

Percy Bysshe Shelley's Socialist Future

In 1888 Eleanor Marx, Karl Marx's daughter, and Edward Aveling gave two lectures to the Shelley Society, founded in 1885, on the subject of "[Shelley's Socialism](#)." The lectures were then published in the socialist periodical *To-day* and as a pamphlet by the Shelley Society. At the time it was an act of recovery to claim Percy Bysshe Shelley, who drowned in 1822 at the age of 29, for the socialist movement: Shelley had been bleached of his radicalism by bourgeois culture, transformed into Matthew Arnold's "[ineffectual angel](#)," a great but misguided and immature lyric poet.

Fabian Socialist George Bernard Shaw introduced himself to the Shelley Society, a mixed group in terms of politics, by [scandalously claiming](#) "I am, like Shelley, a socialist, an atheist, and a vegetarian." In 1892, the centenary of Shelley's birth, Shaw published a [scathing polemic](#), "Shaming the Devil About Shelley," in which he calls out the bourgeois hypocrisy of the centenary events. "Without any ill-conditioned desire to rub the situation into those who have offered Shelley a carnival of humbug as a centenary offering," Shaw writes, "I think no reasonable man can deny the right of those who appreciate the scope and importance of Shelley's views to refuse to allow the present occasion to be monopolized by triflers to whom he was nothing more than a word-jeweller." There was a working-class and socialist celebration of the centenary that carried forward a very different Shelley.

The Left has always fought for Shelley—for his work, for his ideas, and for his legacy—against the forces of reaction. Shelley wrote in a period of intense political activity, from the [Luddite uprising](#) in 1811 to the [Peterloo Massacre](#) in 1819. His first major work of poetry, *Queen Mab: A Philosophical Poem*, was privately printed in 1813 and distributed by hand, because Shelley would certainly have been prosecuted and jailed had it been published. In 1821 radical publishers put out pirated editions of *Queen Mab*, and one of them was immediately prosecuted and thrown in jail. But the poem continued to circulate among radicals and the working class, in progressively cheaper editions, and became one of the canonical books for Owenite socialists, Chartists, and radicals of all stripes.

After Shelley's death, his MP father, Sir Timothy Shelley, forbade the publication of any of his work—any mention of his name, in fact, in print—with the threat of cutting off the small livelihood he was providing to Mary Shelley and her only surviving child. For almost twenty years, it was socialists and radicals who kept Shelley's work in print: in particular, the revolutionary [William Benbow](#)—credited by labor historians as being the first to call for a [general strike](#)—championed Shelley's work, despite the risks. It was because of Benbow and later Chartists like [James Watson](#) and [Henry Hetherington](#) that Marx and Engels and other international socialists, anarchists, and communists encountered Shelley's work. Engels began translations of Shelley's work, and even had a publisher lined up for a German edition of *Queen Mab* (it seems to have fallen through); [Marx called](#) *Queen Mab* "the Bible of the Chartists," and said that had Shelley lived "he would always have been one of the advanced guard of socialism."

To this, socialist and author of *Red Shelley* [Paul Foot](#) adds: “He was in the advanced guard of socialism for long after his death. All through the great agitations of the last century, through the battle to repeal the Combination Laws, through Chartism, through the early socialist activity of the 1880s and 1890s hundreds of thousands of workers took courage and confidence from Shelley. The reason is not just because Shelley was an instinctive rebel who hated exploitation; but because he combined his revolutionary ideas in *poetry*.” Indeed, the famous refrain of [The Mask of Anarchy](#), Shelley’s poem written in response to the Peterloo Massacre, was and still is a source of inspiration for socialists and the labor movement:

Rise like lions after slumber

In unvanquishable number!

Shake your chains to earth, like dew

Which in sleep had fallen on you—

Ye are many, they are few!

