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William Morris: Art, Work and Leisure – Dr Ruth Kinna

William Morris's most important contribution to British socialist thought is often said to be his elaboration of a plan for a 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 the utopian novel News From Nowhere, was inspired by a variety of principles,² but perhaps its most notable feature was the demand that labour be made attractive. 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

¹ E. P. Thompson, William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary, 2d ed., (New York, 1976), 682.

² On the principles of Morris's conception of socialist organisation see G. D. H. Cole, A History of Socialist Thought, vol. II, Marxism and Anarchism 1850-1890, (London, 1974), 414-24; F. McCarthy, William Morris: A Life For Our Time, (London, 1994), 584-88; P. Meier, William Morris: The Marxist Dreamer, tr. F. Gubb, vol. II, (Sussex, 1978), 288-394; A. L. Morton, The English Utopia, (London, 1978), 202-24; Thompson, Romantic to Revolutionary, 682-98.

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 organisation of labour in socialism have attracted a considerable amount of attention. Most scholars have argued that his ideas were underpinned by two distinct concerns: his hostility to the effects of industrialisation and his opposition to the division of labour. 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 which keeps the operative virtually chained to a single repetitive task."⁴ Though both aspects of Morris's thought have generated scholarly interest, the first has attracted more attention than the second. A. L. Morton preferred to examine Morris's attacks on the effects of industrialisation in order to counter the impression that Morris was anti-modern or that his socialism required a return to pre-mechanised methods of production.⁵ Others have argued, more positively, that the proposals Morris made for the reorganisation of industry and for 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

³ J. Drinkwater, William Morris A Critical Study, (London, 1912), 198-99. For another early appreciation of Morris's contribution to the problem of work and leisure see Paul Bloomfield, William Morris, (London, 1934).

⁴ McCarthy, Life For Our Time, 356-7.

⁵ See especially Morton, English Utopia, 217-9.

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

a precursor of green theory.⁷ By contrast, Morris's views about the division of labour have not been seen as either controversial or distinctive. In some accounts, his ideas are straightforwardly compared Marx's.⁸ Others suggest that his understanding of the division of labour was hazy. Paul Meier, for example, argues that Morris was unclear about the problems that the division of labour raised and that he only discussed it in a very general way.⁹ Both these approaches mistakenly emphasise the separateness of the two elements in Morris's thought and the relationship between his critique of industrialisation and the division of labour has been neglected. I will argue that it is this relationship and not the two respective parts, which holds the key to Morris's demand for the realisation of attractive labour.

Morris integrated his ideas about industrialisation and the division of labour 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 heavily influenced by Fourier as well as Marx. The two led him to conceptualise the relationship in two distinct ways. In the first he contrasted work with leisure and suggested that attractive labour required the reduction of necessary labour time. In the second he identified work with leisure and defined attractive labour as the exercise and expression of human creativity. As will be seen these two

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

⁸ J. Lindsay, William Morris: His Life and Work, (London, 1975), 348; A. L. Morton, "Morris, Marx and Engels," in History of the Imagination Selected Writings of A. L. Morton, ed. M. Heinemann and W. Thompson (London, 1990), 300-303; Thompson, Romantic to Revolutionary, 690.

⁹ Meier, Marxist Dreamer, 357.

conceptions were not easily reconciled. The first led Morris to argue that the realisation of attractive labour was dependent upon the division of labour and the increase in productivity which it fostered. The second convinced him that attractive labour required a change in working practices and that its realisation 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 his contribution to late nineteenth century socialist thought.

Morris started to write about the relationship between work and leisure and the idea of attractive labour in the late 1870s and early 1880s, a few years before his turn to socialism. Like most social issues, Morris's first considerations of this question were 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 with his friend, the architect, Philip Webb. Whilst Burne-Jones persevered with his painting, Morris developed his new interest in parallel with his literary career. In 1860, two years after the publication of his first collection of poetry, The Defence of Guenevere he moved into the Red House in Bexley Heath. Discovering that he could not find manufacturers who were able provide suitable furnishings, Morris disciplined himself to work in accordance with his motto 'if I can' and

provide his own.¹⁰ Mocking his one time student, Dante Gabriel Rossetti suggested that a better maxim would 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 the starting point for his analysis. In the articles collected together in Hopes and Fears for Art he identified two motivations for his work. 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 labour 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

¹⁰ J. W. Mackail, The Life of William Morris, vol. I, (London, 1912), 148-9; McCarthy, Life For Our Time, 166.

