An ‘Impossibilist’ Socialist?
William Morris and the Politics of Socialist Revolution versus Social Reform

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In a recent article in the Journal of the William Morris Society it has been argued that the anti-parliamentary socialism of the Socialist League (SL) and Morris in particular divided revolutionary socialists from the left and led to a predominantly non-revolutionary Labour party in Britain. Here I will argue rather the opposite, that Morris represented part of a political trend that propagated revolutionary aims against a rival stream of political development that culminated in the formation of the Labour party. In a movement that increasingly moved away from flirtations with socialism and towards social and political radicalism, from which the ‘socialist revival’ of the 1880s was chiefly derived and composed, Morris was an early exponent of what was later abusively labelled ‘impossibilism’. He was thus not merely, as is now well established, a consistent socialist revolutionary from the early 1880s to his death, but a forerunner of non-market socialism. Before 1914 Britain, as it is now rather a cliché to point out, was noticeable in European politics for its absence of a majority labour movement of a classical Marxist nature. Instead, Britain’s largest nominally Marxist socialist organisation, the Social Democratic Federation (SDF), operated on the periphery of British socialist politics. Theory was marginalised in the emergent British labour movement which, led by the Independent Labour Party (ILP), courted the moderate and mostly Liberal supporting trade unions to form the Labour Representation Committee (LRC) in 1900, later renamed the Labour Party (LP) in 1906. From the mid-1890s theILP, containing a sizeable majority of British socialist opinion, moved away from the task of activity devoted towards ‘making’ and recruiting new socialists and increasingly towards electoral activity, although it has been argued that it was not clear that British socialism would take the parliamentary road until at least 1906. The SDF, although perhaps holding more points of similarity with the ILP than has generally been recognised, remained outside of this development simply because its rigid interpretation of the efficacy of trades unions did not permit it to see a fruitful socialist path in the LRC which it left at the end of 1901.

A union with the ILP, however, had seemed likely in the 1890s and was only prevented by the coolness of the leadership of each party to the other’s approaches. Historians disagree as to the point at which socialist unity became unachievable but it was always improbable given the different approaches of the...
two organisations – the SDF’s revolutionary stance and the more conciliatory, ethical approach of the ILP – that such a union would have lasted for long. It seems likely that socialist unity probably became impossible once the ILP had set a course to court the support of trades unions. However, the bulk of the membership of these organisations seems to have been in branches which existed for geographical convenience (whether SDF, ILP or other) rather than their being divided on lines of political difference. Thus socialists often held membership of both the ILP and the SDF, and James Leatham, a prominent socialist activist in the 1880s and 1900s, was active in both the SDF and the ILP and saw no overwhelming barrier to membership of both bodies. Some sections of the membership of both organisations continued to favour fusion until the eve of the Great War resulting in the formation of the British Socialist Party (BSP) which initially seemed successful but quickly became the SDP (the SDF having changed its name to Social Democratic Party by this time) by another name.

As well as the SDF being confined to the periphery of British politics, it is also possible to question its political character to some extent. Having its origin in the London Radical clubs in the early 1880s the Democratic Federation (as the SDF was first called) drew from already existing land reform and pro-Irish sentiments and O’Brienite radicals. The only part of its original programme of extreme Radical intent was its commitment to land reform. It has been suggested that Joseph Cowen, the left Radical MP for Newcastle, would have been the more suitable leader for the DF, given its distinctively Radical programme and nature, if he had continued his early chairmanship of the committee that established the party. Further, it has been claimed that Henry Myers Hyndman, the figure who dominated the SDF from its beginning to its final split in the Great War, asserted a crude and rigid Marxian understanding from an intellectual tradition of radical Toryism which accounted for his nationalistic and anti-Semitic leanings. Yet further still, it was the O’Brienite ‘silent majority’ in the SDF that allowed Hyndman to assert his own programme on the party rather than a latent socialism. Following the early splitting of the DF over its pro-Irish stance and its increasingly left leanings (following Hyndman’s own intellectual developments) the strategy towards socialism adopted (socialism being the declared object of the SDF by 1884) was one of agitation for a programme of reforms as the ‘stepping stones’ of socialist revolution. This was coupled with an anti-trades union attitude by which the defensive economic action of the working class was dismissed as unhelpful to the ultimate goal of socialist revolution.

It is, therefore, perhaps understandable that Marx and Engels disliked Hyndman and saw no hope for the SDF unless it could manage to inject theoretical rigour into a genuine workers’ movement, the SDF being a stagnant and politically moribund sect on its own. By 1894 Engels had rejected the SDF altogether, regretting that the SDF had ‘managed to transform our theory into the rigid dogma of an orthodox sect’. Engels questioned the theoretical soundness and character of the SDF but he was slightly less defamatory of the Socialist League formed at the end of 1884. A group of prominent socialists, among them William Morris, Ernest Belfort Bax, the Avelings and Andreas Schell, left the SDF disillusioned by Hyndman’s personal control of the SDF journal Justice and his political opportunism. William Morris concluded on the affair, ‘we will begin
again clean handed to try the more humdrum method of quiet propaganda, and
start a new paper of our own'.

