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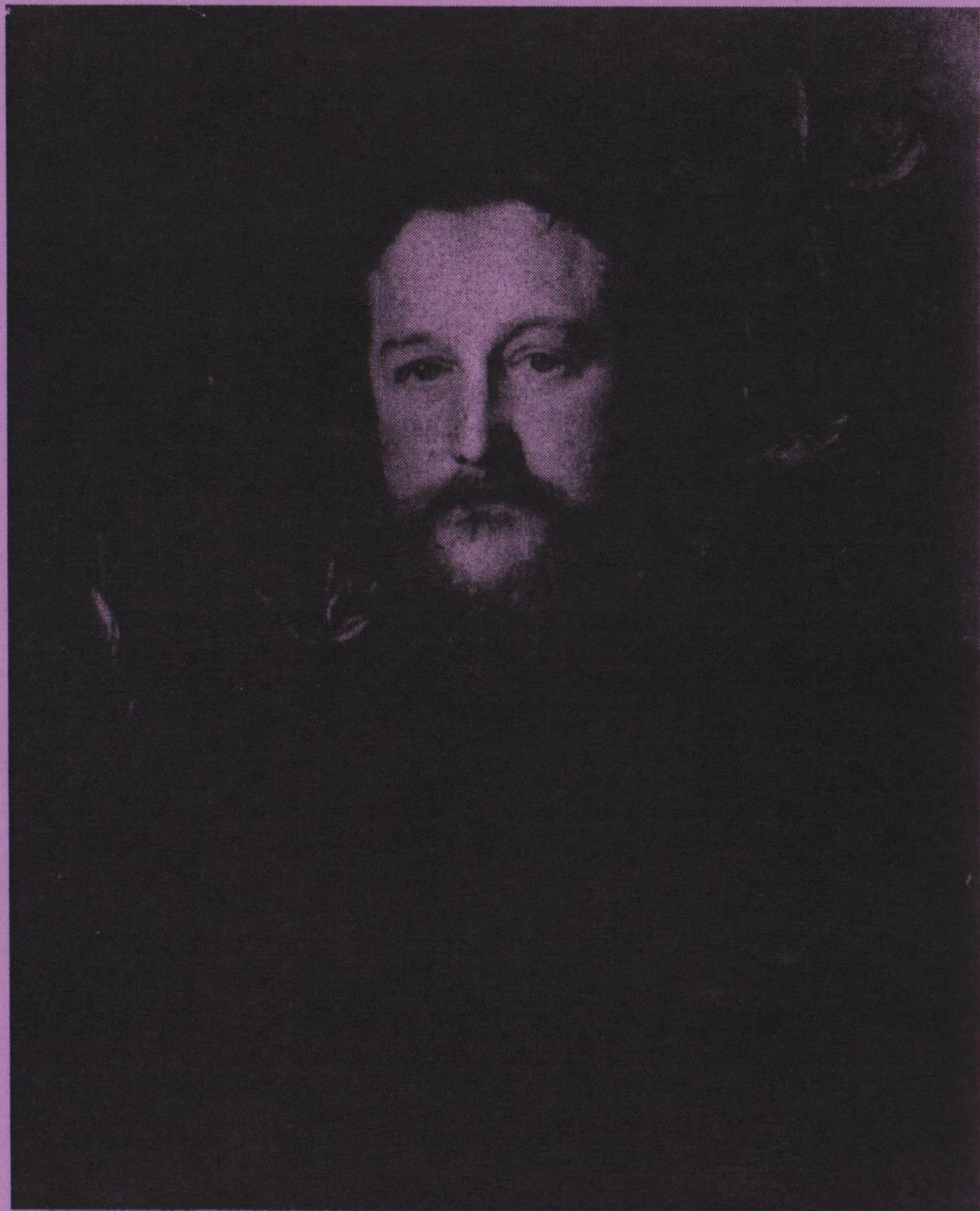
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**A Factory As  
It Might Be**

**William Morris**

**The Factory  
We Never Had**  
**Colin Ward**





William Morris

## A Factory As It Might Be

*William Morris*

We socialists are often reproached with giving no details of the state of things which would follow on the destruction of that system of waste and war which is sometimes dignified by the lying title of the harmonious combination of capital and labour. Many working people say "We admit that the present system has produced unsatisfactory results, but at least it is a system; you ought to be able to give us some definite idea of the results of that reconstruction which you call Socialism."

