Development of Modern Society

William Morris

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Part 1

All the progressive races of man have gone through a stage of development during which society has been very different to what it is now. At present there is a very definite line of distinction drawn between the personal life of a man and his life as a member of society. As a rule, the only direction in which this social life is felt is in that of his nearest kindred — his wife, children, parents, brothers and sisters. This is so much the case that we to-day have given to the word *relations* (which should mean all those with whom a man has serious and continuous dealings) a fresh meaning, and made it signify only those near members of kinship aforesaid. For the rest most civilised men acknowledge no responsibility. Though the word State is in everybody's mouth, most people have but the vaguest idea as to what it means; it is even generally considered as a synonym to the Government, which also indicates either the heads of one of the political parties, or the vague entity called by Carlyle the parish constable — in other words, the executive power of the ruling classes in our society. So little do we feel any responsibilities to this hardly conceivable thing, the State, that while few indeed feel any loyalty towards it, most men do not realise it sufficiently even to feel any enmity against it — except, perhaps, when the tax-gatherer's hand is on the knocker.

Now all this is so far the result of a long series of history, which I must just hint at before one comes to the condition of the workman during its different stages, — a series of events which tended to give to the word *property* the meaning which it now has; a series of events which tended more and more to consider *things* as the important matter of consideration rather than *persons*; which I may illustrate by the fact that nowadays the law looks upon the *estate* as of more importance than the user of it, as for instance in the case of the estate of a lunatic, which it will defend to the utmost against all attacks, and treat as if it had a genuine life and soul capable of feeling all injuries and pains, while all the time the lunatic is under restraint.

I will now contrast this entire ignoring of the community (for that will be a better word than *State* to use at present) with the conditions under which men lived in earlier ages of the world, and through which, as I have said, all the progressive races have passed, some of them so early that when we first meet them in history they are already passing out of it into the next development. In this early period the individual is so far from feeling no responsibility to the community, that all his responsibilities have relation to the community. Indeed, this sense of responsibility, as we shall see later on, has only been completely extinguished since the introduction of the present economical and political system — since the death of feudality, in short: but in the period I am thinking about it was a quite unquestioned habit. The unit of society, the first, and in the beginning the only bond, was the narrowest form of clan, called the *gens*. This was an association of persons who were traceably of one blood or kinship. Intermarriage between its members was forbidden, or rather was not even dreamed of: a man of the Eagle gens could have no sexual intercourse with an Eagle woman, nor thought of it. All property was in common within the gens, and descent was traced, not through the father, but through the mother, who was the obvious parent of the child. Whatever *competition* (war, you may call it, for competition was simple in those days), was outside the group of blood relations, each of which felt no responsibility for other groups of their members. But the fact that intermarriage was impossible within these groups brought about a larger association. Since an Eagle could not marry an Eagle, the Eagles must either get their wives by violent robbery in a haphazard fashion from outsiders, or have some other society at hand into which they could marry, and who could marry into their society. It

used to be thought that the violent robbery was the method, but I believe the second method was the one used. There were groups of neighbours at hand who were recognised as belonging to the same stock, but who were not too near in blood to make marriage impossible. Between these groups there was affinity, therefore; the Eagles could intermarry with the Owls, the Sparrows, the Cats, or what not, according to a somewhat intricate system, and this quite without violence. And also between the clans or gentes who composed these tribes there would be no war, and the use of whatever land they fed their stock upon or cultivated (for in some places or ages this gentile-tribal system lasted well into the agricultural period) was arranged peaceably in a communal method.

Now the tribe in which a common ancestor (worshipped as a god) was always assumed, and was generally a fact, tended to federate with other tribes who still felt that they belonged to a common stock, who thus formed an association called by our ancestors the *thiod*, or people; an association much looser, of course, than that of the gens or tribe, but like those, founded on an idea of common kindred; founded on the personal kinship of all its members to the god-ancestor, and not on locality or the holding of certain property or position. The offices of the body, under whatever names they went, were appointed by the tribesmen for their personal qualities to perform definite duties. There was no central executive body; every freeman had certain necessary duties to perform, a shadow of which still exists in our jury, who were originally the neighbours called together to utter their finding (without direction from a judge) as to how such a one had come by his death, what was to do between two neighbours who could not agree, and so forth. If a man was injured, it was the duty of the members of his gens or clan to take up the injury as an injury to the community. This is the meaning of the blood-feud of which we hear so much in the early literature of the North, and of the Celtic clans, and a survival of which still exists among out-of-the-way folks. The practice of the vendetta in Corsica, *e.g.*, does not indicate that the Corsicans are a specially vindictive people; it is a survival of the tribal customary law: its sentimentalising by novelists and poets is a matter of ignorance — naturally enough, I admit. "Government" or administration, or whatever else you may call it, was in this condition of society as direct as it ever can be; nor had government by majority been invented — *e.g.*, if the clans could not agree to unite in war, the war could not go on, unless any clan chose to go to war by itself.

