

The Revolutionary Ideas of Oscar Wilde

James Granell



Oscar Wilde 1854-1900

Oscar Wilde's reputation as a socialist often takes second place to his reputation as a playwright, poet, dandy and notorious wit. However, in 1891, the Dublin born writer, and arch-satirist of Victorian sensibilities, set out his ideas of socialism in his essay *The Soul of Man Under Socialism*. The essay affords the reader a glimpse into the political mind of this often caricatured Irish artist. As an aesthete and supreme individualist Wilde had an overarching artistic understanding of socialism. He was, on the whole, less interested in economic theory and dialectics than he was in the potential for individual realisation and the inherent beauty that underlies socialist philosophy. Wilde was concerned

with the way in which the institution of private property obstructs the free development of the personality.

In his essay *The Soul of Man Under Socialism* Wilde outlines the general benefits that he believes would be present in a socialist society. Wilde's understanding of socialism is at times simplistic and idyllic and is open to criticism. Despite this, his belief in the potential of humanity and the need to break with capitalism in order to achieve that potential remains inspirational to readers more than a century after his death. This article attempts to act as an introduction to the revolutionary ideas of a man who openly attacked conformist niceties and disobeyed the prevailing moral prescriptions of his day. In so doing so it is hoped to interest readers in delving deeper into the thoughts and ideas of this truly remarkable personality.

Wilde, like Marx, believed that under socialism individuals would achieve their full potential as human beings. Neither believed in a socialist system under which people would work like drones - all dressed in the same uniform - totally obedient to a dear leader of one kind or another. Rather, they both saw socialism as a means of liberating humanity from the economic and social bondage inflicted by the capitalist system. Wilde opens his essay with the following statement:

The chief advantage that would result from the establishment of Socialism is the fact that Socialism would relieve us from that sordid necessity of living for others which, in the present condition of things, presses so hardly upon almost everybody. In fact, scarcely anyone at all

escapes.¹

In Wilde's view, socialism will be of value because it will lead to individual freedom and development; it will create the means whereby human beings can achieve their ultimate potential. In order to achieve real liberation from the choking social constraints imposed by the capitalist system, through the mechanism of private property, a revolution must occur. The tyranny of private property and the wage slavery that sustains it must be overthrown. Wilde argued that the recognition of private property has harmed individualism 'by confusing a man with what he possesses.'²

This situation cannot be remedied by reform, because reform is always based on the idea that the products of private property can be used to alleviate the hardships caused by the very institution of private property. Wilde recognised that this was 'both immoral and unfair.'³ Rather, he contended that, 'the proper aim is to try and reconstruct society on such a basis that poverty will be impossible.'⁴ Under such a system each member of society will have a share in the general prosperity and happiness of society. To quote Wilde directly:

Socialism, Communism or whatever one chooses to call it, by converting private property into public wealth, and substituting co-operation for competition will restore society to

its proper condition of a thoroughly healthy organism, and ensure the material well-being of each member of the community. It will, in fact, give life its proper basis and its proper environment.⁵

It was his recognition of the reformist nature of charity that led Wilde to launch a scathing criticism of the institution. Wilde believed that charity had done much to prevent the reconstruction of society in a way that would end the possibility of poverty. For this reason he stated that, 'the people who do most harm are the people who try to do most good.'⁶ Marx and Engels described this tendency as the desire of a part of the bourgeoisie to redress social grievances, 'in order to secure the continued existence of bourgeois society.' They, 'desire the existing state of society minus its revolutionary and disintegrating elements. They wish for a bourgeoisie without a proletariat.'⁷

In contemporary society it is equally immoral that the capitalist system - a system that thrives as a result of the exploitation of workers and underdeveloped nations - uses a tiny percentage of its wealth to placate those same exploited people. Third world aid and social benefits, while good in themselves, are little more than an attempt to patch up the open sores of the festering capitalist system with the by-product of that same system. Such endeavours, while giving the appearance of humanity to the perpetrators of the poverty

¹Oscar Wilde, 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism,' in *De Profundis, The Ballad of Reading Gaol and Other Writings* (London, 2002), p. 247.