¹¹ W. Morris, "The Prospects of Architecture," Hopes and Fears for Art, vol. 22 of Collected Works of William Morris, (London, 1992), 142.

¹² W. Morris, "Making the Best of It", ibid., 82.

¹³ Morris, "Prospects of Architecture", 142.

work was seen as a necessity then leisure could be thought of as non-work or free time. Alternatively, if it was considered as pleasure, then leisure could be thought of as an extension of work, or voluntary labour. 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 labour - to the first. Free time spent inactively, he claimed, was work's least important reward. Admittedly, his poetry 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 emphasised 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; the second, desire, paralleled his love of art. Individuals, he argued, worked in order to live. But even though work

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

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 labour 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 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 that work was both necessary and that it met a human desire. Individuals, he argued, had to

¹⁶ W. Morris, "The Art of The People", Hopes and Fears, 42-3.

¹⁷ Ibid., 45.

¹⁸ Ibid., 33.

labour 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 labour. When he looked forward to the future organisation 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 he re-evaluated the importance of free time and began to concede that periods of rest were as necessary to all workers as their labour was. In contrast to his original discussion, he accepted that one of the rewards for labour 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

¹⁹ W. Morris, "Useful Work versus Useless Toil", Signs of Change, vol. 23 of Collected Works of William Morris, (London, 1992), 98.

²⁰ Ibid., 107.

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, he defended both of them simultaneously. On the one hand, recognising the stressfulness of labour, he contrasted work with leisure and argued that leisure as free time was labour's reward. On the other, maintaining the pleasure to be derived from work, he defined leisure as voluntary or unforced production, comparable with labour and the fulfilment of desire.

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 maximisation of free time

²¹ Ibid., 99.

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 labour.

Morris had started to move 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 labour simply in order to provide for their own needs, still less because they wanted to. They were they were driven to labour 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 labours, 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

²² Morris, "Prospects of Architecture," 141.

²³ Morris, "Making The Best of It," 115.

²⁴ W. Morris, "The Beauty of Life," Hopes and Fears, 66.

²⁵ Morris, "Prospects of Architecture," 150.

commercial society, workers could not possibly work freely for their employers because they had become subject to a strict division of labour. 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 pleasure from his labour, Morris insisted that he would never have chosen to undertake such a huge range of work had it not been for the division of labour. 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 specialisation. In this sense, he argued, the division of labour 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 labour. It condemned the majority to piece work and deprived him of skilled craftsmen to help him in his labours.

After reading Marx, Morris refined these ideas. Exploitation, he now argued, had its roots in the pattern of property ownership in society. At 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 labour-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 labour

²⁶ Morris, "Making the Best of It," 82.

²⁷ Ibid., 115.

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. Firstly, having accepted that all labour 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 not simply driven by profit, but by the capitalists' desire to escape the natural necessity of labour. In Morris's view, it was not subsistence which forced the majority of workers to labour - 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 work, and make no pretence of doing any," the middle classes "work fairly hard, though with abundant easements and holidays, claimed and allowed," whilst the working class "work so hard that

²⁸ W. Morris, "Monopoly: or, How Labour is Robbed," Lectures on Socialism, vol. 23 of Collected Works of William Morris, (London, 1992), 248.

they may be said to do nothing else than work."²⁹

Morris's second point of clarification concerned the division of labour. In a further refinement of his ideas he distinguished between the specialisation he longed to be able to enjoy personally and the specialisation that he believed the majority of workers were forced to endure. The distinction corresponded to the difference between pre- and post- capitalist organisation. 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 organised by into particular trades.³⁰ Each worker - the wheelwright, coach-builder and upholsterer - worked "at his own occupation" and the labour 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 specialisation, which forced workers "to do day after day the same tasks, without any hope of escape or change" that Morris deplored.³²

²⁹ Morris, "Useful Work," 99.