I am conscious of not explaining fully the difference between such a state of society and ours; but it is indeed difficult to do so now, when all our ideas and the language which expresses them have been for so many ages moulded by such a totally different society. But I must, at least, try to make you understand that the whole of the duties of a freeman in this society had reference to the community of which he formed a part, and that he had no interests but the interest of the community; the assertion of any such private interests would have been looked upon as a crime, or rather a monstrosity, hardly possible to understand. This feudal union of the tribes is the last state of society under barbarism; but before I go on to the next stage, I must connect it with our special subject, the condition of productive labour.

With the development of the clans into federated tribes came a condition of organised aggressive war, since all were recognised as enemies outside of the tribe or federation; and with this came the question what was to be done with the prisoners taken in battle, and, furthermore, what was to be done with the tribe conquered so entirely as not to be able to defend its possessions, the land, which it used. Chattel slavery was the answer to the one question, serfdom to the second. You see this question was bound to come up in some form, as soon as the productive powers of man had grown to a certain point. In the very early stages of society slaves are of no use, be-

cause your slave will die unless you allow him to consume all that he produces; it is only when by means of tools and the organisation of labour that he can produce more than is absolutely necessary for his livelihood, that you can take anything from him. Robbery only begins when property begins; so that slavery doesn't begin till tribes are past the mere hunter period. When they go to war they only save their prisoners to have some fun out of them by torturing them, as the redskins did, unless, perhaps, as sometimes happened, they adopt them into the tribe, which also the redskins did at times. But in the pastoral stage slaves become possible, and when you come to the agricultural stage (to say nothing of further developments) they become necessary till the time when privilege is destroyed and all men are equal. There are, then, three conditions of mankind, mere gregarious organised savagery, slavery, and social equality. When you once have come to that conclusion you must also come to this deduction from it, that if you shrink from any sacrifice to the Cause of Socialism it must be because we are either weak or criminal, either cowards or tyrants — perhaps both.

Well, this last stage of barbarism, that of the federated tribes, gave way in ancient history, the history of the Greeks and Romans, into the first stage of civilisation. The life of the city, and in mediaeval history into feudalism; it is under the latter that the development of the treatment of the conquered tribe as serfs is the most obvious; serfdom being the essence of mediaeval society proper, and its decay beginning with the decline of serfdom. But, undoubtedly, there were serfs in the classical period; that is to say an inferior class to the freemen, who were allowed to get their own livelihood on the condition of their performing certain services for them, and with a certain status, though a low one, which raised them above the condition of the chattel-slave, whose position was not recognised at all more than that of his fellow labourer, the horse or the ass. The Helots, for example, were the serfs rather than the slaves of the Spartans, and there were other instances both among the Greeks and the Romans of labourers in a similar position.

However, chattel slavery as opposed to serfdom is the characteristic form of servitude in the ancient city life. In that life you must understand the idea of the merging of the individual into the community was still strong, although *property* had come into existence, and had created a political condition of society under which *things* were growing to be of more moment than *persons*. But the community had got to be an abstraction, and it was to that abstraction, and not to the real visible body of persons that individual interests were to be sacrificed. This is more obvious among the Romans than the Greeks, whose mental individuality was so strong and so various, that no system could restrain it; so that when that system began to press heavily upon them they could not bear it, and in their attempts to escape from its consequences fell into the mere corruption of competitive tyranny at an early period. The Romans, on the other hand, without art or literature, a hard and narrow-minded race, cultivated this worship of the city into an over-mastering passion, so fierce and so irrational that their history before their period of corruption reads more like that of a set of logical demons bent on torturing themselves and everybody else, than a history of human beings. They must be credited with the preservation of the art and literature of Greece (though with its corruptions and stultification as well), and for the rest I think the world owes them little but its curse, unless indeed we must accept them as a terrible example of over-organisation. Of their state one may say what one of their poets said of their individual citizens, when they were sunk in their well-earned degradation, that for the sake of life they cast away the reasons for living.

