

Wrong About Orwell Being on the Right

Written by Alasdair McKay

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ALASDAIR MCKAY, AUG 28 2012

The Commentator recently published a piece about George Orwell. The article is essentially a rant about the BBC's perceived lack of impartiality and left-wing bias. The author brings to our attention the recent development that Mark Thompson – director general of the BBC – vetoed the proposal by the George Orwell Memorial Trust to build a statue of Orwell outside the BBC's new headquarters because “It's far too Left-wing an idea”. The story then proceeds in The Commentator's habitually paranoid fashion, suggesting that not constructing a statue of Orwell may be a ploy by the BBC to hide its true bias. Interesting logic and, in all honesty, all this is of little importance.

What is most significant, though, is that the author produces claims about Orwell's political beliefs:

“[t]he fact is that Orwell is claimed by both Left and Right. His anti-colonialism and his concern for social improvement are the items on his CV raised by Leftists claiming him as one of their own. His anti-totalitarianism and his related opposition to the corruption of language and thought by the political Left are the issues most commonly flagged up to promote the claims of the Right.

In terms of Orwell's legacy, there can be little doubt that the Right has the stronger claim. His outstanding works — Nineteen Eighty-Four and Animal Farm — focus on the horrors of communism, and it is this for which he will always be remembered.”

Orwell once remarked that “If liberty means anything at all, it means the right to tell people what they do not want to hear”.^[1] With that prompt in mind, it may bring the author of the article great disappointment to be informed that these are hollow claims they are making and there is precious little convincing evidence to support them. To be sure, Orwell was a dedicated foe of the murderous regime of Stalin. Indeed, his commitment to anti-Stalinism was evident when, in 1949, he comprised names of notable writers and other individuals he considered to be unsuitable as possible writers for the Information Research Department's anti-communist propaganda activities. It is also noteworthy that throughout much of his writing he was highly critical of certain parts of the left-wing and its intelligentsia. Yet highly distinguishable proofs of Orwell's left-wing political leanings and vindication of democratic socialism can be unequivocally seen in much of his serious work and his life experiences to which we now turn.

The writer George Orwell was born Eric Arthur Blair on 25 June 1903 Motihari, eastern India. He was the son of Ida and Richard Walmesley Blair, a British colonial civil servant. Orwell described his family as lower-upper-middle-class. After being educated in England at Eton, he joined the Indian Imperial Police in Burma, which was at the time a British colony and this episode in his life would later act as the subject of his first novel, *Burmese Days*, in 1934. Following his resignation from the Imperial Police in 1927, he turned to writing as a profession. In 1928, he moved to Paris, but his lack of success as a writer forced him into a series of menial jobs. These experiences would form the basis for his book, *Down and Out in Paris and London*, published in 1933. Shortly before its publication, he took the name George Orwell which stayed with him for the rest of his life.

In his earlier days Orwell appeared to lean towards anarchism, but in the 1930s Orwell urged the building of socialism, seeing the end of capitalism as the only solution to the economic misery facing Britain and the threat of

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Hitler and fascism from Europe. In the aforementioned *Down and Out in Paris and London*, he exposed the unsanitary and harsh working conditions in France's fine restaurants and in Britain's homeless shelters. He continued this theme with *The Road to Wigan Pier*, detailing the conditions of workers in the north of England and advocating for an inclusionary form of socialism that did not exclude workers or the lower middle class.

Late in 1936, Orwell travelled to Spain to voluntarily fight for the Republicans against Franco's Nationalists in the civil war, but he was forced to flee in fear of his life from Soviet-backed communists who were suppressing revolutionary socialist dissenters. The experience turned him into a lifelong anti-Stalinist. It did not, however, extinguish his socialist principles as some have claimed.

Indeed, Orwell joined the Independent Labour Party in 1938, declaring, "The only regime which, in the long run, will dare to permit freedom of speech is a socialist regime." [2] His vision for socialism included the immediate appropriation of factories and other means of production, collectivized planning of the economy and confiscation of all land from the rich. He loudly denounced those who opposed "that hated, dreaded thing, a world of free and equal human beings." [3]

Orwell's 1941 essay *The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius*, describes Britain's wartime situation, and then calls for a particularly English form of socialism, which would replace the capitalist model democratically and create a fairer society, while being informed by the most attractive English characteristics, such as love of privacy and law abidance. In this essay, we start to see signs of the process which eventually led Orwell to the writing of his famous dystopian novel, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

Written in 1948, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is set in the remnants of Britain, now named Oceania. The text depicts a society which is oppressively controlled by The Party, a totalitarian organisation. Oceania exists in a state of perpetual war, omnipresent government surveillance, and public mind control. Society is dictated by a political system euphemistically named English Socialism (Ingsoc) under the control of a privileged Inner Party elite that persecutes all individualism and independent thinking as "thoughtcrimes". The fate of persecution and torture eventually befalls the story's central character, Winston Smith.