To this Socialists answer, and rightly, that we have not set ourselves to build up a system to please our tastes, nor are we seeking to impose it on the world in a mechanical manner, but rather that we are assisting in bringing about a development of history which would take place without our help, but which, nevertheless, compels us to help it; and that, under these circumstances, it would be futile to map out the details of life in a condition of things so different from that in which we have been born and bred.







Those details will be taken care of by the men who will be so lucky as to be born into a society relieved of the oppression which crushes us, and who surely will be, not less, but more prudent and reasonable than we are. Nevertheless, it seems clear that the economical changes which are in progress must be accompanied by corresponding developments of men's aspirations; and the knowledge of their progress cannot fail to rouse our imaginations into picturing for ourselves that life at once happy and manly which we *know* social revolution will put within the reach of all men.

Of course the pictures so drawn will vary according to the turn of mind of the picturer, but I have already tried to show in *Justice* that healthy and undomineering individuality will be fostered and not crushed out by Socialism. I will, therefore, as an artist and as handicraftsman venture to develop a little the hint contained in *Justice*, of April 12th, 1884, on the conditions of pleasant work in the days when we shall work for livelihood *and pleasure* and not for "profit."


Our factory, then, is a pleasant place — no very difficult matter when, as I have said before, it is no longer necessary to gather people into miserable, sweltering hordes for profit's sake — for all the country is in itself pleasant, or is capable

of being made pleasant with very little pains and forethought. Next, our factory stands amidst gardens as beautiful (climate aside) as those of Alcinous, since there is no need of stinting it of ground, profit rents being a thing of the past, and the labour on such gardens is like enough to be purely voluntary, as it is not easy to see the day when 75 out of every 100 people will not take delight in the pleasantest and most innocent of occupations, and our working people will assuredly want open-air relaxation from their factory work. Even now, as I am told, the Nottingham factory hands could give many a hint to professional gardeners in spite of all the drawbacks of a great manufacturing town. One's imagination is inclined fairly to run riot over the picture of beauty and pleasure offered by the thought of skilful co-operative gardening for beauty's sake, which beauty would by no means exclude the raising of useful produce for the sake of livelihood.

Impossible I hear an anti-Socialist say. My friend, please to remember that most factories sustain today large and handsome gardens, and not seldom parks and woods of many acres in extent; with due appurtenances of highly paid Scotch professional gardeners, wood reeves, bailiffs, gamekeepers, and the like, the whole being managed in the most







wasteful way conceivable; *only* the said gardens, etc., are twenty miles away from the factory, *out of the smoke*, and are kept up for *one member of the factory only*, the sleeping partner to wit, who may, indeed, double that part by organising its labour (for its own profit) in which case he receives ridiculously disproportionate pay additional.

Well, it follows in this garden business that our factory must make no sordid litter, befoul no water, nor poison the air with smoke. I need say nothing more on that point as, "profit" apart, it would be easy enough.

Next, as to the buildings themselves, I must ask to say something, because it is usually supposed that they must of necessity be ugly, and truly they are almost always at present mere nightmares; but it is, I must assert, by no means necessary that they should be ugly, nay, there would be no serious difficulty in making them beautiful, as every building might be which serves its purpose duly, which is built generously as regards material, and which is built with pleasure by the builders and designers; indeed, as things go, those nightmare buildings aforesaid sufficiently typify the work they are built for, and look what they are: temples of over-crowding and adulteration and over-work, of unrest,