The object of the SL was simply, for Morris, to 'make socialists', that is actively
to propagate socialist theory and educate the working class to socialist con­sciousness through theoretical understanding. Morris and the League sought to
avoid the sort of agitational activity for its own sake carried on by the SDF, which
seemed to be trying to display a support that it did not have. Morris comments
in his socialist diary of January to April 1887 on an agitational church parade by
the SDF in London on 27th February: 'they must always be getting up some fresh
excitement, or else making the thing stale and at last ridiculous; so that they are
rather in the position of a hard·pressed manager of a theatre - what are they to do
next?'

In describing the activity of the SDF and SL in the 1880s and the SDF in the
1890s in the Black Country, the labour historian George Barnsby reveals
the extent to which socialists relied on direct contact with their audience. Open
air meetings and the street selling of the socialist journals Justice, Commonweal,
and later Clarion and Labour Leader, as well as pamphlets such as Robert
Blatchford's Merrie England, were not just the primary but the only means by
which socialists could seek to convince others of their case. But the SDF sought to
agitate rather more aggressively than the SL, holding mass meetings and parades
where it could. The SDF, with its emphasis on political change, sought to
demonstrate the revolutionary power of the working class and intimidate its
non-socialist opposition. The SL on the other hand sought primarily to convince
workers of the need for revolutionary change not exclusively in the political arena
and thus adopted a more educational, more anti-state approach. In practice the
gap between the two organisations was not always so clear, as revealed by
Morris's tour of Northumbria in April 1887 in co-operation with SDF activists,
but his general difference of approach applies. For example, in writing the history
of the SDF in the 1930s, H. W. Lee retrospectively decried the loss of chances for
opportunism due to the SDF leaving the LRC in 1901.

The Socialist League was in many respects opposed to this sort of opportunism,
its parliamentary advocates outnumbered by anti-parliamentary feeling. In his The
Policy of Abstention (1887) Morris explains this attitude by stating his (in many
ways vindicated) opinion that attempts to secure short-term political gains could
only end with such gains becoming the ends in themselves of socialist activity, an
outcome which Morris and others in the anti-parliamentary section of the SL
vehemently sought to avoid. However, the League cannot be bracketed, as later
splinter groups from the SDF were, as 'impossibilist', that is, committed to
revolution and nothing else, because its elements were far more diverse than these
later organisations were to be. The Socialist League from the beginning contained
anti-Hyndmanites, parliamentarians, anti-parliamentarians, anarchists and other
assorted creeds that felt they could not belong to the SDF. For a while William
Morris held sway with his anti-parliamentarism but tension increasingly emerged
as the 1880s drew to a close and, in 1890, the anarchist faction gained firm
control and the League fell apart as its leading socialists were compelled to
leave.

While historians of the labour movement have studied the SDF and SL quite
considerably it is interesting to note that other, smaller parties have been overlooked and assumed as of no consequence.\textsuperscript{24} If these smaller organisations were, in the end, insignificant, so too were the SDF and SL, contributing very little to the eventual character of the British labour movement in the twentieth century. The LRC/Labour Party was fundamentally a body to represent working-class Liberalism despite the influence of the ILP and its ethical socialism and, from the outside, the SDF and its brand of Marxism and socialist ‘stepping stones’. Many cultural and social reasons have been cited as to why the British working class did not adopt theoretical socialism as many European working-class movements did.\textsuperscript{25} The answers are difficult to find but the fact remains that British labour continued to see its interests served through its trades unions and through Liberalism and the politics of conciliation. Looking at the two prominent declared Marxist socialist organisations (leaving aside the Fabian Society whose tactics never included promoting direct working-class support for socialist revolution) it is possible to suggest that, despite the considerable development of a socialist minority, there was in fact no significant socialist revival in the 1880s, the membership of these new organisations being those involved in Radical politics and in no way attracting large numbers of the working class. The apogee of the SDF membership in the 1880s was in 1889 with 674 members in forty branches whilst that of the SL was in 1886 with around 700 members. The SDF was to rise and decline in membership repeatedly before its demise but never had a membership of more than a few thousand. The ILP, on the other hand, with a commitment not to revolution but to gradual reform and parliamentary activity, grew from its inception in 1893 and by 1906 had a dues-paying membership of 20,000 rising to 30,000 by 1912, dominating the British socialist movement.\textsuperscript{26} Whilst the Labour Party was not an inevitable outcome of the British labour movement, it was able to mobilise the support of the working class as the SDF and its offshoots were never able to. Historians have suggested a greater continuity between Radicalism, Chartism, Liberalism and British working-class politics than has previously tended to have been noted. According to this view the 1880s simply saw a development and a progression from Radical and Liberal working-class politics to a revived desire for working-class political independence, at its strongest represented by Marxism and socialist consciousness and at its weakest by a desire for working-class representation in parliament. The latter was the favoured option by most workingmen inclined to address politics, but not without a struggle.