Part 2

But further, you must not fail to remember that the aspirations and nobility of sacrifice of the ancient city life were for [a] limited class only. In the old tribal life the slaves were not an important class, and also had easements, and even a kind of position which we do not associate with slave life, scarcely even with serfdom; as one may see in Homer, who, writing at a time when the tribal society was rapidly merging into city-life, gives us, for example, such a picture of a slave as Eumœus, who had at any rate plenty of pigs to eat, and also had a slave of his own "bought with his own wealth." But as the power of production increased and commerce with it, such laziness and pieces of unthrift went out of fashion, and though when a slave was valuable as a grammarian, a schoolmaster, an astronomer, or what not, his position was not intolerable; yet the general condition of slaves is best indicated by such facts as that they could not contract marriage, their evidence in a law case could only be taken under torture, and so forth. Among the Romans the idea of slavery was understood according to the pitiless logic characteristic of that people, *e.g.*, the debtor when delivered over to his creditors as a slave, could be divided among them in the most literal manner; they could cut him up in pieces and carry away each his dividend to do what they pleased with.

The equality, therefore, of the classical period, that splendid ideal of equality of duties and rights, only applied to the freemen of the clan as in the earlier times; but, as aforesaid, those outside the pale of that equality were of much more importance than they had been. At first, both in Greece and Rome, a great deal of the field-work was done by the freemen; the family were only helped in it by the slaves. Also a great deal of the handicraft was done either by poor free citizens, who could not afford to possess slaves, or by the strangers (metœci), who had no political rights, but were nobody's property; though even then the great mass of production was performed by the man or woman out of the labour-market, in which the selling of a human being was more obvious than it is at present. But as society in general grew richer, and the occupations fell more and more under the division of labour system, slave labour increased very much, till in the last days of the Roman republic the proportions of slave to free labour relatively to the handicrafts and agriculture had quite changed. The land, the *ownership* of which had been common in the early days, and the *use* divided among the citizens, had now got into the hands of big and very big landlords, who cultivated them wholly by slave-labour, superintendence and all, the livelihood being doled out to these poor devils on strict commercial principles, such as regulate the feed of a horse or cow, or an English labouring man. The despair of men so treated shook the Roman State in one tremendous slave-mutiny, that of Spartacus, and tormented society for centuries in countless minor mutinies by sea and land, till in the novels of the later Græco-Roman civilisation (which are doubtless mere imitations of earlier works), adventures with organised bands of brigands and pirates form the stock incidents of the tale.

All this had been developing from the hey-day of Greek civilisation, but it did not blossom fully till the rise and growth of a monied middle-class in Rome had exaggerated and confirmed all the evils that were sure to be born out of a system of privileged freemen, who as they got richer got idler and more corrupt, and chattel-slaves, who as their masters got more corrupt, lost more and more of the alleviations of their lot which they had in earlier times; probably because their masters worked with them and lived pretty hardly like themselves, and could feel that instinctive sympathy which fellowship in labour instils into a man. Indeed, that loose easy-going generosity, that good-nature, in a word, of which there are indications in the Homeric poems, and which is

found in fuller measure though in a more brutal form in the old English Tory squire ideal, you must not expect to find in the highly cultivated Greek citizen, who was mostly a prig; or in the energetic public-spirited Roman, who was mainly a jailer.

By the time I have been speaking of, Roman civilised society had come to be composed in the main of a privileged class of very rich men, whose business was war, politics and pleasure; and money-making as an instrument of these enjoyments; of their hangers-on forming a vast parasitical army; of a huge population of miserable slaves; and of another population of free men (so-called) kept alive by doles of food, and contented with peoples palaces in the form of theatrical and gladiatorial shows. That is, the free citizen had become an idler, either a rich luxurious one, or a pauper, and the work was done by men under the most obvious form of compulsion.

Thus was classical society, founded on the corruption of the society of the tribes by the institution of private property, brought to a dead-lock, the history of which is indeed a dreary page of the world's story. Art and literature are not forgotten, not buried, but for want of courage and invention are allowed to walk about like galvanised corpses of what was once so gloriously alive. Virtue? Does it exist at all? In high places there is none of it, nay, not even a sense of the lack of it. Virtue is to be found only in such places as the ranks of wild sectaries, outcasts from society. Warlike heroism? Time was when Hannibal a conqueror beset the city, and the stout-hearted citizens coolly bought and sold the use of the land he encamped on, and the greatest general that the world has seen drew off hopeless. Time was again and a Gothic chief lay before Rome preparing for its storm, and *his* estimate of the valour of the Roman citizens when the envoys appealed to his prudence and asked him not to drive such a huge population to despair, was given in the words "The thicker the hay, the easier to mow." In short, virtue had been used for acquiring power and riches; the bargain had been made, the riches spent, and the virtue gone; nothing was left. So it has been, so it will be, while violence and greed are the foundations of prosperity.

