

# Encyclopedia of Modern Political Thought

Morris, William

Contributors: Florence S. Boos  
Editors: Gregory Claeys  
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William Morris (1834–96), poet, artist, essayist, socialist, designer, translator, tapestry maker, pioneer of book design, and radical ecologist, has influenced the development of nonparliamentary socialist thought for more than 120 years. An unwavering believer in simplicity of life, abolition of “masters,” and shared possession of (and responsibility for) all the means of production, Morris argued tirelessly that artistic endeavors of all sorts—but especially “the lesser arts”—were ethical tests and measures of the value of such production. Animated by these ideals, he also strove to act on his other lifelong conviction: that reliance on half-measures and parliamentary maneuvers undermined socialist ideals of “fellowship” and fetishized political power as a form of property and a corrupt (and corrupting) end in itself.

By way of avocation—so to speak—Morris was also one of the nineteenth-century’s most active architectural and artistic preservationists. An agnostic haunted by the unsung accomplishments of anonymous artists and artisans, in 1877, he founded the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (“Anti-Scrape”), which saved hundreds of churches and other ancient architectural creations from demolition under the guise of “restoration.”

Born March 24, 1834, in Walthamstow, Morris was the third child and eldest son of Emma Shelton and William Morris Sr., a London banker and mine-owner who died when Morris was 14. Morris studied at Marlborough College (1848–51) and Exeter College, Oxford (1853–56), and briefly apprenticed in the office of the Gothic revival architect G. B. Street before he married Jane Burden, an Oxford stableman’s daughter, in 1859. In 1861, he and several close friends formed the design and decorating firm of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner and Co. (later Morris and Co.), but he also devoted many of his apparently boundless energies from 1856 to 1877 to art and literature.

As a student, for example, he edited and wrote for the short-lived *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* (1856). As an artist, he illuminated more than 200 book manuscripts and designed hundreds of images and patterns for stained glass, textiles, and wallpapers for the firm. And as a translator, he prepared renderings of Old Norse texts such as *The Story of Grettir the Strong* (1869), the *Völsunga Saga* (1870), and *The Saga Library* (1891–96) in collaboration with the Icelandic scholar Eiríkur Magnússon. As a gifted and prolific poet, finally, Morris wrote and published *The*

*Defence of Guenevere* (1858), *The Life and Death of Jason* (1867), *The Earthly Paradise* (1868–70), *Love Is Enough* (1873), *Sigurd the Volsung* (1876), and *Poems by the Way* (1891). Directly or indirectly, these works reflected the preoccupations mentioned earlier: respect for prior cultures, anger at historical injustice, and admiration for acts of stoic resistance, unrequited kindness, and redemptive solidarity.

Morris found new ways to honor these ideals when he became a left-Liberal activist in the antiimperial “Eastern Question Association,” one of several organizations formed in the late 1870s to oppose military interventions in Turkey and the Balkans. His active engagement in the first mass antiwar movement in British history deepened his [p. 564 ↓ ] distrust of mainstream political parties, strengthened his contempt for British imperialism, and kindled in him a newly awakened respect for working-class organization as a liberating political force.

As an active socialist speaker and writer from the early 1880s until his death in 1896, Morris drafted and delivered more than 100 essays and lectures devoted to art, labor, socialism, communism, architecture, and the aforementioned “lesser arts,” some of which appeared in *Hopes and Fears for Art* (1882) and *Signs of Change* (1888). In his early, Ruskinian essays and speeches, he argued plainly and conversationally that the industrial order of nineteenth-century Britain had destroyed the environment, traduced natural human aspirations to make things of worth and value, and effectively reduced men to machines of mass consumption as well as of mass production. A truly just order, by contrast, would enhance workers’ lives, “giv[e] us pleasure in our work,” and create real added value in the form of an “art made by the people for the people as a joy to the maker and the user” (as quoted in Morris 1910–15, Vol. 22, 5 and 80).

In 1884, Morris helped found a new organization called the Socialist League, which he helped sustain for six years as an indefatigable writer, speaker, and editor of its weekly newspaper *Commonweal*. Ill health began to abridge his activities in 1890, and he devoted much of his energy in the last six years of his life to the Kelmscott Press, a venture in book design that is still studied as a landmark in the history of fine books.

In his many essays in the mid- and late-1880s and 1890s, Morris denounced what he called “commercial war,” a perpetual state of overt violence, covert coercion, and relentlessly forced overproduction of shoddy “goods” shoved down workers’ throats,

luxury “goods” that served no human needs, and destructive “goods” used to sustain the commercial and territorial ambitions of the British empire. In “Useful Work Versus Useless Toil” (1884), for example, he argued that:

In place of this perpetual war, he advocated communism, a state in which all would do the work they can, and all would have access to the means of production:

Especially important to Morris was the *quality* of human work, for “all labour, even the commonest, must be made attractive” (as quoted in Morris 1910–15, Vol. 23, 111). It should, that is, be varied, unforced, undertaken in conditions of adequate rest, and grant a measure of freedom and creativity to each worker “since . . . the main pleasure of life is the exercise of energy in the development of our special capacities” (as quoted in Morris 1910–15, Vol. 23, 137).

For *Commonweal*, which he edited from 1885 to 1890, Morris drafted three major literary works in serial form: *The Pilgrims of Hope* (1885), a tribute to the Paris Commune; *A Dream of John Ball* (1886), a memorial evocation of the Peasant’s Revolt of 1381; and *News from Nowhere, or An Epoch of Rest, Being Chapters from a Utopian Romance* (1890), a utopian vision of a future society that became his most-cited literary work.

Predictably, his contemporaries Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels considered Morris a “sentimental socialist” (Engels to Laura Lafargue, as quoted in Thompson 1976, 471). But there was nothing naive about Morris’s remark, to a correspondent on December 30, 1887, that

Here and elsewhere, Morris articulated a deeply held broad-left insight—passed down from generation to generation—that “socialism” is an ethic, while dogmatic Marxism is a positivist pseudoscience. Put somewhat differently, his artistic gifts, [p. 565 ↓] egalitarian ideals, and faith in the social value of the “lesser” arts gave a pragmatic as well as aesthetic turn to his personal view of “the Social-Revolution” and gave voice to the ethical ideal—also passed down from generation to generation—of counter-cultural resistance to a smug, philistine, and overwhelmingly hypocritical commercial oligarchy.

Morris's original family had made "a deal" of money from a strip mine in Devonshire that extracted arsenic after its copper gave out. Possibly mindful of this, he understood, personally and *avant la lettre*, that forced labor and environmental squalor—whether imposed by Roman imperatores, medieval liege lords, corporate oligarchs, or their state-capitalist counterparts ("masters" all)—always, and by definition, "take the hindmost":

If the man who drafted the passages just quoted was a "sentimental socialist," it was not in his understanding of economics, but in his refusal to acknowledge human desires to dominate and susceptibilities to inhumane behavior. His views of town planning, architecture, people's history, environmentalism, fostering of arts and crafts, and pleasurable fulfillment in labor have inspired many social-democratic "palliative measures." And his outcries against jingoist groupthink, market-driven imperialism, and manipulation of the poor with tainted bread and shoddy circuses have made a deep and enduring contribution to an understanding of what a truly "socialist" society would have to be.

**See also** [Christian Socialism](#); [Communism, Varieties of](#); [Marx, Karl](#); [Nineteenth-Century Political Thought](#); [Owen, Robert](#); [Property, Theories of](#); [Ruskin, John](#); [Socialism](#); [State, Theories of the](#)

Florence S. Boos

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