I’m not concerned here with whether or not Shelley was a socialist, a proto-socialist, an anarchist, or just a democratic radical: others have addressed this question in a variety of ways, and it strikes me as mostly an academic debate at this point. Regardless of Shelley’s own politics, his work has been a part of the socialist, communist, and anarchist traditions. Instead, I want to focus on what I think Shelley’s work offers to the socialist movement today, which is also a plea for the socialist movement to return to Shelley for inspiration and vision. I will focus on three things: 1) what Shelley offers to ecosocialism; 2) Shelley’s feminist critique of the family, coupled with his advocacy of free love; and 3) Shelley’s utopianism. As this year marks the bicentenary of Shelley’s death, it’s a good occasion to reflect on his, and our, future.

An Ecosocialist Vision

Socialism today, of necessity, must be ecosocialism: that is, socialism must seek not just the end of class oppression, but the end of the exploitation and destruction of the nonhuman world by humans. We now know that a just and sustainable human society requires us to live in harmony with the rest of life on earth. This aspect of current socialist struggle is almost completely absent from the Marxist tradition until recently (Rosa Luxemburg is perhaps an exception, especially in her letters). Shelley’s work, however, offers a powerful corrective to this neglect.

A principled, ethical vegetarianism was central to Shelley’s thought and work. Before the term “vegetarian” existed, Shelley published his essay “[A Vindication of the Natural Diet](#)” as a pamphlet in 1813, and included it as one of the many footnotes to *Queen Mab*. Shelley makes a strikingly sophisticated argument for vegetarianism, anticipating almost every contemporary argument (other than climate change, of course): comparative anatomy, health, ecology, sustainability, world hunger, and ethics. The essay is footnoted to the following passage from *Queen Mab*, which is

part of the utopian vision at the end of the poem (and to which I will return):

no longer now

He slays the lamb that looks him in the face,

And horribly devours his mangled flesh,

Which, still avenging Nature's broken law,

Kindled all putrid humors in his frame,

All evil passions and all vain belief,

Hatred, despair and loathing in his mind,

The germs of misery, death, disease and crime.

No longer now the wingèd habitants,

That in the woods their sweet lives sing away,

Flee from the form of man; but gather round,

And prune their sunny feathers on the hands

Which little children stretch in friendly sport

Towards these dreadless partners of their play.

All things are void of terror; man has lost

His terrible prerogative, and stands

An equal amidst equals; happiness

And science dawn, though late, upon the earth...

Already in 1813, Shelley had extended the promise of equality to nonhuman animals.

Insofar as the histories of vegetarianism and socialism in Britain are intertwined, it seems to be because of Shelley's work. When studying in England, Gandhi met [Henry Stephens Salt](#)—like Shaw and Shelley, a socialist and a vegetarian—who introduced him not only to the contemporary literature on vegetarianism, but also to the work of Shelley. Gandhi's vegetarianism, initially a matter of religion and upbringing, was then affirmed on an ethical basis. Shelley's work also had influence on Gandhi's practice of [nonviolent resistance](#), which in turn influenced the Civil Rights movement in the US.

[Prometheus Unbound](#), considered by many to be Shelley's greatest work, offers perhaps his most powerful vision of humanity living in harmony with the natural

world. But throughout Shelley's work he exhibits a remarkable attunement to the nonhuman world—not just plant and animal life, but water, light, wind, landscape as a whole—and its power, sublimity, and beauty. Reading Shelley's work is reading humanity as part of a vast cosmos, dependent on the earth not just for sustenance, but for everything that makes life more than just sustenance, more than bare life. He expresses this interdependence powerfully in *Queen Mab* in lines that I think must have influenced Walt Whitman:

There's not one atom of yon earth
But once was living man;
Nor the minutest drop of rain,
That hangeth in its thinnest cloud,
But flowed in human veins...

How strange is human pride!
I tell thee that those living things,
To whom the fragile blade of grass,
That springeth in the morn
And perisheth ere noon,
Is an unbounded world;
I tell thee that those viewless beings,
Whose mansion is the smallest particle
Of the impassive atmosphere,
Think, feel and live like man;
That their affections and antipathies,
Like his, produce the laws
Ruling their moral state;
And the minutest throb
That through their frame diffuses
The slightest, faintest motion,

Is fixed and indispensable

As the majestic laws

That rule yon rolling orbs.