Such was the result of the organisation of Rome. If the ancient civilisation had been alone in the world then, if there had been nothing strong and progressive outside the world of civilisation, as is now the case, what would have happened? Who can say? Probably a more complete break up than that which followed on the downfall of Rome. As it was the world was delivered from its deadlock by the advent of the tribes of the North and the East, who were, when the Romans first showed consciousness of them other than by meeting them in battle, as specially in the pages of Tacitus, in a condition not differing much from that of the Latins themselves when they first began to wall round the hills beside the Tiber. They were, in fact, in their later days of tribal society. The story of the way in which they over-ran the empire and furnished fresh blood to its worn-out population is well known enough. I can only wish that we had the story as told by the conquerors to set beside the naturally querulous one of the conquered, who, of course, did not like the process of their being improved out of existence. The story would then have been less empty of local and individual interest than it is now. In any case, however, the broad facts remain, which resolve themselves at last in the foundation of the feudal system; which was, in the main, the development of the customs of the Celtic, Teutonic, and Gothic tribes, customs which differed little from each other, and not much from those of the classical peoples before their development of the city and its life. In all parts of Europe remote from the influence of Rome this development was simple and traceable enough, but where the Germanic and Celtic races took the place of the Roman dominion and colonies, it was natural enough that they should wear the dress, so to say, of the older institutions, which in many cases they never quite shook off, though in essence they

were everywhere the same.

The Teutonic and Gothic invaders of the empire had not got to the stage of city life, and did in fact miss that stage altogether. The feudal system was based not on the city and its wards, urban and rural, as was the case in ancient society, but on the country district, the manor and its townships. When our Anglo-Saxon forefathers first conquered Romanised Britain, they did not know what to do with the cities they won; they let them lie in ruins, and went to live down the dales on the borders of the streams in their homesteads, just as their ancestors had done in the clearings of the great central forest of Europe.

Part 3

In these country districts, both in England and elsewhere, they held for a long time to many of their old tribal customs; the jury of neighbours; frank-pledge, or the responsibility of the district for the conduct of its dwellers; the oath of compurgation; the courts in the open-air; the folk-motes of all the freemen meeting directly (not by delegates) and armed in token of their freedom. Over all this, which still existed in the beginning of feudalism, and never quite disappeared until its wane, the regular feudal system was super-imposed. Serfdom took the place of thralldom; the King and his house-carles, or private body-guard, gave way to the King the head of the conquering tribe, who was the vicegerent of God, and granted the holding of lands to his tribesmen on condition of service from them, many of whom in their turn granted lands to others on similar terms; the performance of certain duties or service in return for the undisturbed holding of land, and having in consequence a definite recognised position, being the essence of mediaeval society. I may remark in passing that the theory of property is quite different from that of our own days, in which the holding of property has been changed into a definite ownership which has no duties attached to it.

Now, I ask you to understand that the attainment of position or status, was the one aspiration of those who were in an inferior position during the Middle Ages. Even the serfs, many of whom at first were not very distinguishable from mere chattel-slaves, gained status by becoming *adscripti glebae*, men attached to the manor on which they lived, and under the protection of its lord, to whom they had to render certain definite services in return; and there was a tendency from quite early days for these serfs to raise their position by becoming tenants of the lord of the manor, and also by their individually getting themselves received into a free town, and so emancipating themselves from individual service. The mention of this last incident calls my attention to the other members of the mediaeval hierarchy, the Free Towns and the Guilds, who lay between the two poles of the landed nobility and their serfs. And you must remember that though the development of these took place somewhat late in the Middle Ages, they were both of them in existence from its very first days, when the tribes first reconstituted society after the break-up of the Roman Empire. Indeed, the growth of the free towns resembled in many respects the growth of Rome in her first days. The germs of them were always the agricultural district, inhabited by such and such a clan or tribe, whose members in early days were, or professed to be, akin to each other by blood, and held at least their land in common. Now in such and such a case this clan of freemen would gather to some more convenient part of their hundred, or district, and would fence it to protect their houses and crafts, and so population would grow thicker there; and they would hold a market there, and attract to them traders and men who needed protection for their

handicrafts, though these would mostly be people outside the clan, unfree men, taking no part in the administration of the place.

Thus there grew up gradually classes of privileged and unprivileged within the towns, the former being the corporations of them, who, as the feudal system grew, got their status recognised by the king or over-lord, and who little by little freed themselves from the services, tolls, and restrictions which the neighbouring military chief had managed to enmesh them in as they passed out of their tribal freedom into the feudal power. This freedom they principally bought from their feudal lord, for their production was always expanding, since they were in the main communities of workers; whereas the revenue of the lord could not expand much, as it depended on the services of his serfs, which were limited by the customs of his manors. Remember once for all, that capitalism was unknown in those days, and the nobles could not live by rack-rent and interest, which in these days procure them such enormous incomes. So the towns, as their production expanded, bought their privileges with money down, and began to grow wealthy and powerful, and therewithal the ruling bodies in them, the corporations, who now represented the freemen of the clan, began to be corrupt and oppressive. They were no longer workmen, but were grown into a municipal aristocracy, very exclusive and mainly hereditary. But at this point these were met by the other associations I have named, the Guilds, which had been growing up under them all this while.

