
The Individualistic Socialism of William Morris and Edward Carpenter: When Angel-winged Utopia Becomes an Iron-clad Political Project

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I. Introduction

When Friedrich Engels and Karl Marx chose to define two categories of Socialism in *Socialism, Utopian and Scientific* (1880), little did they know that their dividing strategy would work for so long. Utopian Socialism, also called “doctrinaire” by Marx, was supposed to be a sort of proto-specimen of Scientific Socialism, decisive in the defining of the movement but archaic and unaware of the historical process. Utopian scholars (Michèle Riot-Sarcey¹ and Gregory Claeys² for instance) have recently argued that Utopian Socialism was not something designed by and for dreamers, thus rendering Engels’s classification obsolete, but no one had yet given a different name to that branch of Socialism which included Fourier, Saint Simon and Owen according to both German philosophers. We believe that those precursors and their heirs can be described as Individualistic Socialists, who considered the individual and its development as paramount conditions to a better world. Owen’s legacy but also Fourier’s are incarnated namely in William Morris and Edward Carpenter. In Britain and in France, there is definitely a philosophical tradition which started with the Enlightenment, encompasses the Socialism that Engels defined as “utopian” and runs through the twentieth century. While doing some research on that movement, it appeared that the common denominator between altogether very different thinkers was their attention to the individual. Contrary to Scientific Socialism, which emphasizes the greater good of the community and subordinates man to a superior cause, Individualistic Socialism warns against such a foible and tries to adopt an approach based on the human being himself. The phrase may sound oxymoronic but we think that the antithesis

sums up fairly well the contradiction that arises when the good of everyone is targeted without hampering people's liberties.

Moreover, albeit familiar with Marx's writings, William Morris and Edward Carpenter did not find their whole inspiration in them, but in John Stuart Mill's. Their particularly sharpened sensitivity led them to refuse a poverty that they observed from afar and to get involved more or less concretely to try and change things. Thus, when they started analyzing their society and its flaws, they considered that art was one of the surest means to obviate the situation, an idea which earned them criticism. They were often considered as elitists or dreamers by their coevals, such as Engels, who brought Morris into disrepute by picturing him as a contemplative romantic who was unfit for politics. It is true that it could seem absurd to demand that all men should take advantage of an artistic environment whatever their salary or that the most insignificant object may be wrought like an artifact. However, we now know that mitigating the obnoxious effects of the Industrial Revolution with more industry, more growth and more progress did not have the expected result, on the contrary.

The object here is to see how Carpenter and Morris fit the definition of Individualistic Socialists and how this trait is visible in their lives and writings. We will therefore concentrate first on a definition of what Individualistic Socialism is and in what way it is associated with John Stuart Mill but also with the "utopians", Owen and Fourier. Our concern is also to demonstrate that two of the characteristics of Individualistic Socialism, a concern for hedonism and Art, were definite priorities for Morris and Carpenter. The division between collectivism and Individualistic Socialism is about the role of the individual but the roots of both trends are also different if we realize how great a part nature had in Morris's writings as well as in Carpenter's. Far from desiring a return to Merry England and pre-industrialization, both men hoped for a rationalized use of machinery and a spiritual return to nature followed by uninhibited relations between the sexes.

II. William Morris and Edward Carpenter: Individualistic Socialists

In an essay entitled *How I Became a Socialist*, William Morris described how he became certain that Socialism was a necessary change after reading John Stuart Mill's pages on the subject. However, he declared having been converted against Mill's intention, Mill

being considered at the time as one of the theorists of liberal economy. Those essays, now gathered under the title *On Socialism*, were a collection of articles published in *The Fortnightly Review* which endeavoured to sketch the Socialist movement without endorsing any opinion, favourable or antagonistic. Nonetheless, contrary to what Morris seemed to think, Mill was not adverse to Socialism, far from it, and even seemed sympathetic to the ideas exposed in his articles. Studying the case of Fourierism, he appeared to be favourably impressed by Fourier's ideas as well as Considérant's. The Utopian Socialists, as they would be called, gave Mill the impression of having found the social answer to his own philosophical frame of mind. Indeed, Mill was an individualist, adamant on the fact that it would be the greatest of shames not to make the most of man's idiosyncratic capacities for the best and for society's well-being. In his understanding of individualism, there was no question of thinking about the self only but it was important to remember that man was not only an atom in society, always and solely working for a whole.