This view of the nonhuman world leads to an ethics very like the Buddhist principle of *ahimsa*. As Prometheus puts it in Shelley's lyrical drama: "I wish no living thing to suffer pain."

Against the Bourgeois Family

Another of the long prose footnotes in *Queen Mab*—essays, basically, that Shelley attempted to get past censorship by including them as footnotes to a poem—concerns free love and marriage. Shelley's sexual politics were deeply influenced by the feminism of [Mary Wollstonecraft](#) and [William Godwin](#), a key thinker in the history of anarchism (their only child was Mary Shelley). Wollstonecraft had argued powerfully that marriage was a form of legal prostitution. Shelley adopts this argument in terms that anticipate the arguments in the [Communist Manifesto](#).

Prostitution is the legitimate offspring of marriage and its accompanying errors. Women, for no other crime than having followed the dictates of a natural appetite, are driven with fury from the comforts and sympathies of society.... Has a woman obeyed the impulse of unerring nature;—society declares war against her, pitiless and eternal war: she must be the tame slave, she must make no reprisals; theirs is the right of persecution, hers the duty of endurance.

Shelley wrote in August, 1812, to James Henry Lawrence, author of a free love treatise in the form of a novel called *The Empire of the Nairs*: "Your 'Empire of the Nairs,' which I read this Spring, succeeded in making me a perfect convert to its doctrines. I then retained no doubts of the evils of marriage,—Mrs. Wollstonecraft reasons too well for that; but I had been dull enough not to perceive the greatest argument against it, until developed in the 'Nairs,' viz., prostitution both *legal* and *illegal*." Compare that to the argument offered by Marx in the *Communist Manifesto*:

Bourgeois marriage is in reality a system of wives in common and thus, at the most, what the Communists might possibly be reproached with, is that they desire to introduce, in substitution for a hypocritically concealed, an openly legalized, community of women. For the rest, it is self-evident that the abolition of the present system of production must bring with it the abolition of the community of women springing from that system, i.e., of prostitution both public and private.

It's difficult, perhaps, for us now to appreciate just how radical Shelley's views on the family and sexuality were at the time. Shaw gives us some sense of this, however. "But all this," Shaw writes, speaking of Shelley's political and religious views,

was mere eccentricity compared to Shelley's teaching on the subject of the family. He would not draw any distinction between the privilege of the king or priest and that of the father. He pushed to its extremest consequences his denial that blood

relationship altered by one jot or tittle the relations which should exist between human beings.... His determination to impress on us that our fathers should be no more and no less to us than other men, is evident in every allusion of his to the subject.... But Shelley was not the man to claim freedom of enmity, and say nothing about freedom of love. If father and son are to be as free in their relation to one another as hundredth cousins are, so must sister and brother. The freedom to curse a tyrannical father is not more sacred than the freedom to love an amiable sister. In a word, if filial duty is no duty, then incest is no crime. This sounds startling even now...but in Shelley's time it seemed the summit of impious vice...

Shelley rejected patriarchy in all its forms, as Shaw rightly points out, seeing the father as another form of arbitrary and violent power like that of kings or priests.

But I think that often too much attention is paid to Shelley's critique of the family, and not enough to his philosophy of love, which is laid out in greatest detail in his poem [*Epipsychidion*](#) (1821).

I never was attached to that great sect,
Whose doctrine is, that each one should select
Out of the crowd a mistress or a friend,
And all the rest, though fair and wise, commend
To cold oblivion, though 'tis in the code
Of modern morals, and the beaten road
Which those poor slaves with weary footsteps tread
Who travel to their home among the dead
By the broad highway of the world, and so
With one chained friend, perhaps a jealous foe,
The dreariest and longest journey go.