²Wilde, 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism,' p. 252.

³Wilde, 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism,' p. 248.

⁴Wilde, 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism,' p. 247-48.

⁵Wilde, 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism,' p. 248.

⁶Wilde, 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism,' p. 248.

⁷Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, 'Manifesto of the Communist Party,' in Robert C. Tucker ed. *The Marx-Engels Reader* (London, 1978), p. 496.

trap, do little to really address the underlying problem. That problem is the system itself; this is as true today as it was in Wilde's time.

Along with the latent potential of a socialist society, Wilde stressed the necessity for individual freedom and development. It is lamentable that the focus on individual self realisation has often become the prerogative of the Right. Very often those on the Left have shied away from this particular aspect of socialist political thought. Living, as we do, under the yoke of capitalism; we are indoctrinated with the idea that the freedoms necessary for the self realisation of the individual are only afforded under a free market system where people can achieve their wildest dreams if they work hard enough. This is the great myth of the capitalist economic system and it was as prevalent during Wilde's life as it is at present. However, Wilde recognized that hard work had nothing at all to do with the potential for individual realization.. He identified the means of achieving individual development, albeit in a limited form under the capitalist system, as bound up with the ownership and control of private property. Those who possess sufficient property and wealth to ensure they are either under no necessity to work, or are enabled to choose a sphere of work that affords them pleasure do have the opportunity to realise their own potential. Wilde identified these as the poets, philosophers, men of science, and men of culture. However, those who do not possess such means are in Wilde's words: 'compelled to do the work of beasts of burden'.⁸ Wilde noted that from their collective force humanity gains much in material prosperity, but that the poor man as an individual is of no im-

portance under this system.

He is merely the infinitesimal atom of a force that, so far from regarding him, crushes him: indeed, prefers him crushed, as in that case he is far more obedient.⁹

In fact Wilde's discussion of individual self realization clearly echoes the ideas of Marx and Engels on the question. As they wrote in *The Communist Manifesto*:

In bourgeois society capital is independent and has individuality, while the living person is dependent and has no individuality... That culture, the loss of which he [the bourgeois] laments, is, for the enormous majority, a mere training to act as a machine.

In place of the old bourgeois society, with its classes and class antagonisms we shall have an association, in which **the free development of each** is the condition for the free development of all

In *The German Ideology*, Karl Marx examined the impact of the division of labour under the capitalist system. Marx noted that as long as activity is divided rather than voluntary, man's¹⁰ own deed becomes an alien power opposed to him. This leads to his activity becoming a means of enslavement rather than something that is controlled by him. The creation of particular and exclusive spheres of activity, as forced upon the individual by the distribution of labour, result in the necessity of his

⁸Wilde, 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism,' p. 249.

⁹Wilde, 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism,' p. 249.

¹⁰ Because I am directly referring to Marx's writing here I am following his practice, and the practice of almost all writers before the 1970s, of using 'man' to refer to all humans.

being bound to a particular sphere of activity if he does not want to lose his means of livelihood. Marx noted that:

In communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, shepherd or critic.¹¹

This is the form of self-realisation and individualism, based on the social control of the means of production, which Wilde would certainly have approved of.

In order to bring about the abolition of private property and to take hold of the means of production disobedience is required, as are agitators. Wilde asserted that the best among the poor are those who are 'ungrateful, discontented, disobedient and rebellious.'¹² Where the poor are told to be grateful for charity, Wilde believed that the best among them were never grateful. They recognised that this was a 'ridiculously inadequate mode of partial restitution,' and that it was usually accompanied by an attempt to tyrannize over their personal lives.¹³ This has been made evident recently when Gary Johns a former Labour MP, writing in *The Australian*, suggested that people who receive

social welfare benefits should have to use contraceptives as a condition of their benefit payments. Johns stated that, 'there should be no taxpayer inducement to have children. Potential parents of poor means, poor skills or bad character will choose to have children. So be it. But no one should enter parenthood while on a benefit.'¹⁴ His idea is that women should have to produce evidence that they are using contraceptives before they can receive benefit payments. Closer to home, Joan Burton questioned why so many protestors against water charges had such expensive phones, stating, 'all of the protestors I've seen seem to have extremely expensive phones, tablets [and] video cameras.'¹⁵ Implicit in this statement is an accusation that the poor and disenfranchised should act a certain way - that there are set boundaries to poverty that must not be encroached upon for fear of moral retribution from those above.