³⁰ K. Marx, Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, vol. 1, tr. S. Moore and E. Aveling, ed. F. Engels, vol. 35 of Collected Works, (London, 1996), 341.

³¹ W. Morris and E. B. Bax, Socialism From the Root Up, in William Morris Political Writings: Contributions to "Justice" and "Commonweal" 1883-1890, ed., N. Salmon, (Bristol, 1994), 593-4.

³² Morris, "Useful Work," 112.

In his most important revision of his early work, Morris set his refined understanding of capitalism within an 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 had made two particular contributions to socialist thought: he had recognised 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." His 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 labour. And following Marx, he anticipated that this crisis would be conflictual and violent. He accepted that the tendency of capitalism was toward the increasing modernisation of industry and toward ever greater efficiency in production. On this basis, he also accepted that the rate of profit would inevitably fall over time and that capital would come to be concentrated in fewer and fewer hands. This 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:

... what is visible before us in these days is the competitive

³³ W. Morris, "The Hopes of Civilization," Signs of Change, 75.

commercial system killing itself by its own force: profits lessening, business 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 therewithal.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 modernising and sub-dividing the workforce into increasingly specialised 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

³⁴ Ibid., 79.

³⁵ W. Morris, "Dawn of a New Epoch," Signs of Change, 124.

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

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 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 labour. In short, there would be abundant free time and rest for all.

Whilst he drew on Marx to show how the further division of labour could reduce necessary labour time, Morris turned to Fourier for an insight into the ways in which the pleasure of voluntary labour could be enhanced. In particular, Fourier's work underpinned the distinction he sought to draw between labour that was free - in the sense that it was only forced by nature - and labour 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

³⁷ Ibid., 604.

³⁸ Morris, "Useful Work," 111.

³⁹ Morris, "Useful Work," 116.

account of his transition to socialism, Morris suggested that Mill had been largely critical of Fourier. In fact 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 Similarly, Morris thought that Fourier's social criticism was "valuable". But he came to this conclusion by a different route from Mill, interpreting Fourier's work largely in the light of the criticism Engels had made in Socialism Utopian and Scientific. In line with Engels's categorisation 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 capitalise on this insight and, like most early socialists, had mistakenly believed that he could realise his goals by voluntary agreement and by persuading others of the "desireableness of co-operation." In Morris's view, Fourier harboured the equally mistaken belief that he could construct a new artificial society from the "materials which capitalistic society offered."⁴²

However, whereas Engels had celebrated Fourier as a satirist, Morris was most impressed by Fourier's notion of attractive labour. Aware that Fourier's ideas about work were often ridiculed⁴³ he nonetheless argued that his "doctrine of the necessity and possibility of making labour attractive" was

⁴⁰ S. 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 Morris, "Hopes of Civilization," 74.

⁴³ W. Morris, News From Nowhere, vol. 16 of Collected Works of William Morris, (London, 1992), 91.

one that "Socialism can by no means do without."⁴⁴ Morris used his notion of attractive labour very much as he used Marx's theory of history: in order to clarify some of his own idea that the key to unforced labour lay in transformation of work through art.

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 craft work. Elsewhere, rather tortuously, Morris asked "what 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 labour through art depended on the extent to which work could be made intelligent. Accordingly, he defined intelligent labour as that which made the labourer's "work-hours pass pleasantly." Intelligent labour gave the worker "at least some control" over production.⁴⁷ Morris admitted that by contrast to imaginative labour, which granted the individual worker unrestricted freedom of expression, intelligent labour was only partly creative. But it still provided some scope for the

⁴⁴ Morris, "Hopes of Civilization," 73.

⁴⁵ Morris, "Art of the People," 42-3.

⁴⁶ W. Morris, "The Lesser Arts," Hopes and Fears, 23.

⁴⁷ Morris, "Prospects of Architecture," 145.

development of the worker's creativity. Moreover, like imaginative labour, 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 realisation of intelligent labour in the mechanisation 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, mechanisation was responsible for the "slavery of mind and body" and it was inimical to intelligent labour.⁵⁰ Indeed, it was the instrument through which the division of labour operated. Without this burden, workers would be set free from the division and the specialisation it imposed. Each would become,

a handicraftsman who shall put his own individual intelligence and enthusiasm into the goods he fashions. So far from his labour being "divided," ... 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

⁴⁸ Ibid., 143.

