Reviews


The question of the precise relationship between Morris’s artistic theory and practice, and his political beliefs and engagement, is a recurrent one. Ruth Kinna argues that earlier commentators have posited a tension between romanticism and revolutionary socialism. Thus they have argued either for a transition in which Morris’s socialism effectively displaced the romanticism apparent especially in his earlier poetry, or one in which his socialism has a particular ‘soft’ and non-revolutionary character. Kinna herself dissents from both views, claiming that Morris’s socialism was a complex mixture of ‘radical, revolutionary and Romantic-revolutionary ideas’. Morris, she argues, deliberately avoided being pigeon-holed into particular party positions. But above all, his socialism was always influenced by his Romanticism, his understanding of history and his understanding of the role of art.

The book opens with an account of different assessments and interpretations of Morris, of the relationship between art and socialism, and the nature of his socialism itself. This discussion focuses particularly on Edward Thompson and G. D. H. Cole. The second chapter contains an overview of Morris’s early life and career, and an account of his views on the relation between art and society in general, and ‘commerce’ in particular before he became involved in politics. The book has a chronological structure, but individual chapters also incorporate more thematic discussions. Thus the next chapter, which opens with an account of Morris’s involvement with the Eastern Question Association, and with Anti-Scrape, contains a substantial discussion of the place of memory, dreams and paradise in Morris’s story-telling. Three chapters deal directly with Morris’s socialist thought. One traces its development, in relation to the main currents of socialist thought in Britain; one examines Morris’s critique of capitalism and its consequences for art’s production; one considers his revolutionary politics and strategy through the themes agitate, educate, organise. The summary on the back of the book focuses on *News from Nowhere*, but discussion of this occurs only in the last chapter, alongside Morris’s late prose romances. Kinna views Morris’s utopia as essentially medieval in tone. She also argues that Morris intended it as a literal description of a desirable future – so that, again, Romanticism is at the centre of Morris’s mature socialist thought. Thus to treat *News from Nowhere* as simply an exploration of socialist values with which we may concur, rather than a posited potential social structure, is, in Kinna’s view, to miss the point. Overall, Kinna insists that Morris’s socialism was indeed revolutionary, but the romantic impulse and his concerns for art led him to socialism, and were never subordinated to it or abandoned.

This is a compact and readable account of the continuities in Morris’s thought, especially about the dependence of art in all its forms on the conditions of its production, and the destructive effects of commerce or capitalism. It is, perhaps, too compact to be fully successful in providing a critical commentary on earlier
assessments. The first chapter is simply too short to do justice to the variety and complexity of views which have been expressed about the precise relationship between art, Romanticism, utopia and politics. Although Edward Thompson is a key figure discussed here, the arguments developed in the postscript to the 1976 edition of his book are barely mentioned. A fuller discussion of other views might reveal Kinna’s argument to be less new than she suggests. Raymond Williams, for example, also argued that Morris’s romantic Ruskinian critique of capitalism and its forms of work led him independently to a position which was congruent with that of Marx. What is revealed by Kinna’s discussion, though never directly addressed, is the extent to which commentators have sought to assimilate Morris to their own political positions. Even the National Front have claimed Morris for their own, on the basis of The House of the Wolfings in particular. But this emphasises the fact that the commentaries themselves are historically located, and can only be understood in terms of the historical and political positions of the authors, and debates current at the time (not least Williams’s own care, in Culture and Society, not to declare either himself or Morris a Marxist). While in her analysis of Morris’s thought, Kinna addresses its historical and biographical context, her commentary on the commentaries is less successful. She is not helped by the now conventional reference system in which works are identified by the date of publication of the edition referred to, rather than the date of first publication – a system that is intrinsically anti-historical. It is therefore impossible for the reader to determine, for example, when Cole’s assessment of Morris was made. There is also a tension in the book between the approach of political theory, which tends to a systematic treatment of themes and issues, and the more biographical/historical approach necessitated by the developmental question at the heart of the book: continuity or change? On the whole, Kinna moves between these well. However, the thematic sections make it doubly necessary to be able to identify the precise date and source of the illustrative quotations. Unfortunately references are given only to the volume and page of the Collected Works. Most readers will not be in my fortunate position of having immediate access to this, and I think many will find this system frustrating.

In her closing paragraph, Kinna argues that Morris’s beliefs that a socialist England could not be forged without revolution, and that attractive labour could not be realised until capitalism was abolished, make his socialism appear outmoded. I could not disagree more. I share neither her assessment of Thompson’s position(s), nor her reading of News from Nowhere. It is striking, however, that Morris’s work retains the capacity to inspire, and to inspire competing interpretations. In that respect, Kinna’s account will stand as a view of Morris a century on, a welcome contribution to debates which show no sign of ending.

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