in a word; so it is not difficult to think of our factory buildings, showing on their outsides what they are for, reasonable and light work, cheered at every step by hope and pleasure. So in brief, our buildings will be beautiful with their own beauty of simplicity as workshops, not bedizened with tomfoolery as some are now, which do not any the more for that hide their repulsiveness; but moreover, besides the mere workshops, our factory will have other buildings which may carry ornament further than that, for it will need dining-hall, library, school, places for study of different kinds, and other such structures; nor do I see why, if we have a mind for it, we should not emulate the monks and craftsmen of the Middle Ages in our ornamentation of such buildings; why we should be shabby in housing our rest and pleasure and our search for knowledge, as we may well be shabby in housing the shabby life we lead now.

And, again, if it is doubted as to the possibility of getting these beautiful buildings on the score of cost, let me once again remind you that every great factory does to-day sustain a palace (often more than one) amidst that costly garden and park aforesaid out of the smoke, but that this palace, stuffed as it is with all sorts of costly things, is for one member of the factory only, the







sleeping partner — useful creature! It is true that the said palace is mostly, with all it contains, beastly ugly, but this ugliness is but a part of the bestial waste of the whole system of profit-mongering, which refuses cultivation and refinement to the workers, and, therefore, can have no art, not even for all its money.

So we have come to the outside of our factory of the future, and seen that it does not injure the beauty of the world, but adds to it rather. I will try to give a picture of how the work goes on there.

We have in previous pages tried to look through the present into the future, and see a factory as it might be, and got as far as the surroundings and outside of it; but the externals of a true palace of industry can only be realised naturally and without affection by the work which is to be done in them being in all ways reasonable and fit for human beings; I mean no mere whim of some one rich and philanthropic manufacturer will make even one factory permanently pleasant and agreeable for the workers in it; he will die or be sold up, his heir will be poorer or more single-hearted in his devotion to profit, and all the beauty and order will vanish from the short-lived dream; even the external beauty in industrial concerns must be the work of society and not of individuals.

Now as to the work, first of all it will be useful, and, therefore, honoured; because there will be no temptation to make mere useful toys, since there will be no rich men cudgelling their brains for means for spending superfluous money, and consequentially no "organisers of labour" pandering to degrading follies for the sake of profit, wasting their intelligence and energy in contriving snares for cash in the shape of trumpery which they themselves heartily despise. Nor will the work turn out trash; there will be no millions of poor to make a market for wares which no one would choose to use if he were not driven to do so; everyone will be able to afford things good of their own kind, and, as will be shown hereafter, will have knowledge of goods enough to reject what is not excellent; coarse and rough wares may be made for rough and temporary purposes, but they will openly proclaim themselves for what they are; adulteration will be unknown.

Furthermore, machines of the most ingenious and best-approved kinds will be used when necessary, but will be used simply to save human labour; nor, indeed, could they be used for anything else in such well-ordered work as we are thinking about; since, profit being dead, there would be no temptation to pile up wares whose apparent value as articles







of use, their conventional value as such, does not rest on the necessities or reasonable desires of men for such things, but on artificial habits forced on the public by the craving of the capitalists for fresh and ever fresh profit; these things having no real value as things to be used, and their conventional (let us say sham) utility value has been the breed of their value, as articles of exchange for profit, in a society founded on profit-mongering.

Well, the manufacture of useless goods, whether harmful luxuries for the rich or disgraceful make-shifts for the poor, having come to an end, and we still being in possession of the machines once used for mere profit-grinding, but now used only for saving human labour, it follows that much less labour will be necessary from each workman; all the more as we are going to get rid of all non-workers, and busy-idle people; so that the working time of each member of our factory will be very short, say, to be much within the mark, four hours a day.


