William Morris
Socialism and Anarchism
1889

Retrieved on 3 March 2011 from www.marxists.org
First printed as a letter in *Commonweal*, May 5th, 1889.

en.anarchistlibraries.net

Socialism and Anarchism

William Morris

1889

In answer to our comrade Blackwell's suggestion and in default of someone else beginning that free discussion he speaks of, I wish to note down a few thoughts suggested by reading the clauses of the Anarchist Congress at Valentia, as stated by our comrade; premising that I do so in no polemical spirit, but simply giving my own thoughts and hopes for the future for what they may be worth.

I will begin by saying that I call myself a Communist, and have no wish to qualify that word by joining any other to it. The aim of Communism seems to me to be the complete equality of condition for all people; and anything in a Socialist direction which stops short of this is merely a compromise with the present condition of society, a halting-place on the road to the goal. This is the only logical outcome of any society which is other than a close company sustained by violence for the express purpose of "the exploitation of man by man" in the interest of the strongest. Our present "society" dominated by capitalism, the society of contract, is a form of this class-society which has been forced upon those who hold the slave ideal by the growth of knowledge and the acquirement by man of mastery over the forces of nature. The history of "society" since

the fall of feudalism has been the gradual freeing of class or slave-society from the fetters of superstition, so that it might develop naturally within its prescribed limits of "exploitation of man by man," and that stupendous and marvellously rapid growth in power and resources of modern slave-society is due to this shaking off of superstition.

Communism also will have to keep itself free of superstition. Its ethics will have to be based on the recognition of natural cause and effect, and not on rules derived from a priori ideas of the relation of man to the universe or some imagined ruler of it; and from these two things, the equality of condition and the recognition of the cause and effect of material nature, will grow all Communistic life. So far I think I can see clearly; but when I try to picture to myself the forms which that life will take, I confess I am at fault, and I think we must all be so. Most people who can be said to think at all are now beginning to see that the realization of Socialism is certain; although many can see no further than a crude and incomplete State Socialism, which very naturally repels many from Socialism altogether. All genuine Socialists admit that Communism is the necessary development of Socialism; but I repeat, further than this all must be speculative; and surely in speculating on the future of society we should try to shake ourselves clear of mere phrases: especially as many of them will cease to have a meaning when the change comes that we all of us long for. And here I join issue with our Anarchist-Communist friends, who are somewhat authoritative on the matter of authority, and not a little vague also. For if freedom from authority means the assertion of the advisability or possibility of an individual man doing what he pleases always and under all circumstances, this is an absolute negation of society, and makes Communism as the highest expression of society impossible; but when you begin to qualify this assertion of the right to do as you please by adding "as long as you don't interfere with other people's rights to do the same," the exercise of some kind of authority becomes necessary. If in-

dividuals are not to coerce others, there must somewhere be an authority which is prepared to coerce them not to coerce; and that authority must clearly be collective. And there are other difficulties besides this crudest and most obvious one.

The bond of Communistic society will be voluntary in the sense that all people will agree in its broad principles when it is fairly established, and will trust to it as affording mankind the best kind of life possible. But while we are advocating equality of condition — i.e., due opportunity free to everyone for the satisfaction of his needs — do not let us forget the necessary (and beneficent) variety of temperament, capacity and desires which exists amongst men about everything outside the region of the merest necessaries; and though many, or, if you will, most of these different desires could be satisfied without the individual clashing with collective society, some of them could not be. Any community conceivable will sometimes determine on collective action which, without being in itself immoral or oppressive, would give pain to some of its members; and what is to be done then if it happens to be a piece of business which must be either done or left alone? would the small minority have to give way or the large majority? A concrete example will be of use here, especially as it affects my temperament. I have always believed that the realization of Socialism would give us an opportunity of escaping from that grievous flood of utilitarianism which the full development of the society of contract has cursed us with; but that would be in the long run only; and I think it quite probable that in the early days of Socialism the reflex of the terror of starvation, which so oppresses us now, would drive us into excesses of utilitarianism. Indeed, there is a school of Socialists now extant who worship utilitarianism with a fervour of fatuity which is perhaps a natural consequence of their assumption of practicality. So that it is not unlikely that the public opinion of a community would be in favour of cutting down all the timber in England, and turning the country into a big Bonanza farm or a market-garden

under glass. And in such a case what could we do? who objected "for the sake of life to cast away the reasons for living," when we had exhausted our powers of argument? Clearly we should have to submit to authority. And a little reflection will show us many such cases in which the collective authority will weigh down individual opposition, however, reasonable, without a hope for its being able to assert itself immediately; in such matters there must be give and take: and the objectors would have to give up the lesser for the greater. In short, experience shows us that wherever a dozen thoughtful men shall meet together there will be twelve different opinions on any subject which is not a dry matter of fact (and often on that too); and if those twelve men want to act together, there must be give and take between them, and they must agree on some common rule of conduct to act as a bond between them, or leave their business undone. And what is this common bond but authority — that is, the conscience of the association voluntarily accepted in the first instance.

Furthermore, when we talk of the freedom of the individual man, we must not forget that every man is a very complex animal, made up of many different moods and impulses; no man is always wise, or wise in all respects. Philip sober needs protection against Philip drunk, or he may chance to wake up from his booze in a nice mess. Surely we all of us feel that there is a rascal or two in each of our skins besides the other or two who want to lead manly and honourable lives, and do we not want something to appeal to on behalf of those better selves of ours? and that something is made up of the aspirations of our better selves, and is the social conscience without which there can be no true society, and which even a false society is forced to imitate, and so have a sham social conscience — what we sometimes call hypocrisy.

Now I don't want to be misunderstood. I am not pleading for any form of arbitrary or unreasonable authority, but for a public conscience as a rule of action: and by all means let

us have the least possible exercise of authority. I suspect that many of our Communist-Anarchist friends do really mean that, when they pronounce against all authority. And with equality of condition assured for all men, and our ethics based on reason, I cannot think that we need fear the growth of a new authority taking the place of the one which we should have destroyed, and which we must remember is based on the assumption that equality is impossible and that slavery is an essential condition of human society. By the time it is assumed that all men's needs must be satisfied according [to] the measure of the common wealth, what may be called the political side of the question would take care of itself.