A common belief, which is at best a misunderstanding and at worst a misrepresentation, is that with *Nineteen Eighty-Four* Orwell unveiled the horrors of "socialism" by predicting what would happen under a regime of the Stalinist model which many claims to be representative of all socialist ideals. A dovetail of this interpretation, or perhaps distortion, is to suggest that "Ingsoc", the totalitarian society, was represented as arising out of and therefore a consequence of democratic socialism. Interestingly, this take on *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as an attack on socialism has also harbored dislike from certain strands of the left. Llew Gardner of the *Daily Worker*, as part of something of an ad-hom attack, said of Orwell that: "When he wrote *1984*, the anti-socialist work that shocked the nation on television, George Orwell was sick in mind and body, a fast dying man". [4] Isaac Deutscher – the biographer of Trotsky – referred to the novel as an "ideological weapon in the Cold War". [5]

Whilst the novel has been met with great enthusiasm by the opponents of socialism, there is overwhelming evidence to show that it was not Orwell's intention to offer a damnation of socialism. He released many statements on *Nineteen-Eighty-Four* as a means of clarifying his intent, here is one of them:

"My novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is *not* intended as an attack on socialism, or on the British Labor party, but as a show-up of the perversions to which a centralized economy is liable, and which have already been partly realized in Communism and fascism. I do not believe that the kind of society I describe necessarily *will* arrive, but I believe (allowing of course for the fact that the book is a satire) that something resembling it *could* arrive. I believe also that totalitarian ideas have taken root in the minds of intellectuals everywhere, and I have tried to draw these ideas out to their logical consequences. The scene of the book is laid in Britain in order to emphasize that the English-speaking races are not innately better than anyone else and that totalitarianism, if not fought against, could triumph anywhere." [6]

Orwell also elaborated that "Ingsoc" was not meant to be representative of a phenomenon arising out of and

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subsequently a consequence of democratic socialism. Instead, his imaginary totalitarians surfaced in England in the aftermath of an atomic war and simply adopted the name of “English Socialism” (Ingsoc) because they aptly perceived it to have popular appeal with the working classes. With this move, there is also an obvious nod to the Nazi Party who, “while allying themselves in 1933 with the Ruhr industrialists and smashing the German trade unions and Socialist Party, called themselves “National-Socialists” to deceive the German working-classes”. [7]

The themes of the exploitation and manipulation of the working-classes also run heavily through *Animal Farm* (1944). Retelling the story of the emergence of Soviet communism in the form of an animal fable, *Animal Farm* allegorises the rise to power of Stalin. In the novella, the overthrow of the human oppressor Mr. Jones by a democratic coalition of animals quickly gives way to the consolidation of power among the pigs. In the same fashion as the Soviet intelligentsia, the pigs establish themselves as the ruling class in the new society and by the end have morphed so much that they have become indistinguishable from their past human oppressors. The novella was designed to be a biting satire of the Russian Revolution and its betrayal, and “the belief that Russia is a socialist country.” [8] It was not, however, an all-out assault upon socialist ideals.

Perhaps the most conclusive evidence of Orwell’s political convictions can be located in an essay which he titled *Why I Write* (1946). This work details Orwell’s personal journey to becoming a writer. First published in the summer 1946 edition of *Gangrel*, the essay offers a type of mini-autobiography and, as the title implies, Orwell examines his four justifications for writing. Sheer egoism, aesthetic enthusiasm and historical impulse are raised by Orwell as the first three reasons for him to write, he then, most significantly, brings us to his fourth justification, political purpose. Orwell writes that “no book is genuinely free from political bias”, and further explains that this motive is used very commonly in all forms of writing in the broadest sense, citing a “desire to push the world in a certain direction” in every person. He then, through his recollection of the Spanish Civil War, clearly illuminates where his allegiance lies:

“The Spanish war and other events in 1936-37 turned the scale and thereafter I knew where I stood. Every line of serious work that I have written since 1936 has been written, directly or indirectly, against totalitarianism and for democratic socialism, as I understand it.”

Based on Orwell’s own writing and self-appraisal, there is little ambiguity in regards to his political beliefs. He was a democratic socialist and remained one until his untimely death from tuberculosis on 21 January 1950, aged just 46. In fact, according to his own last words on the matter, just before his death, Orwell was a supporter of socialism and, to a certain extent, of the British Labour Party which had swept to power in 1945. [9] It is something of an irony that the many attempts to claim Orwell as a man of the right, whilst habitually producing little to no or at best flimsy supporting evidence, possess a deeply Orwellian logic, a sort of alteration of the past is so blatantly Orwellian as to be worthy of the Ministry of Truth: “The past was erased, the erasure was forgotten, the lie became truth.”[10]

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[1] George Orwell, in Preface to the Ukrainian edition of *Animal Farm*, as published in *The Collected Essays, Journalism, and Letters of George Orwell : As I please, 1943-1945* (1968)

[2] Orwell, “Why I joined the Independent Labour Party,” *Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell, Volume 1, 1920—1940* (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1968), p. 337.

[3] Quoted in John Newsinger, *Orwell’s Politics*, (Palgrave Macmillan; New Ed edition 12 Oct 2001) p. 86

[4] *Daily Worker*, 18 December 1954

[5] Isaac Deutscher, in “1984 —The Mysticism of Cruelty” in *Heretics and Renegades* (Jonathan Cape Ltd; First

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[6] Letter to F. A. Henson, 16 June 1949. *CEJL*, Vol 4, p. 564, See also a statement prepared and delivered by his publisher Fredric Warburg in response to an article in *New York Daily News* which, he had been told, interpreted his novel as an attack on the Labour government. Orwell also made a statement to the United Automobile Workers and this ended up being published in the 25 July 1949 issue of *Life* magazine.

[7] Letter from Orwell's friend Tosco Fyve to Margaret M. Goalby regarding her questions to him about Ingsoc and events in his life, July 8. 1950

[8] George Orwell, in Preface to the Ukrainian edition of *Animal Farm*, as published in *The Collected Essays, Journalism, and Letters of George Orwell : As I please, 1943-1945* (1968)

[9] Letter from Orwell's friend Tosco Fyve to Margaret M. Goalby regarding her questions to him about Ingsoc and events in his life, July 8. 1950

[10] Orwell, *George Nineteen-Eighty-Four*, Penguin (3 July 2008) p95.

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