In this political environment emerged bodies of working-class socialists who sought socialism and believed it could be achieved in the relatively short term. These organisations all fall into the political category which can be defined as ‘impossibilism’, a term derived from the French socialist movement which distinguished between those who sought interim reforms until socialist revolution could be realistically expected (the ‘Possibilists’), and those who believed that revolution should be the only goal (the ‘impossibilists’). The word has been used by contemporaries and historians to describe the breakaway of two parties, the Socialist Labour Party and the Socialist Party of Great Britain, from the SDF in 1903 and 1904, and here I am applying the label also to the Hammersmith Socialist Society formed in 1890 which consisted of socialists who shared the same fundamental vision of the priorities of socialist organisation as the later bodies.\textsuperscript{27}
Historians have tended to assess the role of socialists in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century Britain according to their contribution to the later development of the Labour Party. The fact that other bodies contributed little or nothing to this outcome has condemned them to the historical graveyard. However, opposition to reformist and electoral opportunism was a consistent response of a minority of British socialists to the prevailing tendencies within the wider movement. The lack of success and continuity of this minority is of interest both in itself and as a way of understanding why the labour movement developed as it did and why its apparent socialist ambition failed.

The Hammersmith Socialist Society (HSS) was created out of the Hammersmith Branch of the Socialist League. Anarchists having taken control of the League, many members of other persuasions either rejoined the SDF or went on to later form or join the ILP. Indeed many had left the League because of its anti-parliamentary position well before the anarchist seizure of the executive. The Hammersmith Branch chose to form a new body, in which William Morris was undoubtedly the greatest influence. One of the largest branches of first the SDF and then the SL, Hammersmith socialists were enthused by the socialism and sheer effort of Morris. Clearly the HSS felt that it had something different to offer the socialist movement following the demise of the SL. This something was the simple revolutionary clarity of Morris's socialist vision.

Morris has been cited as ending or declining his interest in socialist activity from 1890; the evidence suggests otherwise. Although, as E. P. Thompson has suggested, the nature of Morris's socialism began to change its details, it still retained a fundamental revolutionary clarity, which is similar at many points to the socialists later known as 'impossibilists', and Morris still remained an active socialist when his declining health allowed. It was Morris's socialism that was largely enshrined in the Statement of Principles (1890) that he wrote for the HSS. Although members were still divided on the precise details of strategy, the Society represented the section of the Socialist League that had been closest to Morris's anti-state, though not anarchist, stance. It should be noted that socialists differed less in the early years as to how they conceived socialism, the society of the future, than on how to get there. The totality of change from capitalism to the socialist future was acknowledged even by Fabians in their first decade or so. Arguments over methods of reaching socialism were thus, to a much greater degree than post-1917, disagreements over means rather than ends. Blueprints of the new society were rarely given but different ideas provoked much discussion of socialist organisation. Morris's News From Nowhere (1890) starts with a League discussion over the society of the future and was, in part, a reaction to Bellamy's statist, regimented vision of the future in Looking Backward (1889). Further, arguments over methods still undoubtedly belied differences that ultimately must reflect into the future society – from the reactionary Hyndman's concern with capitalist crisis, (Fabian) Sidney and Beatrice Webb's disillusion with existing political economy, and the ethical repulsion of alienated capitalist society. What was important in British socialism in the 1880s and 1890s was the differences of opinion over how the future society would come about: would there be a crisis of capitalism, an insurrection or would social evolution simply ease society to a higher stage? Differences and shifts of opinion were, of course, frequent but by the
early 1890s it was the parliamentary and increasingly reformist route that was emerging as the dominant strategy, with electoral requirements meaning minimum programmes. It was against this trend that Morris fought a rearguard for revolutionary clarity and it was this fight that Morris bequeathed to the later ‘impossibilists’.

A major part of these differences were attitudes towards the state and parliament and how far they could be used to bring about socialism. From the late-1880s, by which time legislation allowed working people to stand for election to municipal authorities, school boards, boards of guardians, and so on the socialist movement turned increasingly away from the necessity of socialist revolution and began to appeal to the working class on electoral terms. Thus direct appeals to workers and efforts to bring about a socialist majority went by the wayside as efforts shifted away from direct presentation of the socialist case and towards elections and the immediate improvement of social and material conditions by legislative action. Morris and the HSS sought to redress this balance, to restore the socialist movement to definite socialist aims. For the HSS, use of the state as a central means of establishing socialism was misguided. While representatives of a united and strong socialist party may, in future, be sent to parliament, the situation in the early 1890s simply demanded that more socialists be made. According to a Morris lecture in 1890:

I say, make Socialists. We Socialists can do nothing else that is useful, and preaching and teaching is not out of date for that purpose; but rather for those who like myself, do not believe in State Socialism, it is the only rational means of attaining to the New Order of Things.36

