

Art and Socialism

A lecture delivered by William Morris before the Secular Society of Leicester on 23 January 1884.

William Morris began his lecture with these words:

'My friends, I want you to look into the relation of Art to Commerce, using the latter word to express what is generally meant by it; namely, that system of competition in the market which is indeed the only form which most people nowadays suppose that Commerce can take. Now whereas there have been times in the world's history when Art held the supremacy over Commerce; when Art was a good deal, and Commerce, as we understand the word, was a very little; so now on the contrary it will be admitted by all, I fancy, that Commerce has become of very great importance and Art of very little.'

He described the supremacy of Commerce as, *'an evil, and a very serious one'*, because *'the greater part of the people have no share in Art, which as things now are must be kept in the hands of a few rich or well-to-do people, who we may fairly say need it less and not more than the laborious workers.'* He went on, *'in losing an Art which was done by and for the people,' the workforce had lost the natural solace of their labour.'*

He discussed the nature of work in an industrialised society:

'I have said that people work no less laboriously than they ever did; but I should have said that they work more laboriously. The wonderful machines which in the hands of just and foreseeing men would have been used to minimize repulsive labour and to give pleasure, or in other words added life, to the human race, have been so used on the contrary that they have driven all men into mere frantic haste and hurry, thereby destroying pleasure, that is life, on all hands: they have, instead of lightening the labour of workmen, intensified it, and thereby added more weariness yet to the burden which the poor have to carry.'

His first argument was based on the claims that:

'It is right and necessary that all men should have work to do which shall be worth doing, and be of itself pleasant to do; and which should be done under such conditions as would make it neither over-wearisome nor over-anxious.'

Morris believed that the comfortably-off middle classes could help to make these claims a reality. He found himself, *'dazed at the thought of the immensity of work which is undergone for the making of useless things'*. So Morris's anti-consumerism message was that, by simplifying their lives and getting rid of useless luxuries, people could help to free society from what he described as, *'the slavery of Capitalist Commerce'*.

Secondly, Morris believed that Art was central and necessary to everyday life and work, a sign of freedom and happiness. *'Nothing should be made by man's labour which is not worth making, or which must be made by labour degrading to the makers.'*

Finally he affirmed that:

'It is right and necessary that all men should have work to do: First, Work worth doing; Second, Work of itself pleasant to do; Third, Work done under such conditions as would make it neither over-wearisome nor over-anxious.'

Morris believed that everyone willing and able to work should be guaranteed employment but there were other necessities of life. Education was crucial to ensure that everyone was capable of *'honourable and fitting work'*. The second necessity was *'decency of surroundings'*. This included well-made and well-designed houses and access to green spaces. He emphasised the need for, *'abundant garden space in our towns, and our towns must not eat up the fields and natural features of the country; nay I demand that there be left waste places and wilds in it, or romance and poetry, that is Art, will die out amongst us.'* The third necessity was for leisure – leaving working people with enough free time, *'to allow them full rest of mind and body: a man must have time for serious individual thought, for imagination, for dreaming even, or the race of men will inevitably worsen'*.

Morris ended the lecture by reinforcing his message:

'In a properly ordered state of Society every man willing to work should be ensured: First, Honourable and fitting work; Second, A healthy and beautiful house; Third, Full leisure for rest of mind and body.'

He tried to convince the audience that it was an achievable goal although not under the current capitalist system. He believed that, *'the beginnings of Social Revolution must be the foundations of the rebuilding of the art of the People, that is to say of the Pleasure of Life.'*

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