That interpretation of individualism was also adopted by William Morris, who made clear the difference between vulgar selfishness and philosophical individualism. At the end of 1884, Morris founded the *Socialist League* and wrote a *Manifesto* along with Belfort Bax to explain the principles of that organisation. He insisted on the opposition between an individualism related to capitalism which represented for him a form of selfishness, on the one hand, and philosophical individualism, which was defined as taking an interest in the individual's well-being, on the other. William Morris has often been labeled a Marxist and he is still considered as such by Marxist organisations in spite of some reassessments. Of course, one has to admit that when the founder of the Arts and Crafts movement started being involved in politics, he belonged to self-proclaimed Marxist organizations. Indeed, when he decided to become part of a Socialist group, he chose to join Henry Hyndman's *Social Democratic Federation*.

Starting with the SDF meant, for Morris, to acquaint himself with Marxist ideas. According to Hyndman, that first step was paramount for anyone wanting to speak on Socialism: "You must read Marx or you can't argue" (Eshlemann, 1971: 200). Morris decided to read the great theoretician whose ideas were said to be so fundamental. We know the throes of confusion he experienced whilst he was reading *Kapital*, translated into English for the first time in 1887 and which he probably read in French (the 1872-1875 version).

Those happily-confessed troubles contributed to Engels's view of Morris as a dreamer. The distance that Morris felt to Marx's abstract and abstruse writings was made clear one day, as he was addressing a crowd of SDF comrades assembled in Glasgow. Someone asked him whether he accepted Marx's theory of surplus-value, and Morris answered: "To speak quite frankly, I do not know what Marx's theory of value is, and I'm damned if I want to know. (...) And it does not matter a rap, it seems to me, whether the robbery is accomplished by what is termed surplus value, or by means of serfage or open brigandage" (Thompson, 1955: 356).

If the Socialism favoured by the writer-designer did not have the good fortune of being appreciated by Engels, the reason may lie in the fact that the two Socialisms were radically different. Engels did not have anything against Morris, but he wrote in a letter to Laura Lafargue that Morris was sentimental and incapable of controlling himself:

Morris is a settled sentimental Socialist; he would be easily managed if one saw him regularly, a couple of times a week, but who has the time to do it, and if you drop him for a month, he is sure to lose himself again. And is he worth all the trouble even if one had the time? (Morris, 1885-1888: 353)

William Morris had very early shown some reluctance towards any systematisation and towards the State Socialism desired by the Fabians, for example. Decentralized Socialism and the developing of a strong individuality was what Morris yearned for. He advocated a federation of communes à-la-Proudhon and indeed pictured an extremely decentralized society in *News from Nowhere*. The novel's patriarch tells the reader about Morris's inspiration: "Fourier, whom all men laughed at, understood the matter better" (Morris, 1891: 85). Charles Fourier and Mill are partly responsible for Morris's arrival on the political scene and his conversion to "practical socialism". Two years before his death, Morris told in an article published in *Justice*, the *Democratic Federation's* journal, how he became a socialist and mentioned Mill's writings on Fourier and on Socialism: "Those papers put the finishing touch to my conversion to Socialism" (Morris, 1894: 34).

Similarly, Carpenter sought to attain the "great individuality" (Carpenter, 1885: 29) that Morris also longed for. Hence his admiration for Walt Whitman, whom he considered as an unsurpassable artist, someone who had realized his personality without paying heed to what one should do or conform to. For Carpenter, the most natural situation for man was to

have a free individuality. Unfortunately, his understanding of individualism, just as positive and community-oriented as Morris's vision of Socialism, won him the reputation of a misfit in the movement. It was all the more surprising for Carpenter definitely had a sense of the political, but it was linked to the individual without being underrated for all that. He summed it up in his autobiography, *My Days and Dreams*:

[Socialism] has set before itself the ideal of a society which, while it accords to every individual as full scope as possible for the exercise of his faculties and enjoyment of the fruits of his own labour, will in return expect from the individual his hearty contribution to the general well-being. (Carpenter, 1916: 127)

Obviously, different conceptions of Socialism shared the political scene at the end of the nineteenth century and, for instance, the Fabians' idea of the movement was miles away from Carpenter's. The latter was entirely satisfied with the fact that the movement had been pocketed by no one and was fueled by all the different groups, a reality that some saw as a drawback. To Carpenter, it was a definite boon which meant a renewal of values, a real foundation of society on different bases and not just the short-term goal of political representation in Parliament.

