

# Thompson, William Morris and Ecosocialist Tasks

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AS I LOOK back on E.P. Thompson's work and the impact it had on me, his biography of William Morris — *William Morris, From Romantic to Revolutionary* (1977) — stands out brighter than all other texts, including his deservedly acclaimed *The Formation of the English Working Class*.

It was the genius of William Morris to prefigure and express many concerns that today must be part of an ecosocialist synthesis, and it was the genius of E.P. Thompson to detect the originality and relevance of this 19<sup>th</sup> century poet, craftsman, designer, conservationist and socialist for the present.

Ecosocialism today, as the term indicates, implies a fusion of ecological and anti-capitalist perspectives. To be truly meaningful, this encounter must be not a mere mechanical addition, but a transformative integration: neither partner can or should emerge the same from the encounter.

Socialism can no longer be conceived as just the liberation of the existing productive forces from the fetters of capitalist social relations, nor an expansion of consumption as defined by them, nor as an acceleration of quantitative growth, but rather as a redefinition of quantitative into qualitative growth, and a remaking of existing forms of production and consumption, with the extraordinary scientific, technological and engineering effort that this implies.

To what extent this is already present, either implicitly or explicitly, in the work of Marx himself is, of course, a point of considerable debate. I, for one, think it is present, in many cases explicitly.

Think of the aspiration in the 1844 *Manuscripts* to a fuller life of the senses beyond the reduction by capitalism of all enjoyments to the joys of possession; of Marx's description of the "rift" provoked by capitalism in the "metabolic interaction" of humanity with nature (and the duty of socialism to restore it); of the more specific denunciation of the destruction of the soil by capitalist agriculture; of the warning by Engels that lording over nature as a conquering army rules a subjugated people will bring unexpected and destructive consequences; and of the admonishment that no generation owns the planet and its resources but only holds them in trust for those that will follow, to mention just a few examples.

The writings of John Bellamy Foster have explored this extensively. Yet it must be admitted that much of this lay buried in Marx's work until the ecological movement came along. The fact that Foster and others have had to dedicate so much effort to unearth "Marx's ecology" is an indication of this. But independently of where we stand on that debate, the practical conclusion stands: Marxism must insist that labor's struggle against capital cannot but have an ecological dimension, without which it cannot claim to be the bearer of a full break with the exploitive and destructive consequences of capitalism.

But this is a two-way street: The ecological movement needs to recognize that capital's inherent tendency to enclose, commodify and consequently turn all aspects of nature within its reach into a source of private profit places it in irreparable contradiction with natural rhythms and cycles.

Ecology speaks of material limits that we must take into account, but capitalist accumulation is limitless. This refers to fundamental longterm tendencies, beyond the daily misuses of the environment by capital in the pursuit of an extra ounce of profit.

To the extent that the ecological movement fails to recognize this and to extract the logical anticapitalist conclusion, to that extent it turns its back not only on socialism but on the environment it seeks to protect. The destiny of the labor movement is as central to the future of ecologism as it is to the future of socialism.

### **William Morris's Message**

Where does William Morris come into this picture? It was not the relations of exploitation at the center of capitalism that first fueled Morris's indignation, but the base material surroundings it created: its "sordid, aimless, ugly, confusion" in which "the pleasure of the eye was gone from the world."

In his essay "How I became a socialist," Morris proclaimed that "Apart from the desire to produce beautiful things, the leading passion of my life has been and is hatred of modern civilization..." Here, "civilization" refers not only to capitalist social relations but to many of the physical structures and formations erected by it: the extreme polarization of city and country, the degraded urban landscape, the shoddy individual buildings, the poisoning of water and air.

The consummation of such a civilization would be "a counting-house on the top of a cinder-heap." This aversion to the assault of industry on all the senses, on nature and on the past built environment fueled Morris's attempts to protect or revive endangered skills (book printing, decorative arts) or structures (he founded the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings).

Yet he went beyond this, to understand that behind this bulldozer "civilization" stood the basic tendencies of capitalist production. The "counting-house" at the top of the growing "cinder-heap" could only be dismantled by the collective hands of organized labor. He became a socialist militant.

This is a reminder of the centrality of labor for all of those concerned with the environment in all its dimensions, and of the importance of environmental, urban, engineering and architectural concerns for those seeking to turn the labor movement into the agent of a radical social transformation.

This in no way exhausts the wealth of Thompson's William Morris. To include a personal reference: my work on the romantic anti-capitalist dimension of Puerto Rican literature is much indebted to Thompson's discussion of the passage from Keats, to Ruskin and Carlyle (who shared Morris's aversion to industrialism) to Morris's own socialism, which differentiated him from them.\*

One can confidently say about Thompson's recuperation of Morris what he would have said about Morris himself: we ignore it at our own expense.

### **Rafael Bernabe**

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**P.S.**

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<http://www.solidarity-us.org/node/4023>