Only a 'perfect brute' could exist under such conditions and not be discontent, said Wilde. These conditions necessitate disobedience on the part of the poor because 'disobedience, in the eyes of anyone who has read history, is man's original virtue.'¹⁶ Wilde recognised that progress has been made through disobedience and rebellion. Because of this he had a harsh view of the 'virtuous poor,' who can be pitied, but never admired because they have made private terms with the class enemy. They have accepted laws that protect private property despite their own lives being marred and made hideous by those same laws. Wilde found an explanation for this phenomenon in the nature

¹¹Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, 'The German Ideology' in Robert C. Tucker ed. *The Marx-Engels Reader* (London, 1978), p. 160.

¹²Wilde, 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism,' p. 250.

¹³Wilde, 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism,' p. 250.

¹⁴Gary Johns, 'No contraception, no dole', *The Australian*, 30 December 2014.

¹⁵*The Journal*, 9 October 2014.

¹⁶Wilde, 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism,' p. 250.

of poverty itself and its effect on the individual. 'Misery and poverty,' said Wilde, 'are so absolutely degrading, and exercise such a paralysing effect over the nature of men, that no class is ever really conscious of its own suffering.'¹⁷

The paralysing nature of poverty itself makes agitators absolutely necessary. Wilde commented that what the great employers of labour say against agitators is unquestionably true.

Agitators are a set of interfering, meddling people, who come down to some perfectly contented class of the community and sow the seeds of discontent amongst them. That is the reason why agitators are so absolutely necessary.¹⁸

Without agitators, Wilde contends, 'there would be no advance towards civilisation.'¹⁹

On the state - Wilde believed that the state should not govern, but rather should be a voluntary association that will organise labour and be the manufacturer and distributor of necessary commodities.²⁰ This may, at first, seem an oversimplification on Wilde's part, however Wilde is discussing the role of the state during what we might term the post-revolutionary period. Lenin, in *State and Revolution*, noted the importance of the state in the post-revolutionary period. However, the concept of the state in the socialist context is almost abstract to the

mind of someone existing under the current system. Lenin believed that the proletarian revolution would, by its appropriation of the means of production, abolish the bourgeois state. After the revolution there would be a gradual withering away of the remnants of the proletarian state.²¹ It is in this period - following the withering away of the state - that socialism would come closest to Wilde's concept.

Wilde passionately believed that machinery should be used to perform the most menial labour, thus freeing people to pursue truly fulfilling work. He recognised that during his time machinery and the advent of the industrial revolution had led to many losing their employment and sliding further into poverty. He commented that there was 'something tragic in the fact that as soon as man had invented a machine to do his work he began to starve.'²² He recognised that this was the result of the capitalist property system and the system of competition that sustains it.

One man owns a machine which does the work of five hundred men. Five hundred men are, in consequence, thrown out of employment, and, having no work to do, become hungry and take to thieving. The one man secures the produce of the machine and keeps it, and has five hundred times as much as he should have, and probably, which is of much more importance, a

¹⁷Wilde, 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism,' p. 251.

¹⁸Wilde, 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism,' p. 251.

¹⁹Wilde, 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism,' p. 251.

²⁰Wilde, 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism,' p. 260.

²¹ See: V.I. Lenin's *State and Revolution* for a fuller discussion of the relationship between the state and socialism. V.I. Lenin, *State and Revolution: An abridged edition* with an introduction by Kieran Allen, Dublin, 2004, is useful for those approaching the text for the first time. In particular pp. 16-19 on the 'withering away' of the state.