While ‘New Unionism’ had created a generation of workers who were demanding improvements to working and social conditions, their demands stopped a good deal short of anything like definite socialist aims. Many in the socialist movement saw the growth in trades unionism and a declining hostility to socialism from working men as an indication that socialist society was evolving or that new attitudes would allow representation in the legislature. Political opportunism based on these developments, it was thought, would gradually increase the demands made by the working class. It was these strategies that Morris and the HSS feared would lead to an electoral emphasis and piecemeal social and material improvements becoming the ends rather than the means of socialists. While use of the state may be the route chosen by some social-reformers, it should not be used as a veil of expediency by genuine socialists:

It may be, nay probably will be, necessary that various crude experiments in the direction of State Socialism should be tried, but we say if this be so, let them be advocated by those who believe that they see in them a solution of the social question rather than by those who, not so believing, merely wish to use the advocacy of them as a political expedient for strengthening their position as exponents of socialism.37
Morris clarified the position further in his 1893 lecture, *Communism*:

The question ... about all those political gains ... is not so much as to what advantage they may be to the public at large in the passing moment, or even to the working people, but rather what effect they will have towards converting the workers to an understanding of, and ardent desire for Socialism; true and complete Socialism I mean, what I should call Communism.\(^{38}\)

While socialists did not oppose social-reforms as such, these measures were not socialism, which if sidelined, or worse, confused with social reform measures would tend to obscure its necessity.\(^{39}\) In its *Statement of Principles* the HSS states that without definite socialist aims the working-class radicalism which had revived in the late 1880s would come to no greater end than the partial improvements that were being sought:

as Socialists, we would remind our brethren generally that, though we cannot but sympathise with all the struggles of the workers against their masters, however partial they may be, however much they fall short of complete and effective combination, yet we cannot fail to see that of themselves these partial struggles will lead nowhere; and that this must always be the case as long as the workers are the wage slaves of the employers.

We, therefore, earnestly urge the workers to lose no time in constituting a general combination of labour, whose object will be the abolition of privilege by means of obtaining for labour the complete control of the means of production, which must be the first step in the realisation of Socialism ... we appeal to all workers to understand their true position, to understand that they have no better hope of bettering their conditions save by general combination; but that, by means of that general combination they become irresistible, that their demands must be yielded to. But unless they know what to demand, they will not be really strong, nay without that knowledge, complete combination is impossible.\(^{40}\)

Thus, by pursuing electoral success and partial reforms the wider socialist movement was in fact deterring, or at best deferring socialist revolution by abandoning socialist propaganda for the new radicalism of the working class. In fact, rather than educating the working-class movement to increase its demands it was the socialist movement that was reducing its demands in the face of working-class radicalism. The aim of socialists needed to be firmly set on the society of the future and direct organisation towards this end. The *Statement of Principles* outlines clearly how the HSS saw its role in the socialist movement:

To further this militant society of labour we believe to be the business of all Socialists, but we would say a word about the part in this business which we believe should be the special work of the Hammersmith Socialist Society and others, who are neither State Socialists nor Anarchists.

We believe then, that it should be our special aim to make Socialists, by putting before people, and especially the working classes, the elementary truths
of Socialism; since we feel sure, in the first place, that in spite of the stir in the
ranks of labour there are comparatively few who understand what Socialism is,
or have had opportunities of arguing on the subject with those who have at
least begun to understand it; and, in the second place, we are no less sure that
before any definite Socialist action can be attempted, it must be backed up by a
great body of intelligent opinion – the opinion of a great mass of people who
are already Socialists, people who know what they want, and are prepared to
accept the responsibilities of self-government, which must form a part of their
claims.41

Definition of socialism was therefore important. In the opening paragraph of the
Statement of Principles the HSS defines its socialism in clear and cogent terms:

By Socialism, the Hammersmith Socialist Society understands the realisation of
a condition of society all embracing and all sufficing.

It believes that this great change must be effected by the conscious exertions
of those who have learned to know what Socialism is.

This change, it believes, must be an essential change in the basis of society:
the present basis is privilege for the few, and consequent servitude for the many;
the future basis will be equality of condition for all, which we firmly believe to
be the essence of true society.42

Given the aim of the HSS and its definition of socialism that were both
uncompromising, how did the Society propose to achieve the formidable task it
had set itself? The Rules of the Hammersmith Socialist Society gives the answer.
Essentially the Rules state that only socialists who agree with its definition and
principles of socialism – that is, definite socialists who could demonstrate their
understanding – could join, that it would rely on direct contact with the working
class to propagate socialist understanding and ‘make socialists’, and would be
democratic with elected officials and committees but no leader.

On seceding from the Socialist League on November 21st 1890 a committee
was formed to organise the activity of the new Society.43 The offices of the
Society, as laid down in the Rules, were filled and quarterly meetings of members
and Annual General Meetings were begun.44 Most importantly, activity was
started in earnest. The sole purpose of the Society was to ‘make socialists’ and it
attempted this with great enthusiasm, an enormous amount of time being spent by
relatively few members in fulfilling its object.