I have said that the guilds existed from the earliest period of the Middle Ages. I might have gone further, and pointed out their analogy to the free towns in this respect that they were not unknown to classical antiquity. In the early days of Rome, and before the labour of the free artisan was swamped by the enormous flood of slave-labour, it flourished in that city. In fact, it seems to me that these guilds are an answer to the imperative claim for useful association which human nature makes; as one form of society which once served its purpose duly fails men, they are forced to form others, even while the old form exists and has become mere authority and an instrument of oppression. The old kinship clan certainly grew together for mutual protection and help of a band of equals; as that degenerated into a mere privileged caste of nobles, and became worse than useless for its original purpose, men formed other associations that had no bond of kindred, but a bond of mutual interest amidst the disorder of a rough period of transition. And once more we come across the guilds in quite early days of the new European society, and it is remarkable how much the purposes of these early guilds answer to those of the primitive kindred clan. To a great extent they were what we should now call benefit societies: they engaged to redeem their members from captivity; to set them up in business again if they were ruined; to pay their fines if they came into the clutch of the law. They were also clubs for good fellowship, and also (which again makes their analogy to the old clans the closer) drew their members together by the bond of religion, providing the sacrificial feast while our fore-fathers were still heathen, and paying for masses for the souls of their members when Christianity had become the popular religion; and there are instances of the chief work being defence by the strong hand, as in the case of protection against the Norse pirates in the tenth century. In short, it may well be said that from the first the history of the guilds is the true history of the Middle Ages. And we will remember, too, that they were in their early days in direct opposition to the authority of the period, which saw in them, as it was well warranted in doing, a threat of rebellious progress against the robbery of the poor and industrious by the rich and idle. In the Middle Ages, apart from those old Roman guilds, which were of handicraftsmen, this was the first character which the guilds took; leagues of the individually powerless freemen against the accidents of oppression, legal and illegal, held

together by a religious bond according to the custom of the times.

Part 4

To these about the eleventh century were superadded another set of guilds, whose main object was the protection of trade, and which soon became powerful, and establishing themselves in the towns, drew together with the corporations, the freemen of the towns, and were fused with them. They shared in the degeneration of the municipal aristocracies, which reached its height in the beginning of the thirteenth century, and with them were attacked by the third and last set of guilds, whose office was the organization and protection of the handicrafts. These of course had been growing up with the growth of the towns, and the increasing capacity for production, and at the time I mention were organized pretty completely, and embraced, I think, the whole of the handicrafts.

The greater part of the thirteenth century was taken up by the struggle between these new and quite democratic guilds, which were entirely composed of workmen; that struggle was partly a peaceable one. The municipalities could not quite keep the guilds from all participation in the government of the towns; their officers gradually crept into the corporations, and they began to influence the administration; but this peaceful revolution was supplemented by very hard fighting, especially in the north of Germany. The upshot of this double struggle was the complete victory of the workmen over the municipal aristocracies, and by the end of the thirteenth century the craft guilds, who no doubt had been fostered all along by the increasing productivity of labour, had the towns entirely in their power; but, although the municipal aristocracy had lost its privileged official position, the old families had not lost all their influence, and still formed a kind of middle-class nobility; this is exemplified clearly enough by the incidents in the struggle between the great town of Ghent and its feudal superior, the Earl of Flanders, in which men like James Van Artavelde and his sons clearly had a position akin to that of powerful rich men at the present day. The old struggle also was not forgotten; throughout the men of the mean crafts are on the revolutionary side; while the great crafts, led by the mariners, *i.e.*, the shippers, merchants, and so on, are loyalists.

This victory of the handicraftsmen brings us to the apex of the Middle Ages. Let us therefore stop a little to contrast the condition of labour at that period with its condition under the height of the classical period, and see what it has gained. The classical period gives us a class of privileged persons actually idle as far as any good purpose goes, supporting a huge class of parasites, and an enormous pauper population fed on *charity*, and all this founded on the labour of mere chattel slaves, who were fed, clothed and housed according to the convenience of their owners, just as beasts of burden were, but whom they had to buy with hard cash just as they had their horses and mules. There was a certain amount of labour done by freemen, or non-slaves rather, but that did not come to much, and I think we may class these few freemen among the parasites of the rich. The government of all this was aristocratic at first (tempered by the money-bag aristocracy), and at last mere absolutism founded on tax-gathering.