²²Wilde, 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism,' p. 260.

²³Wilde, 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism,' p. 260.

great deal more than he really wants.²³

On the other hand, Wilde firmly believed that if such technology belonged to society as a whole, as opposed to the capitalist ruling class, it would benefit everybody. 'At present machinery competes against man. Under proper conditions machinery will serve man.'²⁴ Wilde was assertive in his view that the workers themselves must have control the machinery of production. Note that he wrote that the state was to have a role in the organisation of labour and in the manufacture and distribution of necessary commodities, but that the machines of production should be the property of all - not the state. Wilde's view of the relationship between the state, the people, and the machinery of production is close to that of the Irish socialist James Connolly, who made the point that:

Socialism properly implies above all things the co-operative control by the workers of the machinery of production; without this co-operative control the public ownership by the State is not Socialism - it is only State capitalism.²⁵

This form of state capitalism was manifested in the USSR and the communist regimes of Eastern Europe which became mirror images of capitalism rather than alternatives to it.

Many people would scoff at the idea of machines performing menial tasks, yet it should be considered that we live in a time when we can put men on the moon and robots on Mars; why should it be any more unbelievable that we could develop automated rubbish disposal? Wilde saw

the potential of machinery, under the right conditions, to alleviate the burden of work so that people could allocate their time to activities that brought them joy and increased cultivated leisure. This would have a double effect. Firstly, it would provide conditions in which the poor were not trapped in an endless drudge of menial work in order to put food on their table. Secondly, in doing so it would, by alleviating the necessity of charity, free up the time of 'scientific men' to pursue projects that would better the conditions of humanity as a whole.

Some accuse Wilde of holding Utopian views in this regard and this is an accusation that he did not deny. Instead he pointed out that a map of the world that does not include Utopia is not worth even glancing at. Such a map, he said, leaves out the one country at which humanity is always landing. 'And when humanity lands there, it looks out, and, seeing a better country, sets sail. Progress is the realisation of Utopias.'²⁶ This is a fine analogy for the progression of history. During the feudal period the achievement of bourgeois democracy was a realisation of a longed for Utopia. It is from this landing place that we can now look out and see the greater Utopia that is socialism and set sail to achieve its realisation - being aware that the perfect society will always be unachievable. Wilde should not be seen as a Utopian socialist though - for him the search for Utopia was the root of progress, it was not an earthly estate that presented the culmination of progress itself. Progress was, according to Wilde, 'the realisation of Utopias,' Utopias are not the realisation of progress and they are certainly not an end in themselves.

Progress is impossible without the vi-

²⁴Wilde, 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism,' p. 260.

²⁵ James Connolly, 'State monopoly versus socialism', *Workers Republic*, 10 June 1899.

²⁶Wilde, 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism,' p. 261.

sion of something better. However, very often the realisation of political and social improvement necessitates such a break with the present that the very people who should benefit most from this progress fear its coming about. Wilde demonstrated this very well in his fairytale *The Young King*. When the young king appears before his people dressed in common garb, eschewing the pomp of monarchy, he is challenged by a member of the on looking crowd. The man challenges the young king by maintaining that the poor rely on the pomp of the rich for their livelihood.

Sir, knowest thou not that out of the luxury of the rich cometh the life of the poor? By your pomp we are nurtured, and your vices give us bread. To toil for a master is bitter, but to have no master to toil for is more bitter still.²⁷

The man in the crowd, like a sizeable number of people in our own society, cannot conceive of a situation in which the poor would be their own masters. Very often the fear of what will come if people challenge traditional authorities and ideologies prevents people from joining in the process of true liberation. The comfort of the present hampers the necessary progress to improve the future. It is paradoxical, but at times those who have the most to gain from the revolutionary process ally themselves most strongly with the old order. Wilde noted that the most tragic event of the French Revolution was not that Marie Antoinette was beheaded because she was a queen, 'but that the starved peasant of the Vendée voluntarily went out to die for the hideous cause of feudalism.'²⁸ This tendency was, to Wilde,

further evidence of the necessity for agitators to awaken class consciousness among the mass of people who made up the poor.

