic tasks. Sometimes the results were comic: examples of "necessary and usually repellent [*sic*] work" included "scavenging, sewer-cleaning, coal-hewing, midwifery, and mechanical clerk's work."⁷⁸ Not all of these jobs are obviously unpleasant, but even if they were, his dismissal of all non-artistic work contradicted his Fourierist assumption that all labor was attractive to some personality types. It also artificially increased the categories of necessary labor that Morris believed communists would be compelled to perform.

Even if Morris had revised his idea that art held the key to voluntary labor, his acknowledgement that some necessary labor would remain in communism points to two more intractable problems. The first concerns the dynamic of socialist transformation. In some ways, Morris's predicament was similar to Marx's. He, too, relied on two separate dynamics of development to explain the transition from one form of work to another. While the liberation of mankind from necessary labor was underpinned by the development of productive forces, inde-

⁷⁷ "Useful Work," 116.

⁷⁸ Morris and Bax, *Socialism From the Root Up*, 614.

pendent of human control, the organization of voluntary labor was based on an exercise of will. Though Morris was confident that class struggle would lead to the abolition of capitalism, he could not show how or why the workers would be able, by exercising their will power, to direct socialism's development at the moment of their liberation. The convergence between Morris and Marx on this issue was not coincidental. Morris was adopting a Marxian theory of development in an effort to show that labor in communism could be made as attractive as Fourier had suggested. Though Morris seemed to have been unaware of the influence, Marx in his turn had also been influenced by Fourier's ideas; and although Marx's view of history was, arguably, less deterministic than Morris's, he was no more successful in reconciling his early Fourierist ideals with his later understanding of the development of economic forces than Morris.⁷⁹

The second problem concerns the division of labor in socialism. Unlike either Marx or Fourier, Morris's capacity to reconcile his ideal of voluntary work with his notion of necessary labor was confounded by his uncompromising hostility to this division. For Marx and Fourier the division was not in itself something to be deplored. Though both attacked its operation in capitalism and argued that it stifled expression and creativity, they both also agreed that in socialism it would help ensure that individuals would be able to vary their occupations and develop their human capacity to the full. In short, for Marx and Fourier the abolition of the division of labor actually implied its extension, in concert with the abolition of exploitation; the decline of specialization consequently held the key to socialist solidarity and the development of interdependence. As Paul Meier notes, Fourier argued for "the division of labour...carried to the ultimate in order to provide each sex and every age with suitable occupations."⁸⁰ Similarly, Marx argued in *Capital* that "Modern Industry necessitates variation of labour, fluency of function, [and] universal mobility of the labourer."⁸¹ Though in its capitalistic form, division prevented workers from taking advantage of the range of tasks available, in communism the development of industrial production promised to "replace the detail-worker of to-day" with one "ready to face any change of production, and to whom the different social functions ... are but so many modes of giving free scope to his own natural and acquired powers."⁸²

Morris's position was very different. His love of art led him to argue that the abolition of the division of labor must mean its eradication and a return to specialized labor.⁸³ Instead of celebrating modern industry for the range of tasks it

⁷⁹ Isaiah Berlin, *Karl Marx* (Oxford, 1983⁴), 95-96; also David McLellan, "Marx and the Whole Man"; Tom Bottomore, "Socialism and the Division of Labour," *The Concept of Socialism*, ed. Bhikhu Parekh (London, 1975), 62-71; 154-66.

⁸⁰ Meier, *Marxist Dreamer*, I, 183

⁸¹ Marx, *Capital*, 489.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 490-91.