In the fully developed Middle Ages, on the other hand, we have a privileged class of land-holders deduced from the freemen of the conquering tribe, absolutely idle, supported by their serfs, who for their part are somewhat speedily turning into tenants, and so laying part of the foundations of the later middle-class. Between these two classes, which in the beginning of the

Middle Ages were the essential constituents of society, lies the great body of the craftsmen, now gathered into towns administered by themselves, oppressed always, no doubt, legally by taxes, and often illegally by war on the part of the nobles, but free in their work except for such regulations as they have imposed on themselves, and the object of which in the main was the equitable distribution of employment, and the reward of employment throughout their whole body. Capitalism does not exist at this time; there is no great all-embracing world-market; production is for the supply of the neighbourhood, and only the surplus of it ever goes a dozen miles from the door of the worker. It must be added that every freeman has the use of land to support himself on, so that he does not depend on the caprice of the market for his bare necessities, and whether employer or employed, he neither sells himself, nor buys others, in the labour market under the rule of competition, but exchanges labour for labour directly with his neighbour, man to man and hand to hand.

Now, you will probably agree with me in thinking that this was a much better state of things for the worker than his condition under what have been called the "*free* peoples of antiquity," but whose freedom was confined to the rich and powerful. One other thing I note in this contrast, that whereas in the ancient world, the intelligence, the high mental qualities, which have made the ancient days so famous, came from the idle classes, who were in good sooth an aristocracy of intellect as well as of position, in the Middle Ages, the intelligence lay with the great craftsmen class, — and that again, I think, was a decided advantage, both for them and for us; since it has given us, amongst other treasures not so famous, but scarcely less glorious, the poems of Shakespeare.

Now, on this high tide of mediaeval life supervened two things: the Black Death, and the gradual decay of the guilds, both of which got the times ready for the next great change in the condition of labour. I will say little about the first, space not serving for it. I will only remark first, that the Statute of Labourers of Edward III, which was one consequence of it, and which has been so useful to enquirers into the condition of labour at that time, represents in the account of wages and labour-hours to be drawn from it, the state of things *before* the terrible plague, not *after* it, since it was avowedly enacted against the labourers in order to lower their wages to the standard of reward before the Black Death.

Furthermore, I must say that all antiquarians must be fully conscious of the decline in art that took place in Northern Europe, and in England especially, after the reign of Edward III. Before the middle of the fourteenth century the English were in these matters abreast with, and in some matters ahead of, the Italians, and in the art of architecture especially, produced works which have never been surpassed, and seldom equalled. By the end of the fifteenth century our arts had for the most part become rude, unfinished and barbarous, and lacking altogether in that self-respect and confidence which the arts are always full of in their fine periods.

Looking carefully at the gradual change, I conclude that the Black Death was answerable for some of this degradation, but that the main part of it was the natural consequence of the great change which was coming over society. For during the next century, a new plague invaded Europe, compared with which the slaughter of the Black Death was but a trifle. That plague was the pest of Commercialism; capitalism aided by bureaucracy and nationalism, began to show itself, and took away from labour the hope of a happy life on the earth.

At the end of the fourteenth century, there were no journeymen in the guilds; every worker in them was certain to become a master if he only did his duty fairly; and the master was not the master in our sense of the word, he was the man who had learned his craft thoroughly, and could

teach the apprentices their business, and all sorts of restrictions were laid on him to prevent him becoming a capitalist, *i.e.*, forcing men as good as himself to pay him for his privilege of providing them with work. But in the early days of the fifteenth century the journeyman began to appear; there were men in the workshops who were known as "servants," and, who though necessarily affiliated to the guild, and working under its regulations, would never become crafts-masters. They were few and unimportant enough, but they grew in numbers, till, *e.g.*, about 1480 the non-guildsmen of the merchant-tailors in London attempted to form a guild under the old craft guild, just as those latter had formed their guilds under the trades guilds. In this attempt they failed, showing thereby how the times were changing, and how employment for profit was raising its hideous head. This falling of the crafts guilds from their old simplicity of equality, was doubtless a token rather than a cause of the change. Capitalism was advancing from other directions. The productivity of labour was increasing, though slowly; more wealth was being produced, and men's greedy desires grew with it. The landed nobility began to see how they might recover their losses in war, and become as rich in relation to other people as they had been when the latter were so poor; and they were no longer contented, as they once were obliged to be, to live on the rents of their land, whether those rents were the enforced service of serfs, or the money rent of tenants, both limited by the custom of the manor. The Peasants Rebellion in England had foiled them in their attempt to rack-rent their tenants, growing prosperous, by forcing them to pay serfs' services on villeinage tenures as well as tenant's rent. But no matter; in spite of the high wages and comfort of the craftsmen and yeomen, *they* were the powerful people, since they were the makers and interpreters of the laws, and since the meetings round the Shire Oak and the folkmotes of the freemen of the Hundred, and other such direct local assemblies, had been swallowed up in the representative assembly, the central parliament, the King's taxing machine. So they set to work to steal, not a purse here, or a bale of goods there, or the tolls of a market in another place; but the very life and soul of the community, the land of the country, which was of the more importance, as in those days no direct rent could be got out of anything save the land. They got the yeomen and tenants off the land by one means or another; legal quibbling, direct cheating, down-right violence; and so got hold of the lands and used their produce, not for the livelihood of themselves and their retainers, but for profit. The land of England, such of it as was used for cultivation, had been mostly tillage where tillage was profitable; it was the business of the land thieves to turn this tillage into pasture for the sake of the sheep, *i.e.*, the wool for exportation. This game not only drove the yeoman and tenant off the land, but the labourer also, since, as More says "Many sheep and one shepherd now take the place of many families." As a result, not only was a pauper population created, but the towns were flooded by crowds of the new free labourers, whom the guilds, grown corrupt, were ready to receive as journeymen. The huckstering landlord and the capitalist farmer drove the workman into the hands of the new manufacturing capitalist, and a middle-class of employers of labour was created, the chief business of whose fathers was to resist the rich, and the business of whose sons was to oppress the poor.