Unlike many who yearn after Utopia and unlike many liberals and reformists in our own time, Wilde was not afraid of the idea of revolution. Under the current system it is perfectly acceptable to have a revolution in fashion, a revolution in technology, a revolution in music, you can have many forms of revolution as long as they distract the public from the need for a political and social revolution - a revolution on the streets. Wilde points out that there is much to be said for the use of physical force. It was force that ended feudalism in France and brought about parliamentary democracy in England. Schools teach about the Glorious Revolution, the French Revolution, the American Revolution, and the Industrial Revolution as integral to the emergence of the current economic and political regime. However, there exists a paradox in which people are also told that revolution is an illegitimate form of political action. What lies at the heart of this ideology is the sentiment that all revolution that brought society to its current position was good and legitimate, but that any form of revolution that challenges the current status quo is, by its very nature, dangerous and illegitimate. In fostering this view, the capitalist establishment demonstrates that it has more in common with George III and Louis XVI than it does with the revolutionaries who fought to break the chains by which these despots shackled them. It is no wonder then when the leaders of the 'Free World' ally themselves, without any hint of irony, to some of the most despotic regimes throughout the earth - they are natural bedfellows.

Capitalist ideology insinuates that soci-

²⁷Oscar Wilde, 'The Young King' in *The Complete Illustrated Works of Oscar Wilde* (London, 2007), p. 268.

²⁸Wilde, 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism,' p. 251.

ety as it is presently constructed is an ideal of human civilisation, from which there are no more Utopias to set sail towards. The idea of revolution is rubbished by a political elite who would have the masses believe that power lies solely in the ballot box, rather than at the barricade. It is strange indeed that members of the Dáil (a parliament born through violence and revolution) should seek to delegitimise the very idea of revolution. Much that we now hold dear was brought about through revolution and the use of physical force. Wilde recognised this. He also recognised the emancipatory and empowering effect of revolution, stating that; ‘the very violence of a revolution may make the public grand and splendid for a moment.’²⁹ In a critique of journalism he lamented the day when the public discovered that the pen is mightier than the paving stone, and can be made as offensive as the brickbat. ‘Behind the barricade,’ he commented, ‘there may be much that is noble and heroic. But what is there behind the leading-article but prejudice, stupidity, cant and twaddle?’³⁰

‘We are dominated by journalism,’ commented Wilde, who lamented the lack of force in it anymore.³¹ He believed that journalism had developed into something that amused people or disgusted them and, for the most part, exercised a tyranny over people’s lives. The media, as it is constituted today, is overwhelmingly geared towards entertainment. It churns out a seemingly endless number of figures and situations that viewers can consume and aspire to be like. *The X Factor* and the plethora of column space given to the show in national media is a good example of this. Viewers and readers are encouraged to identify with the contestants who by talent and hard work have lifted themselves

out of their hum-drum existence and taken their place in the world of celebrity. Viewers and readers are urged to consume the very idea that they too can achieve fame, wealth, and consequently, power. All that is necessary is to work hard enough. The idea is that you yourself can change the circumstances of your life within the current social and political framework. This form of aspirational indoctrination attempts to convince people that within the current system dreams can be realised through hard work, and conversely, that the failure to realise your dreams is the result of a lack of work ethic and focus.

This ideology stresses the revolution of the self - think of the self-help and advice columns that litter many newspapers - above the revolution of society. One person ‘empowering themselves’ to ‘take control of their life’ is a positive, but there is no recognition given to the positive effects of an entire class empowering themselves to take control of society. In this way the media acts as a form of social conditioning, which serves to stifle real debate and progress. It is this media and this journalism that objectifies women, demonises the unemployed and minorities, and serves to entertain rather than stir debate, that Wilde objected to.

Press coverage of the water protests in Ireland and the recent media scandals in the UK have demonstrated just how closely linked the media is with the political establishment. Take, for example, some of RTE’s commentary on the death of King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia, who was described as a ‘reformer’ who during his ten years in power ‘improved women’s social status in Saudi Arabia by bringing women into the country’s parliament and building a first university that provides mixed-

²⁹Wilde, ‘The Soul of Man Under Socialism,’ p. 267.