⁴⁹ W. Morris, "Art and the Beauty of the Earth," Lectures on Art and Industry, vol. 22 of William Morris Collected Works, (London, 1992), 166.

⁵⁰ Morris, "Prospects of Architecture", 149.

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 labour may have been affected by his own manufacturing experience. In 1881, Morris established new workshops in Merton Abbey, near London. This 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 it was impossible for his employees to work freely, as he wanted them to do so. It was, he told the American poet and essayist, Emma Lazarus, 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 this manufacturing experience and Fourier's work, Morris

⁵¹ Morris, "Making the Best of It", 115-6

⁵² W. Morris to E. Lazarus, in N. Kelvin (ed.), The Collected Letters of William Morris, vol. II, (New Jersey, 1987), 277.

⁵³ J. Leatham, William Morris: Master of Many Crafts, intro. E. LeMire, (London, 1994), 74.

significantly broadened the conditions necessary for the realisation of voluntary or unforced labour. 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 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 centres of

⁵⁴ W. Morris, "Attractive Labour," Political Writings, 94.

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

⁵⁶ Morris, "Attractive Labour," 94.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 96.

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 labour should be varied. This condition meant that all work would have to contain both a mental and a manual aspect. Throughout his life, Morris remained sceptical about the value of purely intellectual labour. 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 realised that he was fortunate to be able to combine his mental labour 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 labour 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 utilise 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 labour. In an ideal world, he argued,

⁵⁸ W. Morris, "Work in a Factory As It Might Be," in William Morris: Artist Writer Socialist, vol. 2, Morris as a Socialist, ed. M. Morris, (New York, 1966), 137.

⁵⁹ W. Morris, "The Reward of 'Genius'," Political Writings, 196.

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:

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 labour to be useful, by contrasting it with useless toil. He considered the uselessness of existing labour from two points of view. Just as Fourier had 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

⁶⁰ Morris, News From Nowhere, 173.

⁶¹ Morris, "Useful Work," 112.

⁶² Morris, "Attractive Labour," 94-5.

⁶³ W. Morris, "Art and Socialism," Lectures on Socialism, 195.

second category was largely found in 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 whilst, 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 labour and in time, "people would rather be anxious to seek work than to avoid it." Indeed, under socialism, work would be characterised by "merry parties of men and maids."⁶⁶

Having invoked Fourier to pursue his understanding of work as voluntary labour, Morris needed to reconcile this conception with his Marxist understanding of leisure as free time. He attempted to do so by arguing that,

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ W. Morris, "Notes on Passing Events," William Morris Journalism: Contributions to "Commonweal" 1885-1890, ed. N. Salmon, (Bristol, 1996), 136.

⁶⁶ W. Morris, "How We Live and How We Might Live," Signs of Change, 21.

once necessary labour time had been reduced, socialist society could move towards the organisation of unforced labour, or labour as art. He admitted that this further transformation (to what he called communism) was uncertain. It was possible that where labour was free, in the sense of being compelled by nature alone, work might nevertheless continue to be organised 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 nobody 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 realisation of unforced labour was not inevitable, Morris was confident that its prospect provided one of the strongest impulses for revolutionary change. The primary liberation of labour 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 realised once a residual amount of necessary labour 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

⁶⁷ Morris, "Useful Work," 116.

⁶⁸ W. Morris, "The Aims of Art," Signs of Change, 93.

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 organisation of work and leisure in communist society in some detail. Individuals would spend most of their time engaged in some sort of voluntary labour. 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 practising 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 labour would remain largely unmechanised. Individuals could use machines if these suited their purposes but in most cases workers would be able to perform their 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

Whilst individuals could pass the majority of their time in voluntary work, in communist society some periods would be reserved for necessary

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Morris, "How We Live," 19.