⁸³ See Gregory Claeys, *Citizens and Saints: Politics and Anti-Politics in Early British Socialism* (Cambridge, 1989), 49-58.

would enable future workers to undertake, he maintained an attachment to the realization of a pre-capitalist division: the example of the carriage-makers was stamped on his vision. Indeed, in his later writings he explicitly drew on the idea of medieval production as a model for socialist organization. Within the medieval guilds, he argued, “there was but little division.” Individuals had learned their crafts “from end to end.” Work had been performed “leisurely and thoughtfully,” it “developed the workman’s whole intelligence,” and it allowed each “freedom for due human development.”⁸⁴ Morris admitted that any attempt to try to revive such conditions of labor and to graft them on to the body of capitalism was futile.⁸⁵ Yet he still maintained that the medieval handicrafts provided an important model of organization. Medieval artists had attempted to “destroy the curse of labour by making work the pleasurable satisfaction of our impulse towards energy, and giving to that energy hope of producing something worth its exercise.”⁸⁶ Communists had an identical aim. In Morris’s view they sought to reestablish work on the basis of a craft-specialism rather than encourage the development of limitless diversity. In *Socialism From the Root Up*, for example, he argued that certain kinds of art had fallen foul of a division which had divided the “maker of the ornament” from the “designer of the ornament.”⁸⁷ Under communism Morris expected that these two roles would again be united in one person.⁸⁸

Fourier and Marx faced the difficult task of showing how the existing division of labor could be perfected and made compatible with an idea of free labor. Morris’s problem was even more severe: to demonstrate how the development of capitalist methods of production in socialism was compatible with the return to specialization. In the end Morris not only formulated two separate ideas of work and labor but, equating voluntary labor with art, reinforced the distinctions between the two by associating them with two entirely different methods of production. This formulation undermined his own argument that individuals could divide their time in communism between necessary tasks and pleasurable pursuits. The time spent in necessary labor would either increase as a result of the abandonment of the division of labor and the mechanization it supposed, or workers would continue to be compelled to perform dismal divided tasks at the cost of their creativity and Morris’s craft ideal.

Yet for all its weaknesses, Morris’s conception of the division of labor in communism was one of the most original aspects of his thought, and it offered an integrated view of human development and creativity. Morris did not con-

⁸⁴ “Art Under Plutocracy,” *Collected Works of William Morris*, XXIII, 176.

⁸⁵ “Hopes of Civilization,” 77-78.

⁸⁶ “Aims of Art,” 91.

⁸⁷ Morris and Bax, *Socialism From the Root Up*, 616.

⁸⁸ See also his “Artist and Artisan as an Artist Sees It,” *Political Writings*, 276-79.

sider that his desire to overcome the existing division of labor through the reestablishment of craftwork would stifle creative expression. In his view individuals were more concerned to exploit their primary talents than they were to explore ever new avenues of expression. In 1891 he argued that

the Socialist claims art as a necessity of human life ... and he claims also that in order that his claim may be established people shall have every opportunity of taking to the work which each is best fitted for; not only that there may be the least possible waste of human effort, but also that that effort may be exercised pleurably. For I must here repeat what I have often had to say, that the pleasurable exercise of our energies is at once the source of all art and the cause of all happiness: that is to say the end of life.⁸⁹

The idea of creativity which this idea supports was very different from the one offered by either Marx or Fourier. Whereas they suggested that the key to human development lay in the pursuit of variety, Morris believed that individuals should develop themselves within a particular field. On occasion his views appear extremely conservative. In *News From Nowhere*, for example, when Guest quizzes old Hammond about the tendency of women to wait on their menfolk Hammond asks in response: “don’t you know that it is a great pleasure to a clever woman to manage a house skillfully, and to do it so that all the house-mates about her look pleased, and are grateful to her?”⁹⁰ Yet, however Morris perceived the sexual division of labor, there is no reason to assume that women would be required to perform such traditional work against their will. In his vision the attractiveness of labor depended on the development and realization of social roles, not their transcendence. But individuals would be able to invest their being in their labor. And to do so they would, like Morris himself, have to follow their own promptings and desires.

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⁸⁹ “The Socialist Ideal,” *Collected Works of William Morris*, XXIII, 260.

⁹⁰ *News From Nowhere*, 60.