

JAMES TOCHATTI: A LITTLE-KNOWN MORRIS SOCIALIST COMRADE

Stephen Williams and Florence Boos



James Tochatti, 1896

Although William Morris was by all accounts the central and guiding force of the Socialist League (1885-90), he was far from alone, and his decisions took into account those he worked and socialized with in the Hammersmith Branch and elsewhere. To his credit, he valued the opinions of those from many backgrounds and attempted to make the Socialist League a model for egalitarian governance. The re-editing of Morris's *Socialist Diary* (forthcoming) has enabled a more complete account of several of the socialist and anarchist activists with whom he worked quite closely. The following biographical sketch introduces one such lifelong campaigner, the Hammersmith anarchist communist James Tochatti.

A merchant tailor, lecturer on reformist and quasi-scientific topics, and a lifelong campaigner for communist anarchism, James Tochatti (1853-1928) was born in Ballater, Aberdeenshire, the son of a police constable Joseph Tochatti and his wife Jane Cormack. By the mid-

1860s his family were living in Leeds, where his mother was a teacher in the Railway Street Ragged School. James worked briefly as a stationer (1871 census) before becoming a tailor, and moved to Shoreditch, east London sometime in the mid-1870s. There he became active in the National Secular Society and also developed an interest in phrenology and physiognomy; his lecture on 'Our faces, and how we come by them,' was given at the Freethought Institute, Walworth in September 1877 and on several later occasions (*South London Chronicle* 14 September 1877, p. 3). Still in east London at the time of the 1881 census, Tochatti described his occupation as 'memory lecturer and phrenologist.' In 1882 he moved west across London to Hammersmith, where his campaigning to reduce the working hours of shop assistants resulted in arrest on a charge of riotous conduct (*Illustrated Police News*, 7 October 1882, p. 3). He was also active in the Hammersmith Radical Club, where he met members of the Hammersmith SDF, and in January 1885 became a founding member of the Hammersmith branch Socialist League.

Tochatti was a frequent outdoor speaker for the branch, served as branch delegate to the 1886 League Conference, and contributed news notes and articles to *Commonweal*. Much in demand as an outdoor speaker and lecturer, Tochatti spent two weeks in East Anglia in early 1887 addressing meetings on nearly twenty occasions. Successful factory gate meetings at Colman's mustard works in Norwich were followed by League meetings at their regular sites, where he often spoke for more than an hour to the hundreds present. A number of formal events in large halls were also organized for Tochatti's visit, including one at the Gordon Hall where he lectured on "Objections to Socialism," the meeting concluding with the singing of Morris's "No Master" and the "Marseillaise." (*Commonweal*, 12 March 1887, p. 83). In November 1888, along with Morris, Cunningham-Graham, David Nicholl, and Sparling, he spoke at a joint Socialist Democratic Federation/Socialist League meeting in Hyde Park held to commemorate the murdered Chicago martyrs and protest the closure of Trafalgar Square to demonstrations (*Lloyds Weekly News*, 18 November 1888, p. 8).

Doubtless boosted by the successful London dock workers strike in the summer of 1889, labourers and hammermen at John Issac Thornycroft's shipbuilding yard in Chiswick, west London struck against low wages in September of that year. Immediately organized into the National Labour Federation trade union, the strikers were guided by John ('Jack') E. Williams, a prominent

Social Democratic Federation member, and Tochatti, who served as union branch president. With the 'unskilled' workers solid in their action, attention turned to ensuring that the craftsmen still at work did not undertake any of the strikers' duties. Williams and Tochatti secured these assurances and the support of craft trade unions who also witnessed some of their own members joining the strike in solidarity. Tochatti appealed to the strikers to remain united in their action, telling them that this was how the power of workers could be demonstrated. He warned against relying on parliamentary means to achieve their ends because it "does not matter whether a Conservative government or a Liberal government was in power, the weekly wages of those he saw around him were the same, so that the only thing for them to do was to combine and organise."