³⁰Wilde, ‘The Soul of Man Under Socialism,’ p. 267.

³¹Wilde, ‘The Soul of Man Under Socialism,’ p. 268.

gender education.³² Women are still not permitted to drive in Saudi Arabia and just two days before king Abdullah's death *Middle East Eye* published an infographic showing that the Islamic State and Saudi Arabia prescribe almost identical punishments for 'crimes' ranging from blasphemy to theft, and including homosexual acts.³³ The article on the RTE website quoted president Obama as saying that he, 'valued King Abdullah's perspective and appreciated our genuine and warm friendship.' This is the 'prejudice, stupidity, cant and twaddle' that Wilde objected to.³⁴ This is not to say that there are no good journalists or that nothing produced by the media has any merit, but it cannot be denied that the media is profoundly politically, socially, ideologically and culturally biased. Under a capitalist system, where such media has a vested interest in the maintenance of the system, it is impossible for it to be any other way.³⁵

Wilde's critique of the uniformity imposed by capitalist society is striking. There is a clear understanding that the capitalist system, with its stress on competition and struggle for place, stifles sympathy for our fellow man. Nevertheless he presents a realistic understanding that sympathy itself will not diminish the causes of suffering; seeing socialism as essential to diminish poverty and science as essential to diminish disease - the two great horrors that afflict humanity. Wilde viewed socialism as the means of change and the vehicle necessary to bring into reality a better society. This will not be a perfect society, but it will be a fairer society. It will be a society in which mankind will

realise its full potential through individual self-fulfillment. At the point when humanity is freed from its slavery to the markets and rampant capitalist expansion that exists under the innocuous guise of globalization, they will be capable of truly expressing themselves as individuals. Wilde's most profound statement about the condition of the working class under the capitalist system is not found in *The Soul of Man Under Socialism* but in *The Young King*. When the Young King is transported to a weaver's workroom, during one of a series of dreams, the weaver challenges him about the social inequality between rich and poor; to which the Young King replies that the land is free and the weaver is no man's slave. The reply that Wilde put into the weaver's mouth demands to be quoted at length.

'In war,' answered the weaver, 'the strong make slaves of the weak, and in peace the rich make slaves of the poor. We must work to live, and they give us such mean wages that we die. We toil for them all day long, and they heap up gold in their coffers, and our children fade away before their time, and the faces of those we love become hard and evil. We tread out the grapes, and another drinks the wine. We sow the corn, and our own board is empty. We have chains, though no eye beholds them; and we are slaves, though men call us free.'³⁶

³²'State flags at half mast following the death of king Abdullah,' *RTE* website, 23 January 2015.

³³Mary Atkinson and Rori Donaghy, 'Crime and Punishment: Islamic State versus Saudi Arabia', *Middle East Eye*, 20 January 2015.

³⁴Wilde, 'The Soul of Man Under Socialism,' p. 267.

³⁵For a more detailed discussion of the media see: John Molyneux, *Will the Revolution be Televised? A Marxist Analysis of the Media* (London, 2011).

³⁶Wilde, 'The Young King' pp. 262-63.

Socialists cannot shy away from the necessity to overthrow the capitalist system that leads to such degradation and inequality. We must become those agitators that Wilde praised and cast off the invisible chains that enslave the mass of the people in an endless system of toil and hardship. These chains are not merely economic, they are mental - they are the chains of conformity that bound Wilde in Reading Gaol. The same chains that weigh heavy on so many individuals in our society today whether they struggle to feed

themselves or struggle to be themselves. In the words of Marx and Engels:

The Communists disdain to conceal their views and aims. They openly declare that their ends can be attained only by the forcible overthrow of all existing social conditions. Let the ruling classes tremble at a Communistic revolution. The proletarians have nothing to lose but their chains. They have a world to win.³⁷

³⁷Marx and Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party* pp.500.