Edward Carpenter was so anti-systemic that he was sometimes considered an Anarchist. He was not and never followed the same road as the Anarchists, he was even criticized by them for his nuanced understanding of politics. However, he was diffident of the State: "his political libertarianism led him to suspect it as inherently coercitive" (Rowbotham, 2008: 307). In his autobiography, he also expressed his belief that the aim of Socialism was to realize the Anarchist ideal: to do without the State in order to replace it with what Morris himself called public consciousness and what Carpenter defined as "the voluntary and instinctive consent and mutual helpfulness of the people" (Carpenter, 1916: 127). The formation of a new individual with new behaviour was what moved him and what defined his struggle as a Socialist, like William Morris. Sheila Rowbotham describes both men's political efforts as very similar: "Both men's politics arose from a longing for free and equal human relations and both imagined these as enabling individuals to realise aspects of themselves denied under capitalism" (Rowbotham, 2008: 84). Hence their interest in federalism and their admiration for Prince Kropotkin's alternative to traditional economy. Morris and Carpenter agreed on the association between industry and agriculture.

III. Socialist Artists and Hedonists

In a book called *Angels' Wings*, Carpenter expressed his views on Art, namely on literature, painting and music. He drew a parallel between three artists: Millet, Whitman and Wagner, and explained why he thought they deserved his attention. To him, they were simply three great individualities. Carpenter was seduced by the extraordinary potential in every individual: "there is something original, authentic, in every individual – that which makes him different from every other in the universe" (Carpenter, 1898: 118). Like John Stuart Mill, he found that the great difficulty was in being able to think outside preconceived judgments, outside tradition. And still, like Mill, he believed in the importance of the individual impetus in Art. Like Individualistic Socialism, which stems from a great, developed and happy individual who works for himself and the community, similarly "the greatest artist is one whose point of view is intensely his own, and yet so large and broad that it reaches down and includes the general view" (*idem*, 131-132). That is how the artist can be a Socialist, namely because what Carpenter believes in is an "Art of the People", to use Morris's phrase. Both artists were far from being elitists, in the negative sense that the term usually has, and were "at the farthest pole from the elaborate study of artificial effects and the 'grand style'" (*idem*, 4). That was the reason why Carpenter was seduced by Walt Whitman, because the American poet identified himself with objects and people. As ridden with guilt as Morris was to be all his life – both men could not stand being rich and felt the injustice deeply – Carpenter never turned a deaf ear to the people's sufferings and never pursued an ideal of elitist art, aimed only at beautifying rich people's lives: "By the attentive ear the cry of starving children can be heard though the rustles of silk and clink of glasses" (*idem*, 213). Just as Individualistic Socialism means developing the individual and enabling man to become what his personality dictates, Art's aim is to do the same: "When the time at length arrives for life itself to become lovely and gracious, Art as a separate thing from actual life will surrender much of its importance, the sense of expression of Beauty will penetrate all our activities" (*idem*, 22). So every field of life should be artistic, including labour: "Manual work, once become spontaneous and voluntary, instead of servile – as it is today – will inevitably become artistic" (*idem*, 219). Carpenter's wish was to live in Nowhere, Morris's utopia, in a world where work had become the supreme way of realizing one's personality and devoting oneself to pleasurable tasks.

Indeed, Morris's strength resided in his artistic personality, the keystone to all his work, in literature, design and politics. His utopia was inspired by art, and his vision of it. According to William Morris, art was moribund at the time of Victoria but could definitely know the fate of the phoenix. Morris believed it would then bring solace and a reason to live to all human beings. Morris insisted on a eudaemonistic politics whose major instrument and end was art. In a conference entitled *The Socialist Ideal: Art*, Morris reminds his readers that, for Socialists, art is not elitist in the least inasmuch as any manufactured object should be a work of art. According to him, the capitalist, the "commercialist", as he called industrialists, makes a difference in manufactured objects between those he considers as art and the others which do not need to have any artistic qualities.