Demonstrating a link with and knowledge of Morris's artistic network, Tochatti appealed to the employer John Thornycroft—whose parents had both been artists, and his brother Hamo, a sculptor, a friend of Morris and a prominent member of the Arts and Crafts movement—to follow his 'artistic instincts' by which 'he should naturally rebel against the brutalization of his workmen by poverty.' (*West London Observer*, 21 September 1889, p. 5). Repeated company attempts to intimidate the strikers failed, as did 'compromise' pay offers. With urgent orders on the company books and the strikers growing in confidence, the company settled the dispute within three weeks, agreeing to the union's demand of a 2 shilling increase in the weekly wage of the lowest paid labourers.

Tochatti continued his activism through the 1890s and beyond. In the early 1890s he served as organizing secretary of the United Shop Assistants' Union and was twice arrested on charges of creating 'disturbance' during protest demonstrations (*West London Observer*, 6 September 1890, p. 3; *Morning Post*, 17 October 1891, p. 2). *The London Times* reported his remarks to an audience of about 1000 at an anarchist meeting held in conjunction with an 1892 Hyde Park May Day demonstration in support of an eight-hour day:

When they saw that the average wage of a working man in this country was 18 shillings per week, and that the average age of the working man 29 years, while the masters live in luxury to the age of 55, surely it was time to fight for their just rights. (Cheers). The eight hours demonstration was a farce. With the machinery of the present age the masters could get as much work out of a man in

eight hours as seven years ago he [sic] got in twelve. He maintained that the workers could obtain an eight hour day at once if they resorted to the simple method of stopping at that time. (Hear, hear). It was no use cringing and asking Parliament to grant this or that boon; the workers had the power in their own hands, and they were fools if they did not use it.' (2 May 1892, p. 7)

By the 1891 census Tochatti was listed as a merchant tailor in Hammersmith, with a shop on Beadon Road, W, described in *Liberty* as "Carmagnole House." As one of the Socialist League's anarchist communist members Tochatti remained in the League after Morris's departure. *Freedom* of the early 1890s indicates that he spoke frequently, and *The Scotsman* reported that he had been physically attacked by thugs when speaking on behalf of anarchism at the 1894 annual May 1st labour demonstration (2 May, p. 7). In the same year he spoke to the Aberdeen Anarchist Communist Group 14 October on 'Human Nature and Anarchism' and on 15 October on 'Economic Conditions and Anarchism' (*Aberdeen Evening Express*, 13 October 1894, p. 3). In 1896 he served as secretary of a group protesting the exclusion of anarchists and 'non-political' delegates from the London International Socialist Workers and Trade Union Congress.

In the 1890s anarchist and socialist debates over tactics, Tochatti favored moderation. *Commonweal* reported that at a meeting held in November 1892 at the South Place Institute to commemorate the deaths of the Chicago anarchists, Tochatti had urged verbal restraint:

Tochatti objected to the wild language. We must not indulge in wild talk about dynamite and pillage (cries of dissent). As for dynamite, he was as ready to use it as any man, when the time came but any talk of its present use was madness. (Oh!) If we want to learn how to preach anarchy let us study the speeches of our Chicago comrades, and learn to explain our noble principles in the same clear and plain fashion. (*Commonweal*, 21 November 1891, p. 150).

Tochatti's enthusiastic defence of the imprisoned anarchist David Nicoll is recorded in the December 1892 *Freedom*, p. 1. Despite his strong support of Nicoll he must have had reservations about some of the public statements of his fellow anarchists, for in January 1894, disturbed by the incendiary tone of *Commonweal*, he began *Liberty*, considered by Quail an unusually open-minded anarchist journal (p. 204). When in late 1893

Tochatti asked Morris for a contribution, Morris replied suggesting that Tochatti repudiate propaganda by violence, and added:

However, I don't for a moment suppose that you agree with such 'propaganda by deed'. But since I don't think so, that is the very reason why I think you should openly say that you don't. (12 December 1893, Kelvin, ed. *Letters of WM*, 4:113, WM Gal, J357)

Tochatti did provide this repudiation, and Morris contributed two essays to *Liberty*, 'Why I Am a Communist' (February 1894) and 'As to Bribing Excellence' (May 1895).

