What can we learn from
William Morris?

Stephen Coleman

One hundred years ago on 27 December 1984, William Morris, Belfort Bax, Eleanor Marx, Edward Aveling and a number of other revolutionary socialists resigned from the first ever Marxist party in Britain, the Social Democratic Federation, and formed the Socialist League which was committed, in the words of its Manifesto, to ‘advocating the principles of Revolutionary International Socialism’. Since his death in 1896 Morris has been associated principally with wallpapers, Romantic poetry and, insofar as his political vision is acknowledged at all, his utopian novel, News From Nowhere, is regarded as a quaint and eccentric communist scenario.

In the light of the profound strategic crisis which has inspired heated debate in recent years amongst those who claim to stand for socialism, there are lessons of value to be learnt from Morris’s political writings, speeches and activities. Of course, there are significant differences between the political environment of the 1980s and the 1880s. In 1884 British capitalism was in the midst of an unprecedentedly severe economic crisis; the earlier promises of liberal capitalism had given way to feelings of despair in the concept of perpetual radical progress. Only fourteen years before the formation of the League compulsory elementary education was introduced and workers were, by the early Eighties, beginning to read more than the turgid Scriptures and the machine instructions: cheap, pocket editions of radical writings were being mass-produced, Mechanics Institutes provided libraries and discussion classes for the proletarian autodidacts, the age of the self-taught philosopher was leading to an explosion in critical social thought. Disillusion with liberal capitalism, together with the rise of popular education, provided the impetus for the New Unionism of the mid-Eighties: trade unions comprising workers, women as well as men, young as well as old, unskilled combined with skilled, united in a wave of unprecedentedly successful militant strike action. The strikes gave hitherto unorganised workers an enormous sense of their own power; for Engels such spontaneous discontent was seen as the beginning of a process which, under the direction of Marxists, would result in social revolution. Whilst supporting the striking workers, Morris did not allow the enthusiasm of momentary success to overwhelm his awareness of the fact that ‘mere combination amongst the men, with no satisfactory ulterior aim, is not itself Socialism’.

*Stephen Coleman’s article was meant for the centenary of the founding of the Socialist League on 30 December 1884, with the formation of a Provisional Council, J. L. Mahon as Secretary, and a Manifesto drafted by Morris. The practical life of the League thus began in the New Year of 1885, the General Conference being held on 5 July. This issue of the Journal thus embraces that centenary, though we failed to mark the first.
What was ‘Socialism’ as far as the socialists of the 1880s were concerned? Nineteenth century British socialism was inspired by three intellectual sources, a consideration of which will not only enable us to see why and how Morris broke with them, but, more importantly for socialists of the 1980s, how the legacies of these strategic errors serve to confuse and distort the ‘socialist’ outlook today.

To begin with, Romanticism. Morris himself became a socialist as a result of the influence of the Romantic critics of industrial capitalism: men like Rossetti, Cobbett, Carlyle and Blake, the latter of whom wrote about the industrial capitalists who ‘Compel the poor to live upon a crust of bread... Smile when they frown, frown when they smile; and when a man looks pale with labour and abstinence, say he looks healthy and happy.’ Of all the Romantic writers Morris was most impressed by Ruskin, the thinker who best articulated the misery faced by the man of sensitivity who despised the ugliness of a social order in which the voracious desire to make profit was at the expense of human dignity and environmental beauty. But, despite their eloquently stated moral indignation, the Romantics could only find comfort in the unhistorical hope of reviving an idealised pre-industrial past; their Utopia comprised dreams of yesterday rather than visions for tomorrow. Ruskin described himself as ‘a violent Tory of the old school’ and confessed that he was ‘by nature and instinct conservative, loving old things because they are old and hating new ones merely because they are new’. William Cobbett too sought hope in a romanticised image of pre-Reformation England where ‘monks and nuns, who fed the poor, were better than sinecure and pension men, who feed upon the poor’.

Morris accepted the visions of the Romantics, but, in rejecting their conservative nostalgia, looked towards the integration of that which was best in the past in a transformed and realisable future. Morris realised that ‘it is as ridiculous to yearn for an original fullness as it is to believe that with this present emptiness history has come to a standstill’.

Unlike the Romantic critics, the Radicals saw change as being desirable and practical, but confined their ‘socialism’ to being a new way of running capitalism. Typical of such ‘socialist’ Radicalism was the Fabian Society, and typical of it was Sidney Webb who, on 14 January, 1886, decided to become a socialist and delivered a lecture to say why. ‘I call myself a Socialist because I am desirous to remove from the capitalist the temptation to use his capital for his own exclusive ends’ stated Webb. Seeing the role of socialists as being to ‘bring home to the monopolist the sense of his trusteeship’, Webb formulated a strategy, later to be embraced by the Labour Party, for persuading the exploiters of labour to run their system for the benefit of the exploited. Poor old Arnold Toynbee pleaded with the working class: ‘We have neglected you... we have wronged you; we have sinned against you grievously...; but if you will forgive us... we will serve you, we will devote our lives to your service....’, while Annie Besant enthused about schemes for state control of industry which Morris dismissed as being ‘State Socialism... in its crudest form’.