Part 5

Thus fell the Society of the Middle Ages, by Capitalism establishing itself on the ruins of Feudality, and the rise of a middle-class who were either parasites of the nobility, themselves become

commercial, trading on the grossest monopolies, and exacting rack-rent, and practically doing the state no service — partly parasites of the nobility, or partly employers living on the profit wrung out of workmen employed at a very low rate of wages. I have been giving the story of the change as it happened in England. On the Continent the divorce of the people from the land was not so sudden or complete, I think because there was less resistance possible to the centralised bureaucracy here than on the Continent. There, on the other hand, the rise of definite nations with stiff political demarcations gave rise to most horrible wars, which reduced the peasants to the last stage of misery, hampered new-born commerce, and in the long run ruined the land-owning aristocracy, and at last made the French Revolution both possible and necessary. It is no exaggeration to say that Germany is only now within the last twenty years recovering from the Thirty Years War which went on at the end of the sixteenth and beginning of the seventeenth centuries.

But with the birth of capitalism and the world-market, the relative importance of agriculture and manufacture began to alter; and that again especially in England, a country so rich in coal and minerals, and so well furnished with harbours on all sides. The new-born power of making profit out of the employment of handicraftsmen had to be exercised and developed. The craftsmen were in a changed position; they had been completely masters of their own work with other resources, which forbade the work mastering them; they were so no longer; they were working for other people, driven by competition to sell themselves at a poor price in the market. In short, they had become wage-slaves; but they were still handicraftsmen working in an isolated way. They were not being made the most of, and could only be the instruments of a timid scanty commerce. If they could have remained thus I think that they would have been less degraded then they became afterwards, and are now; but then the last word of progress would have been said, the hope of revolution would never have arisen.

What happened was very different. Capitalism was no sooner born than she was forced to sow the seed of her decay and final destruction; she was forced to develope [sic] the power of Labour to the utmost; that was indeed her work. The mechanical invention of man had lain dormant since the early days that had invented the plough, the cart, the row-boat, and the simple machines that help man's labour and do not supersede it, such as the grist-mill, the potter's wheel, the lathe, the simple loom, the crane, etc.; that invention was now to wake up, but not very suddenly; the fuller organisation of handicraft was to precede its abolition. I say when Capitalism began to grow towards manhood at the end of the sixteenth century, production was wholly by handicraft little organised.

The work of the seventeenth century was that gradual organisation by means of the division of labour. In handicraft (supposing a man to take no pleasure in his work, to be no artist) the single worker's whole intelligence is wasted on a piece of commonplace goods; a small part of that intelligence will suffice, if the whole of some one else's intelligence is employed in organising. Therefore, set him, the single man, at doing one small portion of that work, and you can soon dispense with almost all his intelligence, while at the same time you will quicken the habit of his hand, his mechanical power, prodigiously; in short, you will at last make of him a very delicate machine, or part of a machine, for performing the small piece of work you apportion to him; but you must take care that the whole machine of him and his fellows must be properly built up. This was the work of the seventeenth century. In the eighteenth it was complete, and the unit of labour was no longer a single man but a group of men.

Commerce was now, one would think, as well provided as she needed to be; but happily she could not stop there, or there would still have been no revolution possible for us. Now, indeed, she stirred up the sleeping invention of man, and with the latter half of the eighteenth century began that marvellous series of inventions, which one would have thought should have set mankind free from the greater part of his labour, but which, as it is, has done, on the face of it, little more than make a new and enormously rich middle-class, and multiply the working population many times over in order to provide them with due wage-slaves, who work not less, but more than they did in the days before the organisation of labour, and get not higher wages, but lower for their more burdensome labour.