Morris aimed at happiness as an end for humanity; happiness which he linked to pleasure. When the workers own the means of production, Morris explained, they will be able to concentrate on a beautiful artistic production. Similarly, with more leisure, they will have more desires and so a desire for beautiful things which will be salutary for art. Hence the reason why Morris's first lectures on art were mostly about the link between art and Socialism, so eager was he to awaken the masses to necessary beauty through a simple and functional art. In a letter to Thomas Horsfall who wanted to establish a Workman's Model Cottage, Morris explained his vision of art: "beauty and convenience, not show and luxury, in such matters, should be every man's rule" (Morris, 1881-1884: 36).

Art is also an excellent test for equality. Like Fourier, who declared that the state of a civilization could be measured in the light of the condition of women's lives, Morris uses the same measure with art. Apollo's protected domain being a luxury in Great Britain, it shows for Morris that his country is not a real democracy. Art should be part of the necessary things to be enjoyed by each and every citizen: "The Socialist claims art as a necessity of human life which society has no right to withhold from any one of the citizens" (Morris, 1891). An art used to measure the state of equality in a society, a simple and functional art; to all that Morris adds an art which is not afraid of revealing its kinship with nature and dares to go back to its roots.

IV. Countryside Socialism versus Factory Collectivism

When the ugliness of his surroundings proved too hard to bear, Morris found great solace in his walks in the countryside and his activities of amateur gardener. When reading *News from Nowhere*, one becomes aware of the importance of nature in Morris's eyes. Not only does the reader feel projected in a pre-Industrial Revolution world but it is also a prelapsarian universe as the relations between the sexes seem as natural as they are presumed to have been before the Fall. De facto, it is post-revolutionary, as the reader learns from old Hammond, who is the narrator's contact with the past, that in the nineteenth century violent riots led to the utmost confusion and then to the peace of Nowhere. In literary utopias, nature is usually tamed and fitted to be used by human beings and the latter mostly live in cities with gardens but no wild nature. Nowhere is the exception. The inhabitants have also decided to produce and consume what they need only. It all seems natural and logical to a twenty-first century reader – more than ever aware of environmental problems – but that Morris, the son and product of a century which fiercely believed in endless progress, should advocate it in his novel is a great deal more surprising. The consequence is a capacity to enjoy things without any complexes. If craftsmen make beautiful objects and garments, the inhabitants do not see why they should not wear them. They adorn themselves with bright cloths, smoke the best tobacco contained in a snuffbox which is so beautiful that the narrator is astonished, and they drink excellent wines. Sounding like a connoisseur, the narrator mentions a Steinberg³ that the narrator enjoys along with his charming hosts: “for if ever I drank good Steinberg, I drank it that morning” (Morris, 1891: 36). The people of Nowhere drink Steinberg and Bordeaux wines, they know how to make strangers welcome, they are aesthetically-minded; all things which show that, revolution or not, the inhabitants of Nowhere have not forgotten about what is essential or, at any rate, what for Morris was necessary to well-being.

When Sheila Rowbotham tried to pin down the difference between Carpenter and Morris, here is how she described the founder of Morris & Co: “Morris was a bon viveur who loved wine, beautiful objects, rich textures and old books” (Rowbotham, 2008: 84). Indeed, Carpenter followed a different diet and way of life, as he did not like to be surrounded with particularly luxurious objects and ate little; anyone next to Carpenter would look like a riotous hedonist. Morris did lead a very different life from the men of his fortune

at the time: there was nothing wasted at the Morris's and most of his money was destined to finance the different socialist journals and even sometimes the organisations themselves. Morris's pleasures were considered by him as simple and natural because they were linked to the love of Beauty. The "rich textures" mentioned by Sheila Rowbotham are not at all out of place in the world of Nowhere: it really is perceived as luxury only by people who are deprived of beauty in their daily lives but to those who have become craftsmen mindful of their work's quality it is only normal to walk around dressed as a "Middle-Age gentleman". E. P. Thompson summed up extremely well this balance between luxury and simplicity which ruled Morris's life: "Simplicity did not imply deprivation of the senses, but the clearing away of a clutter of inessentials" (Thompson, 1996: 704).