The programme of the Fabian Society advocated the ‘peaceful and expeditious path to Socialism, through such measures as Nationalisation of railways, Municipalisation of Ground Rents and industries connected with local transit, and with supply of gas and water in the towns’. After nearly a century of such ‘gas and water socialism’, might we
not learn something from Morris’s response to such reformism, written in June, 1886: ‘Those who believe that they can deal with capitalism in a piecemeal way very much underrate the strength of the tremendous organisation under which we live... it will not suffer itself to be dismembered, nor to lose anything which is its essence.’ Morris was right: after a century of radical reform, often presented in the name of socialism, it can be concluded that capitalism can be reformed in every way but for that which makes it unequal, oppressive, insecure and wasteful.

It was because Morris rejected attempts to reform capitalism that he, together with his comrades, parted from the Social Democratic Federation, which had adopted a minimum programme of palliative ‘Stepping Stones’. In *Art and Socialism* Morris asserted that ‘the palliatives over which many worthy people are busying themselves now are useless because they are but unorganised partial revolts against a vast, widespread, grasping organisation which will, with the unconscious instinct of a plant, meet every attempt at bettering the condition of the people with an attack on a fresh side’. The Socialist League’s Manifesto rejected ‘schemes of social reform’ and, providing a critique of events which were to occur after the League’s demise, dismissed ‘that State Socialism, by whatever name it may be called, whose aim it would be to make concessions to the working class while leaving the present system of capital and wages still in operation’. They will not be commemorating the centenary of the Socialist League this year in state capitalist Russia or China.

The League maintained that workers wanting socialism must take political power. But how? In considering Morris’s strategy for revolution, too much emphasis is placed usually upon the literary scenario presented in the chapter in *News From Nowhere* entitled ‘How The Change Came’. William Morris held no one dogmatic position regarding the value of parliament to those seeking to establish socialism. Certainly he opposed the use of parliament as a body to be joined by ‘socialists’ seeking to reform capitalism. This does not mean that Morris saw no possible use for parliament in the struggle for socialism, as has sometimes been suggested. In 1886 Morris argued that socialists could enter parliament, but only as ‘rebels’, and, in 1887, he wrote that ‘I believe that the Socialists will certainly send members to parliament when they are strong enough to do so; in itself I see no harm in that, so long as it is understood that they go there as rebels, and not as members of the governing body prepared by passing palliative measures to keep Society alive.’

Morris had his doubts about the dangers of socialists being active in parliament (rather different from the doubts of Labour leaders who fear the activity of ‘socialists’ outside parliament), but he never did so on the grounds that minority insurrection was a substitute for majority, democratic revolution. Opposing the Anarchists, Morris exposed the dangers of ‘riots carried out by men who do not know what Socialism is, and have no idea what their next step is to be if, contrary to all calculation, they should happen to be successful’. So Morris and the League (before it was taken over by Anarchists) recognised that there could be no socialism without mass socialist education.

Thus it was that William Morris rejected three traditions of social change: Romanticism, Radical Reformism and Anarchism. Socialists in 1985 are confronted by similar
strategies—ones which must be exposed to careful scrutiny and rejected. Like the Romantics, the advocates of the politics of ecological salvation, who seek to return to an earthly Earthly Paradise, without removing the social system which necessitates environmental ruin for the sake of commercial gain, must be rejected if we are not to succumb to the temptation of appealing rear-view visions. The Radicals who seek to humanise capitalism by passing it through the cleansing division lobbies of Westminster must be exposed as being no more than a statist, left-wing of capitalism. And those who follow in the footsteps of the Anarchists, who are planning to spring liberation upon the oppressed by surprise, must be seen as the architects of a brand of freedom in which the conscious emancipators become dictators over the supposedly emancipated. Without majority understanding, without ‘making socialists’ as Morris put it, there will be no socialism.

One hundred years ago there were those who claimed to stand for the socialist transformation of society who regarded as ‘utopian’ or ‘impossibilist’ the very notion of winning a majority of workers to the cause of their own emancipation from capitalism. After the failure of the French Socialist Workers’ Party in the elections of October 1881, Paul Brousse led a Possibilist split, declaring that ‘We prefer to abandon the “all at once” tactics practised until now, tactics which generally resulted in achieving nothing at all.’ Expressing ideas which well reflected his education at Eton, the pompous ‘Marxist leader’, H.M. Hyndman, asserted that ‘a slave-class cannot be freed by the slaves themselves. The leadership, the initiative, the teaching, the organisation, must come from those who are born into a different position, and are used to train their faculties in early life.’ H.H. Champion, another saviour of the proletariat, standing on the podium of theoretical wisdom which the SDF had erected for itself, declared that ‘Given a great mass of uncultivated, ignorant, emotional human beings, stirred by unrest, discontent, and a sense of injustice, but without trained minds to reason back to causes . . . they either follow the few who know their own minds or act from unreasoning instinct.’ William Morris had no time for such elitist nonsense; but for nearly a century now Socialism has been a place at which workers have been told they will arrive when they have been wise enough to follow the best leaders and to do so with vigour. If we learn nothing else from Morris the socialist, surely it is time that we discovered that followers can reach many destinations, but never the point of self-liberation.