Tochatti published his "Reminiscence of William Morris," in the December 1896 issue of *Liberty* (p. 123), arguing that 'It is a great mistake to suppose that Morris changed his views with regard to parliamentary action. In a comparatively recent lecture at Kelmscott House he expressed his belief that the people were going that way, but he added with emphasis, "Don't make the mistake of thinking this, Socialism.'" He noted that 'Like his friend Walter Crane, he helped all, being too great a man to be sectarian,' and promised more reminiscences and an account of Morris's letters to him on the topic of Socialism. This was the final issue of *Liberty*, however, and these reminiscences did not appear. Some years later Tochatti offered his memories of Morris at a gathering to commemorate Morris's death held at the William Morris Hall, 32 Upper Mall, Hammersmith, at which Walter Crane and Herbert Burrows also spoke, and Cunningham-Graham sent a letter to be read (*West London Observer*, 11 October 1907, p. 6).

Despite *Liberty's* closure in 1896, however, Quail (pp. 273-74) states that in the early 1900s Tochatti was again a frequent speaker, and his tailoring store in Hammersmith became a meeting place for anarchist discussion. In 1909 his premises were searched by the police as part of an attempt to find incriminating evidence against Guy Aldred, who had recently been imprisoned for a year for publishing the anti-imperialist newspaper *Indian Sociologist*; Tochatti complained of "a detective outrage more suited to Russia than England," and London Labour Member of Parliament Will Thorne raised the issue of possible police misconduct on his behalf in the House of Commons (*The Scotsman*, 29 September, 1909, p. 10). The December 1912 *Freedom* announced Tochatti's 'Lantern Lecture' on 'Agriculture' at the Morris Studio, Adie Road, Hammersmith; in 1913 he urged an audience of omnibus workers who had waged a suc-

cessful strike, 'irrespective of the victory which they had won, to press forward and obtain fresh concessions. They were, he said, in a class war' (*West London Observer*, 26 September, 1913, p. 13); and on 12 October 1914, he was reported as lecturing in Bristol on 'The Attitude of Revolutionists towards the War' (*Freedom*, November 1914). John Mahon's *Harry Pollitt*, London 1976, pp. 65-66, describes Pollitt's visits to his shop in 1918 and after, where according to Pollitt's unsympathetic account he had

defended conscientious objectors on socialist grounds, disputing with Tochatti, who alternatively favoured folded arms and shooting the officers. Sometimes they had first-hand news from Russia by someone returning from there.

In 1877 Tochatti married Louisa Susan Kaufman, of German descent, who had a fine singing voice used to perform at benefit events as "the socialist songstress" (*West London Observer*, 5 October, 1889, p. 6). *Commonweal* reported in October 1889 that at a meeting in support of the Thornycroft strikers held on Acton Green and addressed by Tochatti and Williams, "Louisa Tochatti opened proceedings with the revolutionary song 'When the loafers are somewhere down below'" (5 October, 1889, p. 318). [Composed by C. W. Beckett and published as "Song for Socialism" in the 17 March 1888 *Commonweal*, this song continued to be used in labour movement circles into the early twentieth century.]

Louisa appears several times in the Hammersmith SL minutes as present at meetings; on 10 February, 1888 she reported to the branch that at a recent meeting in Parish Hall, Chelsea she had sold 24 *Commonweals*, and she is mentioned in the 7 September 1889 *Commonweal* as collecting money for the London dock strikers. According to Libcom.org, she was also remembered as singing revolutionary songs at open-air meetings in the 1900's. By 1881 the couple had three children; among these was Moncure Douglas Conway Tochatti (Moncure Daniel Conway was a freethinker and minister at the South Place Chapel 1864-65 and 1893-97), who was born in Hammersmith in 1887. Moncure Tochatti, who later changed his surname to Galdino at the request of a friend and benefactor, moved with his family to Dorset, where James himself died in the winter of 1928, only months after Louisa's death in 1927.