My briefly told tale is over now, for I need not go through the often-told story of the fly-shuttle, the spinning jenny, the steam-engine, the power-loom, and the rest of it. I will only remark that the last development of machinery is to make the factory itself the machine, of which these wonderful machines, and the men that manage them (the most wonderful of all) are only parts. There remains only on this side of human life, production to wit, one thing to do as long as machine production lasts (which I prophecy will not be for ever). That one thing is this: The machines were invented that some men might work harder and others softer than they used to do, and they have well fulfilled their purpose; but though they have in that process seized hold of the bodies of the hard-working ones, the wage-slaves, though the factory has their bodies in its grip, it has not got hold of their intelligence, and does not want it, nay, sedulously keeps it out. Suppose that intelligence to wake up and to say, The hard work and the soft work, let us no longer keep these two separate for two classes of men, but throw them together and divide them equally amongst all, so that there should be no classes! In that case would not life in general, the only holy and sacred thing we know, be purified and made far holier by taking away from it the sorrow and misery that come of anxious seeking for toil, and the need for accepting the sickening burden. Surely that is so. Surely there is nothing in the machines themselves and the invention of man which created them, that they should forbid the true use of them, the lightening the burden of human labour.

That is what we Socialists under the machine and factory system are striving for at present, leaving the consideration of what is to be done to the machines and factories to future ages, who will be free to consider it, as we are not. Freedom first at any price, and then if possible happiness, which to my mind would be the certain result of freedom. Or are we free? I have told you what was the condition of the civilised world in the days of the late Roman Republic, and the Absolutist Empire which followed it. What is its condition now that we have gone through chattel-slavery and serfdom to wage-slavery? It can be told in nearly the same words.

A privileged class partly composed of a landed nobility, partly of a money-bag aristocracy; a parasite class, ministering to their pleasures and their corruption, drinking of their cup, eating of their dish, flattering them and flattered by them but despised by them, and (woe is me!) sharing in their crime of living on the misery of the poor. And those by whose labour they live? A huge population of miserable and hopeless labourers, to whom are superadded a crowd of paupers, far less joyous than the old Roman ones, fed by the fears, the remorse — the charity we call it — of the rich; and a few, a very few, free workmen, who as they work not for the workers, but the idle, must be turned back again to herd with the crowd of parasites aforesaid. Who can dare to say that this is not true of our society? And how does it differ from that of Roman corruption? Can its end be otherwise then — or worse?

Remember this, that in the days of that Roman corruption there was valiancy outside it which was ready to help the then world by destruction and new life combined; its enemies were the friends of the world, and were as good in their way as the early classical peoples had been in theirs, and I say they were outside that society, but at hand for its regeneration. All that the last two thousand years have used up; there is nothing outside civilisation that we can turn to for new birth; whatever there is to help us must come from within.

How are we to get at that? you will say. The answer to that question is the fact that we admit that the workers of to-day are wage-slaves. Those that feel themselves slaves must have been driven to desire freedom. But, again, what is the freedom which we desire? For the word has been used so often that men have forgotten its meaning. I think the answer is the freedom to develope our capacities to the utmost without injuring our neighbours. And how can that be done? By each of us working for the welfare of the whole of which we each form a part, and feeling sure that only so can we each of us fare well. Shall we not then have to give up a great deal in order to reach this point? Yes, we who are trying to bring people to that point will have to, but when people have reached it, they, when Socialism is realised, will turn round and find that their loss has only been imaginary. The rich man will have lost riches, *i.e.*, dominion over others, and find that he is happy; the intellectual man will have given up his claim to be worshipped by the masses, and will find that he is understood by them and loved by them — and the poor man, what has he to give up? He will have to give up his chance of becoming rich — a valuable possession truly — and he will find that he is not rich, but wealthy; that is, that he has whatever a man healthy in mind and body can wish for, and that poverty has become an evil dream but half remembered.

In short, even now, while the realisation of Socialism, though it is already going on, is neither desired nor understood by most men, the mere breath and rumour of its coming can at least hold out to true men who will join our ranks one gift at least — that they shall be glad to live and not afraid to die. And is that not a wonderful contrast to the spirit of the life of those who are still living placidly, because ignorantly, amidst the dishonesty of our present society? wherein how many there are, and those not always the poorest or most ignorant, but men of culture, men of genius, who do at once hate life and fear death. Friends, join us in helping to throw off this bugbear, so that you may be no longer wage-slaves or their masters, or their masters' parasites. So shall we be our own Goths, and at whatever cost break up again the new tyrannous Empire of Capitalism.

William Morris
Development of Modern Society
1890

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