The major activity of the HSS was outdoor speaking which was pursued on
Sunday mornings and afternoons. The favoured venue for outdoor speaking was
Hammersmith Bridge where audiences of around three hundred were regularly
achieved.45 As well as outdoor speaking, lectures were given on Sunday evenings
at Kelmscott House with an additional lecture on Wednesday evenings during
the winter months. The list of speakers at these lectures shows an extraordinary
range of prominent socialists and reformers. Clearly, while revolutionary socialist
principles were foremost to the HSS, the Society was a body that sought to
challenge other socialists rather than stand aloof. As a means of achieving its
object it sought not just to appeal to working people uninitiated in socialist

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politics but also to engage with organisations and individuals who disagreed with the Society. It wished to correct the narrow dogmatic and deterministic SDF by offering a more all-encompassing vision and definition of socialism and to put the increasingly vote-seeking ILP and Fabian Society on more clear socialist lines. In a revealing lecture of 1895, Morris argues that the labour movement was, as the HSS had feared in 1890, now concerned simply with limited material and social improvements. Socialists, according to Morris, should go beyond these aims – to socialism itself. While he now rejected insurrection as a revolutionary pathway and accepted that a socialist party should send delegates to parliament, he qualified this by saying that they would be delegates under the instructions of a socialist party and would be there not to run capitalism but to abolish it. Morris had clearly revised his earlier strongly anti-state position but retained socialist principles at the heart of any policy of sending socialist representatives to parliament. More importantly, Morris claims that what was, above all, important was socialist unity and the building of a strong, genuinely socialist, party. There was room for differences of opinion amongst socialists but these had to be subservient to the central socialist aim, ‘to the old teaching and preaching of Socialism pure and simple’. It was the desire to bring this about which inspired the range of lectures and established Kelmscott House as a centre of socialist activity. It also resulted in an attempt at practical unity between the HSS, the SDF and the Fabian Society.

In December 1892 discussion between the organisations took place with the result of the formation of a Joint Committee consisting of five members from each body. Morris, George Bernard Shaw and Hyndman were given the task of drawing up a manifesto that could be the basis of united socialist action. The resulting Manifesto of English Socialists was issued on May 1st 1893. It is difficult to assess how serious both Shaw and Hyndman were about the move as there existed very little in the way of united activity outside of the Manifesto. On the face of it the text could have provided the basis for real unity. It suggested a programme of palliatives to satisfy the ‘stepping stones’ of the SDF and the gradualism of the Fabian Society whilst, for the HSS, making clear that these were merely temporary measures not detracting from the ultimate need to abolish capitalism and establish socialism. It is probable that the SDF and HSS might have coped with the document but the revolutionary tone was probably too harsh for the Fabian Society to work with. The attempt at unity by the Joint Committee was at any rate a resounding failure with very little in the way of practical unity coming from their efforts.

Clearly, however, the HSS were prepared to compromise for the sake of socialist unity by advocating reforms provided they were firmly shackled to the socialist aim:

The first step towards transformation and re-organisation must necessarily be in the direction of the limitation of class robbery, and the consequent raising of the standard of life for the individual. In this direction certain measures have been brought within the scope of practical politics; and we name them as having been urged and supported originally and chiefly by Socialists, and advocated by them and still, not ... as solutions of social wrongs, but as
tending to lessen the evils of the existing regime; so that individuals of the useful classes, having more leisure and less anxiety, may be able to turn their attention to the only real remedy for their position of inferiority – to wit, the supplanting of the present state by a society of equality of condition.\(^{48}\)

This position was clearly at variance with the general position of the Society with regard to support for political action that, according to the HSS, was futile for the ends sought. Clearly tension existed on the point at which socialist revolution was compromised by political expediency. In 1891 a member was lost through resignation after agreement by the HSS that individual members of the Society could help an SDF candidate standing for election to a school board. The Society, however, did not discourage voting as the League had done.\(^{49}\) Allowing individual members to assist at elections for other socialist bodies and encouraging workers to use their votes at elections,\(^{50}\) the HSS still maintained a hostile attitude to involvement of the HSS itself in electoral activity. It was, according to a member of the Society (Davies) present at a meeting of socialist societies supporting the SDF candidate to the school board elections, ‘contrary to its principles’ although ‘its members were free to take part in the London School election’\(^{51}\). Although there was a more pragmatic approach from the HSS to political action than there had been from the Morris wing of the League, there was still a strong opposition to the support of ‘futile’ reforms. This is evidenced particularly in John Carruthers’ pamphlet *Socialism and Radicalism* (1893) which stressed, as Morris did, that political action was useless unless a strong socialist party existed, that is, one that could achieve a majority in parliament:

... it is better for us who are socialists to continue to preach our doctrines but not to take part in political quarrels unless we can do so independently of existing parties who, however, much they differ in other matters, are agreed in deadly hatred of Socialism. I don’t mean to say that those who want to vote should not do so, but only that Socialists should not take an active and leading part in politics.\(^{52}\)

Apart from direct public contact through speaking and lectures the HSS also laid down in its rules that it would further its aim by publications. To this end the Society produced several pamphlets. The inside back cover of the *Manifesto of English Socialists* displays an advertisement for the HSS and its literature, available from the Literature Secretary courtesy of Kelmscott House. Most of the titles were by Morris and included *Dream of John Ball, News from Nowhere, Art and Socialism, Useful Work vs. Useless Toil, Monopoly, True and False Society and Reward of Labour*. Other titles included Andreas Scheu’s *What’s to be Done*, John Carruthers’ *Political Economy of Socialism* and the *Statement of Principles*. The Society also offered a cartoon by Walter Crane, ‘The Triumph of Labour’ and fraternally promoted ‘Fabian and other Socialist Tracts’.