Now, next it may be allowable for an artist — that is, one whose ordinary work is pleasant and not slavish — to hope that in no factory will all the work, even that necessary four hours' work, be mere machine-tending; and it follows from what has been said above about machines being used to save labour, that

there would be no work which would turn man into mere machines; therefore, at least some portion of the work, the necessary and in fact compulsory work I mean, would be pleasant to do; the machine-tending ought not to require a very long apprenticeship, therefore in no case should any one person be set to run up and down after a machine through all his working hours every day, even so shortened as we have seen; now the attractive work of our factory, that which was pleasant in itself to do, would be of the nature of art; therefore all slavery of work ceases under such a system, for whatever is burdensome about the factory would be taken turn and turn about, and so distributed, would cease to be a burden — would be, in fact, a kind of rest from the more exciting or artistic work.

Thus, then, would the sting be taken out of the factory system, in which, as things now are, the socialisation of labour, which ought to be a blessing to the community, has been turned into a curse by the appropriation of the products of its labour by individuals, for the purpose of gaining for them the very doubtful advantages of a life of special luxury, and often of mere idleness; the result of which, to the mass of the workers, has been a dire slavery, of which long hours of labour, ever-increasing strain of







labour during those hours, and complete repulsiveness in the work itself have been the greatest evils.

It remains for me to set forth my most sanguine hopes of the way in which the gathering together of people in such social bodies as properly-ordered factories might be, may be utilised for increasing the general pleasure of life, and raising its standard, material and intellectual; for creating, in short, that life rich in incident and variety, but free from the strain of mere sordid trouble, the life which the individualist vainly babbles of, but which the Socialist aims at directly, and will one day attain to.

In a duly ordered society, in which people would work for a livelihood, and not for the profit of another, a factory might not only be pleasant as to its surroundings, and beautiful in its architecture, but even the rough and necessary work done in it might be so arranged as to be neither burdensome in itself nor of long duration for each worker; but, furthermore, the organisation of such a factory, that is to say of a group of people working in harmonious co-operation towards a useful end, would of itself afford opportunities for increasing the pleasure of life.

To begin with, a factory will surely be a centre of education; any children who seem likely to develop gifts towards its

special industry would gradually and without pain, amidst their book-learning be drawn into technical instruction which would bring them at last into a thorough apprenticeship for their craft; therefore, the bent of each child having been considered in choosing its instruction and occupation, it is not too much to expect that children so educated will look forward eagerly to the time when they will be allowed to work at turning out real useful wares; a child whose manual dexterity has been developed without undue forcing side by side with its mental intelligence would surely be as eager to handle shuttle, hammer or what not for the first time as a real workman, and begin making, as a young gentleman now is to get hold of his first gun and begin killing.

This education so begun for the child will continue for the grown man, who will have every opportunity to practice the niceties of his craft if he be so minded, to carry it to the utmost degree of perfection, not for the purpose of using his extra knowledge and skill to sweat his fellow-workman, but for his own pleasure and honour as a good artist. Similar opportunities will be afforded him to study, as deeply as the subject will bear, the science of his craft is founded; besides, a good library and help in studying it will be provided by every





productive group (or factory), so that the worker's other voluntary work may be varied by the study of general science or literature.

But, further, the factory could supply another educational want by showing the general public how its goods are made. Competition being dead and buried, no new process, no detail of improvements in machinery would be hidden from the first inquirer; the knowledge which might thus be imparted would foster a general interest in work, and in the realities of life, which would surely tend to elevate labour and create a standard of excellence in manufacture, which in its turn would breed a strong motive towards exertion in the workers.

A strange contrast such a thing would be to that now existing! For to-day the public, and especially that part of it which does not follow any manual occupation, is grossly ignorant of crafts and processes, even when they are carried out at their own doors; so that most of the middle class are not only defenceless against the most palpable adulterations, but, also, which is far more serious, are of necessity whole worlds removed from any sympathy from the life of the workshop.

So managed, therefore, the factory, by co-operation with other industrial groups

will provide an education for its own workers, and contribute its share to the education of citizens outside, but, further, it will, as a matter of course, find it easy to provide for more restful amusements, as it will have ample buildings for library, school-room, dining-hall and the like; social gatherings, musical or dramatic entertainments will obviously be easy to manage under such conditions.