Morris's attitude towards machinery is that machines have proved to be labour-saving, meaning that they do not alleviate the pain of labour but simply replace men, stealing their jobs from them. It saves manpower instead of saving efforts. In an ideal society, machines would be man's slaves, and certainly not the contrary, like in *News from Nowhere*, where "All work which would be irksome to do by hand is done by immensely improved machinery" (Morris, 1891: 280). Going back to nature also signifies finding the source of natural relationships between the sexes. In *News from Nowhere*, marriage means two people cohabiting and has lost the restrictive and confining characteristics it had in the nineteenth century. Divorce has disappeared and unions can be made and unmade at one's own will. Free love does not prevent Nowhere's inhabitants from having emotional issues to deal with, but for Morris his system is still the best. Nowhere perfectly symbolizes a return to nature, the disappearance of private property and a society free from prudery in which women blush from pleasure and not from a false modesty imposed by a self-righteous world.

All that could not but appeal to Carpenter, whom George Bernard Shaw nicknamed *the Noble Savage*. Indeed, E. M. Forster wrote of him: "What he wanted was *News from Nowhere* and the place that is still nowhere, wildness, the rapture of unpolluted streams, sunrise and sunset over the moors" (*apud* Rowbotham, 2008: 442). Like Morris, Carpenter tried to resist industrialization in a rational way, not for the sake of it but because he did not find the landscapes around him, the black chimneys of Sheffield and its polluted atmosphere, to be the ultimate panacea.

His way of life definitely embodied a return to nature, perhaps a bit exaggerated, like every reaction to an extreme situation. Nature for Carpenter was the epitome of individualism, his chosen philosophy: “How sacred, how precious is the individual! Not in humanity only, but in all her forms, is it not true that Nature is individual to her very fingertips?” (Carpenter, 1898: 127). Carpenter, like Morris, saw nature not only as individual; it was also a sane return to healthy relationships between the sexes: “The redemption of Sex, the healthy and natural treatment of it in Art, is one of the greatest works any artist of to-day has before him to carry out” (*idem*, 80).

Risking the tautology, Carpenter considered that sex was the union of all beings just as art was, and he drew the conclusion that sex was art. Case made... The free, sane acceptance of the human body being the key to the art of the future, there lay in that programme the direction towards which Socialism should have headed forward. Carpenter’s writings on sex are well-known but the link with politics is rarely underlined. We think, however, it is the only way to understand Edward Carpenter fully. He was not a political campaigner who wrote about sex but someone who was interested in sexuality because it held a key to the new life that could eventually be brought about by Socialism: that is the reason why he thought it was a good thing that different organizations preached for Socialism because the ideas were all the more abounding.

V. Conclusion

Uniting body and soul, constructing happy individuals respectful of others and developing real personalities, such were the aims of Individualistic Socialism. Karl Marx did not want to stifle the individual and he really tried to alleviate the workers’ sufferings, but, on the other hand, one can find in his writings an attitude to the individual which could not have been further from Morris or Carpenter’s ideas, among others. In *The Class Struggles in France*, he wrote:

Thus, while *utopia, doctrinaire Socialism*, which subordinates the whole movement to one of its elements, which puts the cerebrations of the individual pedant in place of common, social production, and above all, wishes away the necessities of the revolutionary class struggles by petty tricks or great sentimental rhetoric (...) the proletariat increasingly organises itself around *revolutionary Socialism*, around *Communism*, for which the bourgeoisie itself has invented the name of Blanqui. (Marx, in the *Human Rights Reader*, 1997: 326)

In spite of Marx and Engels's attempts at stigmatizing what they called Utopian Socialism, the good fortune of Individualistic Socialism was that its advocates never felt that they belonged to any party and therefore escaped dogmatism. Unfortunately, they were cursed for the very same reason because, contrary to what Edward Carpenter seemed to think, Socialism could not but become a unified party in order to represent a counter-power and a political alternative. Thus, Edward Carpenter's ideas went down in history insofar as they concerned ways of life and sexuality but not really politics. And Morris is still, for some, a medievalist and a dreamer. Nevertheless, the link they established between daily life and politics, the care they had for the individual inside society and the way they celebrated every part of a man's existence makes their thoughts more topical than ever.

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Notes

¹ Cf. Riot-Sarcey's *Le Réel de l'utopie: essai sur le politique au XIXème siècle* (1998).

² Gregory Claeys contends that the differentiation between Scientific and Utopian Socialism "is no longer tenable in light of modern scholarship", *Citizens and Saints, the Rise of Early British Socialism* (2002), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press [1989], p. 8.

³ Steinberger, in Hattenheim, takes its name from the old Steinberg monastery and is a very famous German wine appellation.