As well as these pamphlets the Society published, from October 1891, a four-page monthly journal under the title *Hammersmith Socialist Record* that continued until 1895. The purpose of the *HSR* was as a communications vehicle for the Society’s membership and other interested socialists, its main function
being to list the lecture programme for the coming month and to list the publications available. A front and back page editorial was included which commented every month on the general socialist case and, as far as was possible in a limited monthly space, current events connected with the labour and socialist movements. As a propaganda tool the journal was not effective comparable to the journals of the other socialist organisations. Before the HSR was published the Society sold copies of first Justice, then Labour Leader, followed by Clarion. It is probable that the HSS continued to utilise these journals after the publication of HSR.

On Morris’s death in October 1896 the Society, dependent as it had been on Morris’s ideas, efforts and, not least, premises, on the advice of a committee set up to consider the future of the HSS, decided that:

... the Society would justify its continued existence by the publication of these and similar pamphlets dealing with the question of Socialism from the standpoint of the Society as formulated in its Statement of Principles.\(^5\)

Besides Morris’s death the activities of the Society had been declining from its early years. Minutes and reports indicate a declining enthusiasm from members,\(^5\) increasingly brief minutes through 1896, and, most importantly, declining audiences at outdoor pitches. However, even publishing activity was stopped by the end of the year and the last meeting, a social gathering, was held in January 1897, the business of the Society having been wound up the previous month.\(^5\)

In the face of a socialist and labour movement continuing to move away from the course advocated by Morris and the HSS, the Society’s impact was as small as its aim had been demanding of its members and resources. Throughout its course the Society attracted only a small number of new members besides those who had already been in the old Hammersmith League Branch. There were a small number of little-known stalwarts of the Society but the Society also contained a high proportion of notable members such as Walter Crane, Philip Webb, Gustav Von Holst and others, all no doubt attracted to some extent by the association of the Society with Morris and the Arts and Crafts Movement. Despite the intellectual vitality of the HSS it remained both a geographically and politically isolated group and its activity, although impressively prolific from few members, was hopelessly small for the task it had set itself. It is unfortunate, from the standpoint of the early twenty-first century, that Morris’s socialism and the activity of the HSS did not succeed in its revolutionary object with other contemporary radical organisations and the working class. It did, however, influence the 1904 ‘impossibilist’ revolt in the SDF, forming a tradition of socialism-and-nothing-but that extends from elements of the Socialist League, through the HSS and the later (mainly Glasgow-based) Socialist Labour Party to the still-extant Socialist Party of Great Britain.

Following a century of failed labourism that has brought only moderate reforms to rampant capitalism and the Leninist state capitalist projects, it is long overdue for the left to reassess itself and return (as the HSS pushed briefly for and later ‘impossibilist’ socialists have continued to maintain),\(^5\) to definite socialist aims. Morris’s relevance to us, in the twenty-first century, surely remains the
comprehensiveness of the socialist vision that he held out.\textsuperscript{57} I do not share the pessimism of the late Nick Salmon, who, regarding the failure of socialism in the twentieth-century, perceived that the solution to capitalism had not been found. Perhaps it is the wrong way to look at history. The failure of socialism to date does not detract from its necessity. As long as capitalism persists, socialism has a future. \textsuperscript{1} I believe rather that Salmon nonetheless hinted at the way forward when, admiring Morris's practical socialism, the compelling vision of a future for the choosing, he stated: 'However much you preach the class-war and the inevitability of the revolution you have to convince the people'.\textsuperscript{58}

\textbf{NOTES}


4 Particularly following the disastrous failure of ILP candidates at the 1895 general election.


8 The SDF had originally been dismissive of the new ILP on its formation suggesting that socialists should belong to the party that already existed. In the latter half of the 1890s, however, when the SDF took a more positive approach to socialist unity, the ILP had already begun courting the trades unions in the light of the 1895 failure and the ILP leadership managed to scupper a

Keith Laybourn believes that socialist unity was never likely, Stephen Yeo has argued that unity was not possible after the mid-1890s, David Howell has suggested that it was unlikely after 1900-05, and Martin Crick has argued that it was possible until the Great War. See Keith Laybourn, ‘The Failure of Socialist Unity in Britain, c. 1893–1914’, Transactions of the Royal Historical Society 4 (1994; sixth series), pp. 153-175; Keith Laybourn, ‘A Story of Buried Talents and Wasted Opportunities: The Failure of the Socialist Unity Movement in Yorkshire, 1911-14’, The Journal of Regional and Local Studies 7: 2 (Autumn 1987), pp. 15-31; David Howell, British Workers and the ILP (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983); Stephen Yeo, ‘A New Life’; Martin Crick, “A Call to Arms”: The Struggle for Socialist Unity in Britain, 1883-1914’, in James, Jowitt & Laybourn (eds.), Centennial History of the ILP (Krumlin: Ryburn Academic, 1992), pp. 181-204; Martin Crick, A History of the SDF (Keele: Ryburn Press, 1994).