What follows is Shelley's philosophy of love presented in epigrammatic form:

True Love in this differs from gold and clay,
That to divide is not to take away.
Love is like understanding that grows bright
Gazing on many truths; 'tis like thy light,
Imagination! which, from earth and sky,
And from the depths of human fantasy,

As from a thousand prisms and mirrors, fills
The Universe with glorious beams, and kills
Error, the worm, with many a sun-like arrow
Of its reverberated lightning. Narrow
The heart that loves, the brain that contemplates,
The life that wears, the spirit that creates
One object, and one form, and builds thereby
A sepulcher for its eternity.

Gold and clay are not chosen arbitrarily here. The comparison sets love in contrast to money and the body. Love is spiritual for Shelley the atheist, and while it of course has a material basis in bodies, it cannot be reduced to sex. You could say that Shelley seeks to replace money with love as the central medium of human relationships and human society.

Shelley's conception of free love was not libertinism: he recognized that sex and relationships are complicated and come with responsibilities. He married Mary Godwin despite their shared belief in free love, because he recognized what it would mean for Mary socially to be living with him unmarried. The point for Shelley is that human life, inherently social, is enriched by more love and more friendship, and that we should reject the arbitrary barriers that prevent this.

As [Foot points out](#), in Shelley's major works "the revolutionary leaders are women: Cyntha in the *Revolt of Islam*; Asia in the *Prometheus*; *Queen Mab*, Iona in *Swellfoot*." We can add Hope, the "maniac maid" in *The Mask of Anarchy*, to this list. And invariably Shelley's visions of a just society feature the equality of the sexes, and not a whiff of the family. In *Queen Mab*:

Woman and man, in confidence and love,
Equal and free and pure together trod
The mountain-paths of virtue, which no more
Were stained with blood from many a pilgrim's feet.

"Can man be free if woman be a slave?" Shelley asks us. *Laon and Cythna* (later revised as [The Revolt of Islam](#)) "could plausibly be called the first feminist epic," [Anahid Nersessian claims](#). She goes on: "Shelley went much further than most of his contemporaries in advocating for the complete social and political equality of women, whose freedom would only be secured (so he argued) when both marriage and monogamy no longer constrained their access to multiple forms of intimacy and attachment." As with his vegetarianism, feminism and free love were essential to

Shelley's work and his philosophy.

A Utopian Horizon

It's not only the family that is abolished in Shelley's utopia: the prison and the church have been reduced to ruins of a former time.

Low through the lone cathedral's roofless aisles

The melancholy winds a death-dirge sung:

It were a sight of awfulness to see

The works of faith and slavery, so vast,

So sumptuous, yet so perishing withal! [...]

Within the massy prison's mouldering courts,

Fearless and free the ruddy children played,

Weaving gay chaplets for their innocent brows

With the green ivy and the red wall-flower,

That mock the dungeon's unavailing gloom;

The ponderous chains, and gratings of strong iron,

There rusted amid heaps of broken stone

That mingled slowly with their native earth

Government itself seems to have been rendered obsolete. There isn't the slightest mention of private property. But the most succinct summary of Shelley's view of the just society comes in *Prometheus Unbound*.

Thrones, altars, judgment-seats, and prisons, wherein,

And beside which, by wretched men were borne

Sceptres, tiaras, swords, and chains, and tomes

Of reasoned wrong, glozed on by ignorance,

Were like those monstrous and barbaric shapes,

The ghosts of a no-more-remembered fame

Which from their unworn obelisks, look forth

In triumph o'er the palaces and tombs
Of those who were their conquerors; mouldering round,
Those imaged to the pride of kings and priests
A dark yet mighty faith, a power as wide
As the world it wasted, and are now
But an astonishment; even so the tools
And emblems of its last captivity,
Amid the dwellings of the peopled earth,
Stand, not o'erthrown, but unregarded now.
And those foul shapes,—abhorred by god and man,
Which, under many a name and many a form
Strange, savage, ghastly, dark, and execrable,
Were Jupiter, the tyrant of the world,
And which the nations, panic-stricken, served
With blood, and hearts broken by long hope, and love
Dragged to his altars soiled and garlandless,
And slain among men's unreclaiming tears,
Flattering the thing they feared, which fear was hate,—
Frown, mouldering fast, o'er their abandoned shrines.
The painted veil, by those who were, called life,
Which mimicked, as with colors idly spread,
All men believed and hoped, is torn aside;
The loathsome mask has fallen, the man remains
Sceptreless, free, uncircumscribed, but man
Equal, unclassed, tribeless, and nationless,
Exempt from awe, worship, degree, the king
Over himself; just, gentle, wise; but man

Passionless—no, yet free from guilt or pain,

Which were, for his will made or suffered them...