James Tochatti's near half century of activity as an anarchist communist straddle the formative years of the British socialist movement. While it is true that many of the ideas held by Tochatti left him on the margins as

the movement gravitated towards labourism, he never faltered in his advocacy of a future communist society that in the words of his comrade William Morris, ‘had no consciousness of being governed.’ That he was able to sustain his position without recourse to sectarianism, rancor, belligerence or menace earned him the respect of many, including Morris.

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KRISTEN ROSS’S *COMMUNAL LUXURY:
THE POLITICAL IMAGINARY OF THE
PARIS COMMUNE.*

London: Verso, 2015. 156 pages.

Florence S. Boos

Kristin Ross’s concise but elegantly written treatise, *Communal Luxury*, assesses Morris’s contributions to late nineteenth-century British socialism from a comparative and international perspective. Ross argues that the Paris Commune and three of its nineteenth-century interpreters—Peter Kropotkin, Elisée Reclus, and William Morris—enter “vividly into the figurability of the present” (p. 2), as characterized by modern populist resistance movements such as Occupy and Black Lives Matter. In her meditation on the antecedents and results of this seventy-two-day experiment in worker-controlled government, Ross identifies the actions by which women, educators, and artists refashioned a hierarchical social structure into an internationalist, egalitarian democracy. For readers less acquainted with French than English nineteenth-century history, it is arresting to read of the pioneering efforts of Elizabeth Dmitrieff (organizer for the Women’s Union), Eugène Pottier (educator-advocate of a “polytechnic,” multi-faceted education), and the artist Gustave Courbet (founder of the Federation of Artists, which abolished the distinction between “signed” and “unsigned” [lesser] arts). Morris appears throughout Ross’s account as a British advocate of similarly egalitarian views, formed during a period in which he visited Iceland and translated medieval Scandinavian sagas. She notes that Morris found in Icelandic history an opening of possibilities, a “parable of the days

to come” (p. 75), a quality also reflected in the events of his poetic epic on the Paris Commune, *The Pilgrims of Hope*, with its added “shocking characteristic: it happened in the present” (p. 76). Her account of émigré life in London emphasizes the extent to which solidarity and shared reflection on the Commune’s meanings characterized the uprising’s survivors, whose later theories were born from action rather than the reverse. Similarly Morris believed that the new society, like the Commune, would embody shared life on a human scale: “the secret of happiness lies in the taking of interest in all the details of life, in elevating them by art” (p. 113).

Viewing the sundry factions of 1880s British and émigré socialism in an eclectic light, Ross summarizes, “What they shared was a view of human living that left little or no place for either the state or party politics, the nation or the market” (p. 108). She also defends the lack of programmatic purity that characterized Morris and his associates: “what looks to be theoretical confusion may well be an astute and well-thought-out political strategy” (p. 111). Most important, “fellowship” for Morris meant kinship between persons freed to engage in creative labor, living in harmony with the variety of nature. For those who were influenced by the spirit of the Commune, Ross argues, “Nature’s repair could only come about through the complete dismantling of international commerce and the capitalist system. A systemic problem demanded a systemic solution” (p. 139).

It is refreshing to read a modern commentator who, instead of revisiting the electoralism versus anarchism debates of the 1880s, argues for the relevance of Morris’s program for “making socialists,” the Abensourean “education of desire” that must accompany any political change. This seems a message expressly geared to the moment, as many people despair of making immediate changes in entrenched or undemocratic political systems and redouble their efforts at local initiatives and issue-directed coalitions. At times, the comparative method of *Communal Luxury* can slightly flatten the nuances of Morris’s thought in order to posit resemblances with Kropotkin and Elise Reclus, a scientist and geographer, respectively, but in compensation, Ross’s relative disregard of the English political context for Morris’s ideas in favor of more internationalist, theoretical readings emphasizes their internal coherence and intellectual force. *Communal Luxury* deepens our understanding of Britain’s “socialist imaginary” through its suggestive account of its affinities with other European revolutionary movements.