Mark Bevir, ‘H. M. Hyndman: A Re-reading and Reassessment’, History of Political Thought 12 (1991), pp. 125-145; Mark Bevir, ‘The British SDF 1880-1885: From O’Brienism to Marxism’, International Review of Social History 37 (1992), pp. 207-29. O’Brienite’s were followers of James Bronterre O’Brien (1804-1864), a foremost Chartist, and advocated political solutions to social and economic problems. The debate on Hyndman has not been conclusive. His personality and political peculiarities have been criticised by R. Page Arnot, William Morris: the Man and Myth (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1964), Chushichi Tsuzuki, Hyndman and British Socialism (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961) and Eric Hobsbawm, Labouring Men (London: Weidenfield and Nicholson, 1964), pp. 231-38. This criticism has been countered by Mark Bevir in the above articles and by Martin Crick in The History of the SDF (Keele: Ryburn Press, 1994). Doubtless, Hyndman’s personality is open to criticism in light of contemporary opinion but Hyndman was, as Keith Laybourn has commented, primarily a personality of his age, and Stanley Pierson, Marxism and the Origins of British Socialism (London: Cornell University Press, 1973), has argued that Hyndman was influenced by Lasallean national (or state) socialism counter to the dominant intellectual traditions of British Marxism such as republicanism, utilitarianism, Carlylian, Ruskinian and Romantic criticism, secularism and religion.


This was an approach to politics that focused on the individual and knowledge and understanding before the possibility of meaningful social change. This political methodology has a record of being condemned to the historical graveyard; from Richard Carlile, Spenceianism, Owenism and ‘Knowledge’ Chartists to its Marxian equivalents in the late-nineteenth century and early-twentieth century such as William Morris, the Socialist League, the Socialist Labour Party and the Socialist Party of Great Britain. All of these organisations looked to the importance of principle and correct theory and the need for popular understanding before the ‘new society’ could become a possibility (to this day the S.P.G.B. maintains a test to ensure entrants understand its principles). This trend thus has the ‘utopian’ character of revealing a position whose validity will lead to mass support and thus to social change. In relation to the S.P.G.B., ‘utopian’ and ‘determinist’ approaches meet – with class-struggle producing socialist consciousness but with socialists needing (especially into the later-twentieth century) to propagate partly through appealing to social ‘alternatives’. The ‘unrevolutionary’ or ‘arm-chair’ nature often ascribed to the Marxian ‘making-socialist’s’ strategy is rather unjustified. The socialist idea emerges, as it were, through the class struggle but, as we know, not to date amongst large sections of the population. It is possible to be a revolutionary party without a mass base, that is, to favor principles over courting popular support on a reduced programme. Socialism is needed as ‘theory’ but its inter-relation with support would be ‘practice’, a crucial dialectical position essential for the emergence of socialism from capitalism – liberation, through practice, of the idea. It obviously improves the prospect of socialism not at all to shift the goalposts as the practice on a reduced programme is not between socialism and its support but between the (most likely) reform and its support. With little support, the socialist idea acquires importance in relation to erosion or expediency.

23 The history of Morris and the Socialist League has been well covered, the best examples being E. P. Thompson, William Morris: Romantic to Revolutionary (London: Merlin, 1977); Fiona MacCarthy, William Morris: A Life for our Time (London: Faber and Faber, 1994); R. Page Arnot, William Morris.
24 Nicholas Salmon, a staunch Morrisian, did exactly this with regard to the HSS in ‘William Morris: The Final Socialist Years’, p.13.
25 In any case European social democracy increasingly pursued the path of British labour by abandoning all claims to revolutionary ambition, removing the apparent anomaly of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century politics.


29 E. Belfort Bax left the League in 1887 and the Avelings in an 1888 dispute – all rejoined the SDF. At the first ILP conference E. P. Thompson notes that several old Leaguers were present including J. L. Mahon, A. K. Donald, F. W. Jowett, F. Pickles and A. Mattison, all from northern Britain.

30 The League had a serious dispute over political action in 1888 leading to the Bloomsbury Branch, including the Avelings, A. K. Donald, J. L. Mahon and others seceding from the SL and forming the Bloomsbury Socialist Society, and the Labour Emancipation League withdrawing its affiliation. The ‘Leftists’ in the SL thereafter formed a majority of the executive Council.