One pleasure — and that a more serious one — I must mention, a pleasure which is unknown at present to the workers, and which, even for the classes of ease and leisure, only exists in a miserably corrupted and degraded form, I mean the practice of the fine arts. People living under the conditions of life above-mentioned, having manual skill, technical and general education, and leisure to use these advantages, are quite sure to develop a love of art, that is to say, a sense of beauty and an interest in life, which in the long run must stimulate them to the desire for artistic creation, the satisfaction of which is of all pleasures the greatest.

I have started by supposing our group of social labour busying itself in the production of bodily necessities; but we have seen that such work will only take a small part of each worker's time; their







leisure, beyond mere bodily rest and recreation, I have supposed would employ in perfecting themselves in the niceties of their craft, or in research as to its principles; some would stop there, others would take to studying more general knowledge, but some — and I think most — would find themselves impelled towards the creation of beauty, and would find their opportunities for this under their hands as they worked out their due quota of necessary work for the common good; these would amuse themselves by ornamenting the wares they made, and would only be limited in the quantity and quality of such work by artistic considerations as to how much or what kind of work really suited the wares; nor, to meet a possible objection, would there be any danger of such ornamental work degenerating into mere amateur twaddle, such as is now inflicted on the world by ladies and gentlemen in search for a refuge from boredom; because our workers will be thoroughly educated as workers and will know well what good work and true finish (not trade finish) means, and because the public, being a body of workers also, everyone in some line or other, will well understand what real work means. Our workers, therefore, will do their artistic work under keen criticism of themselves, their workshop comrades, and a public composed of intelligent workmen.


To add beauty to their necessary daily work will furnish outlet for the artistic aspirations of most men; but, further, our factory which is externally beautiful, will not be inside like a clean jail or workhouse; the architecture will come inside in the form of such ornament as may be suitable to the special circumstances. Nor can I see why the highest and most intellectual art, pictures, sculpture, and the like should not adorn a true place of industry. People living a manly and reasonable life would have no difficulty in refraining from overdoing both these and other adornments; here then would be opportunities for using the special talents of the workers, especially in cases where the daily necessary work affords scanty scope for artistic work.

Thus our Socialistic factory, besides turning out goods useful to the community, will provide for its own workers work light in duration, and not oppressive in kind, education in childhood and youth. Serious occupation, amusing relaxation, and more rest for the leisure of the workers, and withal that beauty of surroundings, and the power of producing beauty which are sure to be claimed by those who have leisure, education and serious occupation.

No one can say that such things are not








desirable for the workers, but we Socialists are striving to make them seem not only desirable but necessary, well knowing that under the present system of society they are impossible of attainment — and why? Because we cannot afford the time, trouble, and thought necessary to obtain them. Again, why cannot we? *Because we are at war*, class against class, and man against man; all our time is taken up with that; we are forced to busy ourselves not with the arts of peace, but with the arts of war, which are, briefly, trickery and oppression. Under such conditions of life, labour can but be a terrible burden, degrading to the workers, more degrading to those who live upon their work.

This is the system which we seek to overthrow and supplant by one in which labour will no longer be a burden.

## The Factory We Never Had


Colin Ward



As the decades roll by, it becomes more and more evident that the truly creative socialist thinker of the nineteenth century was not Karl Marx, but William Morris. His most eminent Marxist biographer, the late E.P. Thompson, virtually admitted this when he came to revise his massive volume *William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary*. When it first appeared in 1955, critics complained that it was a great Stalinist steam-roller, flattening Morris into a cardboard cut-out of a card-carrying Communist Party member.

Maybe it was that, but it was a great deal more beside, and in his postscript to the later version, Thompson explained that "Morris, by 1955, had claimed me. My book was by then, I suppose, already a work of muffled 'revisionism'. The Morris/Marx argument has worked inside me ever since. When, in 1956, my disagreements with orthodox Marxism became fully articulate, I fell back on modes of perception which I'd learned in those years of close company with Morris, and I found, perhaps, the will to





go on arguing from the pressure of Morris behind me."