⁷¹ W. Morris, "The Society of the Future", Artist, Writer, Socialist, 461.

labour. In some respects, Morris's ideas about the organisation 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 organised in irregular periods. Similarly, he did not decide whether the work would be organised by rote or whether it would simply be performed by volunteers. But however it was organised, necessary labour would not be either particularly onerous or difficult to organise. 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 labour would also be performed very easily. None of it would be "exacting 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 labour, it could relieve the burden of necessary work. Admittedly, in commercial society, Morris argued that 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 that picture which he took from understanding of

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

⁷³ Morris and Bax, Socialism From the Root Up, 614.

⁷⁴ Morris, "Useful Work," 117.

⁷⁵ For a recent discussion of Morris's utopianism see K. Kumar, "News From Nowhere: The

work and leisure support this view. His was an Arcadian vision. Workers might sometimes labour 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

Clearly this vision can be, and has been criticised for its lack of realism. Yet the problems of Morris's understanding of communism go further than this. Many arise from the contradictions of his understanding of attractive labour. Notwithstanding his confidence that the organisation of leisure as free time would give way to the realisation of voluntary labour, or labour 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 mechanisation 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 labour in communism might threaten individuals with an intolerable burden. Considering the organisation of labour in socialism, he questioned:

Renewal of Utopia," History of Political Thought, (14), 1993, 133-43.

⁷⁶ Morris, "The Society of the Future," 461.

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 labour with all non-artistic tasks. Sometimes the results were comic: examples of "necessary and usually repellant [*sic*] work" included "scavengering, 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 labour was attractive to some personality types. It also artificially increased the categories of necessary labour that Morris believed communists would be compelled to perform.

Even if Morris had revised his idea that art held the key to voluntary labour, his acknowledgement that some necessary labour 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. Whilst the liberation

⁷⁷ Morris, "Useful Work," 116.

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

of mankind from necessary labour was underpinned by the development of productive forces, independent of human control, the organisation of voluntary labour 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 labour 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 labour in socialism. Unlike either Marx or Fourier, Morris's capacity to reconcile his ideal of voluntary work with his notion of necessary labour 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,

⁷⁹ I. Berlin, Karl Marx, 4th ed., (Oxford, 1983), 95-6. For a discussion of Marx's position see also D. McLellan, "Marx and the Whole Man" and T. Bottomore, "Socialism and the Division of Labour," in The Concept of Socialism, ed. B. Parekh, (London, 1975), 62-71; 154-66.

for Marx and Fourier, the abolition of the division of labour actually implied its extension, in concert with the abolition of exploitation; the decline of specialisation 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 labour must mean its eradication and a return to specialised labour.⁸³ Instead of celebrating modern industry for the range of tasks it would enable future workers to undertake, he maintained an attachment to the realisation 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

⁸⁰ Meier, Marxist Dreamer, vol. 1, 183

⁸¹ K. Marx, Capital, 489.

⁸² Ibid., 490-1.

⁸³ For a discussion of the historical antecedents of this views see G. Claeys, Citizens and Saints: Politics and Anti-Politics in Early British Socialism, (Cambridge, 1989), 49-58.

organisation. 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 labour 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 organisation. 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 re-establish 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 labour could be perfected and made compatible with an idea of free

⁸⁴ W. Morris, "Art Under Plutocracy," Lectures on Socialism, 176.

⁸⁵ Morris, "Hopes of Civilization," 77-8.

⁸⁶ Morris, "Aims of Art," 91.

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

⁸⁸ See also his discussion in "Artist and Artisan As An Artist Sees It," Political Writings, 276-

labour. 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 specialisation. In the end, Morris not only formulated two separate ideas of work and labour but, equating voluntary labour 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 labour would either increase as a result of the abandonment of the division of labour and the mechanisation 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 labour in communism was one of the most original aspects of his thought and offered an integrated view of human development and creativity. Morris did not consider that his desire to overcome the existing division of labour through the re-establishment of craft work 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,

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 pleasurably. 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 skilfully, 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 labour, there is no reason to assume that, in his communist society, women would be required to perform such traditional work against their will. In his vision the attractiveness of labour depended on the development and realisation of social roles, not their transcendence. But individuals would be able to invest their being in their labour. And to do so they would, like Morris himself, have to follow their own promptings and desires.

⁸⁹ W. Morris, "The Socialist Ideal," Lectures on Socialism, 260.

⁹⁰ Morris, News From Nowhere, 60.