32 Adam Buick, ‘A Revolutionary Socialist’, *Journal of the William Morris Society* 6: 1 (1984), pp. 18-28. The ‘transitional’ stage often crudely associated with Morris and socialist theory in general is too often exaggerated, the result of (deliberate or otherwise) Leninist ideological creep. Difficulties and severe struggle anticipated in socialist revolution and afterwards did not correspond to a ‘two-stage’ revolution from lower socialism to higher communism. Socialism and communism were used far more interchangeably than has generally been allowed, Morris’s ‘Communism’ being a defence of the meaning of socialism against an increasingly statist vision. The overlap of the anti-authoritarian socialist position (though perhaps little else) with Oscar Wilde has been noted in Peter Faulkner, ‘William Morris and Oscar Wilde’, *Journal of the William Morris Society* 14: 4 (2002), pp. 25-40. Neither is there a choice to be made with Morris between Marxism and anarchism as small-scale production and ‘sustainability’ were clearly compatible, for Morris, with the utilisation and advance of science and technological application; see Dennis Bartels, ‘The Moral Marxism of William Morris’, *Journal of the William Morris Society* 13: 4 (2000), pp. 10-15; Dennis Bartels, ‘Was William Morris a ‘Natural Luddite’?’, *Journal of the William Morris Society* 14: 2 (2001), pp. 43-46. A modern attempt by a Morrisian and socialist to outline the productive and social possibilities of contemporary technological advances has been made by Ron Cook, *Yes, Utopia! – We Have the Technology* (Birmingham: privately published, 2001).

33 Eric Hobsbawm has gone further and suggested that there was little between Liberal, socialist and anarchist visions of the ‘gentle anarchy’ they desired. See *Age of Revolution, 1789-1848* (London: Abacus, 1999 edition), p. 295: ‘What
distinguishes the various members of the ideological family descended from humanism and the Enlightenment, liberal, socialist, communist or anarchist, is not the gentle anarchy which is the utopia of all of them, but the methods of achieving it'.

34 See, for example, Stephen Coleman, *Three Early Socialists on the Way Ahead* (Bristol: Theommes Press, 1996). Dennis Bartels, ‘William Morris and the USSR’, *Journal of the William Morris Society* 14: 4 (2002), pp. 41-51, puts forward the astonishing claim that Morris’s thought was in some ways a precursor to ‘democratic centralism’. This theory is based on an exaggerated reading of Morris’s belief that a tight and committed party would be required for successful socialist revolution.


38 Morton (ed.), *Political Writings*, pp. 227-40.

39 For an application of such a position see the pamphlets of the Socialist Party of Great Britain around the radical liberal settlement of the 1940s: *Beveridge Re-organises Poverty* (London: SPGB, 1943); *Family Allowances: A Socialist Analysis* (London: SPGB, 1943); *Nationalisation or Socialism?* (London: SPGB, 1945).

40 *Statement of Principles*, pp. 7-8.

41 *Statement of Principles*, p. 6.


43 On November 21st 1890 the Hammersmith Branch ceased its affiliation with the League and agreed to reconstitute itself as the HSS on a motion by Davie and Beasley. The organising committee consisted of Morris, Bullock, Walker, Mordhurst, Davies, Tochatti, Watt and Tarleton. HSS Papers, BL Add. MS 45893.

44 The officers elected were Beasley as Treasurer, Walker as Secretary, Mrs. Sparling as Librarian, Radford as Lecture Secretary and Bullock as Literature Secretary.

45 Other speaking pitches included Cage Square, Uxbridge Road Station, Waltham Green and presumably many street corners. Members not speaking would sell literature or carry the HSS banner and processions often took place to the speaking pitch.

46 William Morris, ‘What We Have to Look For’, 30 March 1895, BL Add. MS 45,333.

47 Although Hyndman states in his autobiography that Morris wanted the ILP to be included, the attitude of the SDF, that the ILP was not a socialist body, prevented this.


This declining enthusiasm is indicated through, for example, the employment of a clerk to carry out the day-to-day business of the Society, reports of members forgetting to sell literature or to take the HSS banner to meetings and other subtle indications in the HSS Papers which suggest a less invigorated membership by 1896.

The most consistent and only surviving party of impossibilist opposition to labourism and state capitalism is the Socialist Party of Great Britain which still publishes the monthly Socialist Standard and pamphlet editions of Morris’s socialist literature (SPGB, 52 Clapham High Street, London, SW4 7UN). For a detailed analysis of the SPGB see David Perrin’s The Socialist Party of Great Britain: Britain’s Oldest Socialist Party (Wrexham: Bridge Books, 2000).

See, for example, Stan Parker, Stop Supporting Capitalism! Start Building Socialism! (London: SPP, 2002), pp.106-12. Against a trend that, while admiring Morris’s vision, sees his relevance not in a comprehensive socialist revolution (Morris’s solution) but in parts of his thought to suit the ends of various reformist projects, from ecology to education, see, for example, Ruth Kinna, William Morris: The Art of Socialism (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2000), pp.213-16; John Payne, Journey up the Thames: William Morris and Modern England (Nottingham: Five Leaves, 2001).