Equal, unclassed, tribeless, and nationless: this is Shelley's utopia. Shelley's views were so extreme, so far ahead of his time, that even a "progressive" liberal like William Hazlitt, after reading *Prometheus Unbound*, attacked Shelley as a "philosophic fanatic." As is always the case with socialists, the liberals hated him nearly as much as the reactionaries.

Utopian socialism, of course, was superseded by the "[scientific socialism](#)" of Marx and Engels, and it still brings charges of naivety and wishful thinking. But Shelley wasn't just building castles in the air: he was in the first place committed to, as [Marx put it](#), the "*ruthless criticism* of all that exists, ruthless both in the sense of not being afraid of the results it arrives at and in the sense of being just as little afraid of conflict with the powers that be." Shelley's early pamphlet [Poetical Essay on the Existing State of Things](#)—lost for almost 200 years—published to raise money for the Irish journalist Peter Finnerty, imprisoned for criticizing the practices of the army, already demonstrates his commitment to systematic critique. The majority of *Queen Mab*, cantos 3-7, is devoted to precisely the kind of ruthless criticism called for by Marx. Only after this critique is carried out does Shelley turn to his visions of futurity in the closing two cantos.

"The system of society as it exists at present," Shelley wrote to his friend, the radical journalist Leigh Hunt, "must be overthrown from the foundations with all its superstructure of maxims & of forms..." After Peterloo, Shelley believed this revolution was imminent, and he both hoped for it and feared it. He feared it because he had seen the French Revolution turn into a new kind of tyranny with Napoleon, and because he hated violence. He hoped for a bloodless revolution. But he also [realized that](#) "so dear is power that the tyrants themselves neither then nor now nor ever left or leave a path to freedom but through their own blood." Much of his poetry, and prose, following Peterloo is a working through of this hope and fear.

At a time when, to use a Shelleyan image, hope looks more like despair, and the Left at times seems [paralyzed by melancholy](#), a return to utopian visions and thinking might be necessary. We have to remind each other what we are fighting for. The ruthless criticism must and will continue; but I think we are mature enough to also let our imaginations run wild with beautiful ideas and visions and hopes for what could be. "If faith is a virtue," Shelley wrote, "it is so in politics rather than religion."

At the very center of *Queen Mab*, both structurally and conceptually, is a critique of commerce, which takes up the entirety of the fifth canto of the poem. The all-consuming power of commerce, dominating the earth as well as human life, is expressed forcefully, in lines that seem now, in the midst of the capitalist-driven Anthropocene, particularly prophetic:

All things are sold: the very light of heaven

Is venal; earth's unsparing gifts of love,
The smallest and most despicable things
That lurk in the abysses of the deep,
All objects of our life, even life itself,
And the poor pittance which the laws allow
Of liberty, the fellowship of man,
Those duties which his heart of human love
Should urge him to perform instinctively,
Are bought and sold as in a public mart
Of undisguising selfishness, that sets
On each its price, the stamp-mark of her reign.

For Shelley, commerce is "the venal interchange
Of all that human art or nature yield
Which wealth should purchase not, but want demand,
And natural kindness hasten to supply
From the full fountain of its boundless love,
For ever stifled, drained, and tainted now

Instead of money, need and kindness and love should be the basis of human exchange. This passage captures, in essence, that famous dictum of socialism: from each according to their abilities to each according to their needs. So far as I know, these lines have gone unremarked even by Shelley's socialist readers and apologists. Marx perhaps took inspiration from them—from Shelley's work in general—and I propose that we do so as well.

The post [Percy Bysshe Shelley's Socialist Future](#) appeared first on [Socialist Forum](#).