It was a namesake of his, Paul Thompson, who wrote the best of all accounts of Morris, *The Work of William Morris*, first published in 1967 and reprinted several times since then. What does it matter, he asks, whether Morris was a romantic, an anarchist, a Marxist, or even a crypto-Fabian? The important thing is that he had a world view of extraordinary richness, which again and again foreshadows our own preoccupations: "the destruction by the international economy, not just of ancient cultures, but of the natural resources and ecology of the earth itself; the crippling of local independence by spreading centralization and bureaucracy, the stifling of natural creativity and zest for learning of children by institutionalised schooling; the cramming of working people into barrack-like housing . . ."

But beyond this relevance, for Paul Thompson there is a special reason for Morris's importance for us: his remarkable anticipation of the problems posed to socialists within a late-twentieth century consumer society: "Socialism was originally the product of the age of the factory, and it bears that mark in its primary focus upon work. This is a major reason why socialism has always

had a more direct appeal to men than to women, and equally why, with the growth of leisure and a home-centred way of life, its significance to ordinary life has become less and less obvious. But Morris stands alone among major socialist thinkers in being as concerned with housework and the home as with work in the factory. The transformation of both factory and home was equally necessary for the future fulfilment of men and women. Morris wanted everyday life as a whole to become the basic form of creativity, of art: 'For a socialist, a house, a knife, a cup, a steam engine, must be either a work of art, or a denial of art.' "

Morris's account of *A Factory as it Might Be* comes from 1884, one of the busiest years of an endlessly busy life. He was writing, week by week in *Justice*, the organ of the Social-Democratic Federation, founded in January of that year, and in December had resigned, with a majority of the Executive, to form the Socialist League. But all through that year he was also lecturing in English and Scottish cities and towns with a series of topics, some of which became famous. E.P. Thompson records that the main themes he was offering at this time were "Useful Work versus Useless Toil", "Art and Labour", "Misery and the Way Out", and "How We Live and How We





Might Live." He explains that. "These lectures, with great variety of illustration and vigour of expression, followed a similar pattern. First Morris examined in some fresh and striking manner, the reality of life and labour in capitalist society. Next, he presented by contrast the vision of true society, creative and responsive to beauty, and called his listeners to action in the struggle to achieve this vision."

The factory of his vision is a handsome group of buildings, surrounded by gardens, cultivated co-operatively "for beauty's sake, which beauty would by no means exclude the raising of useful produce for the sake of livelihood." And he notes that "the Nottingham factory hands could give many a hint to professional gardeners". He is right. The rose-grower Harry Wheatcroft recalls how in the 19th century Dean Hole, "the man who really transformed rose-growing in Britain", estimated that every third family in Nottingham had an allotment garden.

Morris's factory would combine work and leisure with technical education, would have its nursery, school, restaurant and concert hall. It would be adorned with painting and sculpture. It would be a neighbourhood's social centre and the place where children learned by doing. His account of the factory also refutes

those critics who, a century after his death, still dismiss Morris as a medievalist dreamer, an anachronism in the machine age. for he argues that "machines of the most ingenious and best-approved kinds will be used when necessary, but will be used simply to save human labour", so that the working hours will be reduced to about four hours a day.

As for the tedium of repetitive work, he observes that "the machine tending ought not to require a very long apprenticeship, therefore in no case should any one person be set to run up and down after a machine through all his working hours every day" since, apart from the reduction of working time, "whatever is burdensome about the factory would be taken turn in turn about, and so distributed, would cease to be a burden — would be, in fact, a kind of rest from the more exciting or artistic work."

Here Morris is anticipating the findings of highly-paid industrial psychologists a century later. Plenty of us find a repetitive task restful, provided that everyone else shares it and provided that it occupies a short amount of our working day. The whole tragedy of monotonous jobs on the assembly line, whether it is actually a line or a draughty shed where women gut chickens all day for the food-processing industry, is that the more







hours they can get, the happier they are, simply for the sake of a pathetically small pay-packet.

So what became of Morris's factory vision? Several industrialists set about creating "model" factories. Eleven years after Morris's essay, George Cadbury moved his chocolate factory to Bournville outside Birmingham, where, the historian Gillian Darley explains, "The factory was surrounded by gardens, where the white-gowned workers could idle by the rose bushes in their lunch breaks; another palliative for the tedium of assembly-line work." And even earlier, in 1888, when William Hesketh Lever moved his factory to Port Sunlight, he explained that he wanted his workers to "learn that there is more enjoyment in life than the mere going to and returning from work and looking forward to Saturday night to draw their wages." But Gillian Darley quotes a trade unionist's comment that "no man of an independent turn of mind could breathe for long in the atmosphere of Port Sunlight".

The tradition of the model factory persisted. Studying the lives of two tragic sisters, Alexandra Artley found that their happiest days were the ten years they worked for Courtaulds Red Scar rayon works outside Preston from 1970 to 1980. "Going to Courtaulds was like a holiday camp to us." In her book

*Murder in the Heart* (Hamish Hamilton, 1993), Alexandra Artley drew upon their Morris-like recollections of breakfast at Courtaulds; "...here, from the largesse of a good employer, they could choose and choose and eat and eat the most delicious hot subsidized things they were denied at home... the warmth of the vast room with windows steamy against a frosty northern day, committed cooks in absolutely spotless white aprons and caps, and the long, under-heated chrome counters, subtly lighting trays of crisply fried bacon, big round sausages, glistening fried eggs, kidneys, golden triangles of fried bread, hot buttery toast, well-grilled tomatoes so sweetly squidgy in the middle, and gallon s and gallons of hot, sweet tea. 'Oh,' said June, looking back on the vast hungers of youth, 'the breakfasts at Courtaulds were lovely!'"

This sensual account is a reminder that what made factory work acceptable to millions, apart from the pay-packet, were incidentals, like the company of fellow workers, not a concern for the product. But if you travel in Morris's footsteps through industrial Britain in the 1990s you are overwhelmed by dereliction. Statistically, through the shift of manufacture from Europe and North America to the countries of the Pacific Rim or Latin America, where labour costs are cheaper, the owners of capital







have shifted production, while automation and a change in the materials used, have made the factory itself obsolete. Capital has achieved its object which was to eliminate labour. When Alexandra Artley sought out the sight of those enormous breakfasts, she found that "What had once been Courtaulds rayon mill now seemed to be something very different and a huge board at the foot of the drive stated the names of 'companies on site'. They seemed to be very 1980s-sounding names, such as Assembly Line Recording Studio, Windowland North-West and Bodycare Toiletries Ltd... there was no rayon works any more — just smart new, grey metal factories."

A handful of socially-conscious capitalists may have taken notice of Morris's industrial ideal, but have gradually abandoned it because industrial welfare added to the cost of production, by comparison with that of poor countries. And yet another of Morris's demands has been completely lost. He thought that "the factory could supply another educational want by showing the general public how its goods are made." This comment anticipated the principle that, generations later, the American anarchist Paul Goodman called the 'transparency of operation', the idea that we should all be able to understand the functioning of the industrial products we

use every day. But every item of electronic equipment in our homes has a label that warns 'No user serviceable parts inside.'

It was Morris's contemporary and friend Peter Kropotkin who added some thoroughly modern contributions to his comments on industrial production. In his study of *Fields, Factories and Workshops* of 1899, he gathered a mass of statistical evidence to show that ideologists of both right and left had exaggerated the scale of factory production. Most of our ordinary daily need were produced in a small-workshop economy. And he anticipated the changes in sources of motive power that in the 20th and 21st centuries would make the large factory obsolete. we see this in the obsolescence all around us today.

This does not mean that Morris's vision of a factory as it might be has no significance for the future. It simply means that we have failed to achieve the humanisation of work that was at the heart of his life's ambition to separate useful work from useless toil.