

The Eco-Political Advocacy of George Orwell: Capitalism versus Totalitarianism

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Throughout the millennia of civilization, mankind has utilized a class controlled societal structure; the many have been ruled, frequently with an iron hand, by the few. It is only recently, however, since the dawn of the free market, that the concept of capital gain has encroached upon this long-standing tradition of authoritarian dominance by the landed gentry, raising the aspirations of the general populace and leading them in their quest for physical, emotional, and spiritual fulfillment. More so than any other author of the twentieth century, Eric Arthur Blair, better known by his pseudonym, George Orwell, has succeeded in giving depth and breadth to this struggle, bringing into focus the excesses of totalitarianism and the inequities of capitalism as the political and ideological *betes noires* of the modern western world. His literary works transcend the bounds of academic discipline and have left an indelible mark upon the development of political, social, and economic thought of the past half-century. In his later writings can be found a juxtaposition of the dogmatic philosophies of political expedience and the suffering of the masses upon which they are inflicted, a symbiosis wrought with inner conflict. The idiosyncratic attitudes and opinions of George Orwell regarding socialism as the political ideology of choice, developed primarily from 1936 onward, are a curious melding of his fear of totalitarianism and the innate flaws of capitalism.

It can certainly be said of George Orwell that he was a man of the people. By 1936, at age thirty-three, he had accumulated a diversity of life experiences which would, at that time, begin to influence his political leanings. Educated at St. Cyprians and as an adolescent, at Eaton, Orwell found himself placed amidst the progeny of the upper crust of English society. After graduation, he served for five years in Burma as an assistant superintendent of the Indian Imperial Police, where he found the “natives...hostile and the English jingoistic” (Zehr 409). In his essay, *A Hanging*, written during that time, Orwell tells “of the unspeakable wrongness of cutting a life short when it is in full tide” (McQuade 183). It reveals Orwell’s revulsion of Capital punishment, but he as yet makes no particular case for its abolition (Hollis 39).

Subsequent to the time spent in Burma, Orwell made sporadic forays into the poverty and counterculture of both London and Paris. Acceptance into this lower echelon of society, he felt, would in some way alleviate his guilt associated with the role he played in the British imperialistic excesses perpetrated in the Far East (Meyers 5). It was during this time that he first began to fathom the all-encompassing apathy that squelches the aspirations and ambitions of those persons unable to extricate themselves from the throes of destitution. *Down and Out in Paris and London* is the narrative and occasionally lighthearted result of those experiences.

During the pivotal year of 1936, as Orwell became convinced something was amiss in his homeland, interest in the plight of the poverty stricken turned to obsession. “Eric Blair had experienced injustice and

poverty; George Orwell began to look for the causes” (Gray 53). *The Road to Wigan Pier* is his departure point into the realm of political literature and immortality. Commissioned by the Left Book Club, which was headed by publisher Victor Gollancz, it proved to be a dichotomy and considerably more than that for which Mr. Gollancz had bargained. Not only did Orwell do as he was asked, writing an exposé of the conditions of working-class coal miners in the north districts of Yorkshire and Lancashire, in the second half he penned a scathing critique of capitalism and the corruption he felt was prevalent at the time in the English socialist movement. In an attempt to mitigate the animosity certain to be generated by Orwell finding socialists “a stupid, offensive, and insincere lot,” the foreword by Gollancz was more designed to smooth ruffled feathers than give real credence to the book. In it, Gollancz acquired the unenviable task of separating socialism from sodomy and distinguishing between Russian commissars and “half-gramophones, half-gangsters” (Meyers 12).

More significant and portentous than the antagonisms spewed forth in the second half of the book, however, are certain basic tenets of existence that Orwell found instilled into the very psyche of the lower classes by what he considered to be the inexorable machinations of the capitalist gods on high: the average working-class boy’s propensity for “real work” rather than school, the overwhelming stigma of inferiority shared by persons unemployed or on the dole, and the virtually constant indignities of filth and hunger suffered by a majority of the populace (Voorhees 90-94). With the writing of *The Road to Wigan Pier*, Orwell’s views on these improprieties of capitalism began to crystallize into a concise formulation of neglect, discrimination, and exploitation of the working man and the lower middle classes (Voorhees 89).

Orwell’s Spanish Sojourn, begun in late 1936, presented him with an opportunity to observe firsthand the planting of the seeds of totalitarianism. The Fascist military coup de etat, initiated by Generalissimo Francisco Franco to topple Spain’s pro-communist elected government, had resulted in civil war, and the lure of seeing “democracy standing up to fascism” was enough to inveigle Orwell into joining a local militia unit. Unbeknownst to Orwell, the left-wing government had outlawed the radical partisans he had thrown in with, in effect putting him in the camp of the Fascists and potentially subjecting him to the government purges and reprisals that would subsequently be carried out (Gray 53). “Spain left definitive marks on Orwell’s character; all the political writing he did after escaping the civil war was sharpened by his keen sense of betrayal” (Gray 53). “The disillusionment and anger that he felt over the dubious, self-serving role of the Communist party in Spain, and over what he saw of the extensive rewriting of history for the purposes of propaganda and deception, provided the seminal experiences that would inform and structure [the totalitarian aspects of both] *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*” (Zehr 415).

Although Orwell had indulged in some virulent socialist-bashing in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, he began to give tacit approval to a socialist doctrine of industrial organization when confronted by the wartime pragmatics of the German military juggernaut. “Hitler had proved that a planned society, whether it was planning for evil or good, was a more efficient machine for war than an unplanned society” (Hollis 133).

Even though Orwell possessed a reactionary's dread of government paternalism, he realized that, for the good of the average citizen, a socialistic government would have to invade certain areas of life in which, under capitalism with all its faults, the common man was free to do as he pleased (Voorhees 89). In *The Lion and the Unicorn*, Orwell fingered the avarice of the free market for the chaos in the English war economy, placing the blame for the shortcomings of the English military during World War II squarely on the shoulders of the capitalist and his preoccupation with profit. England needed tanks, but since the profits of private corporations took precedence over the interests of the country, industry produced cars (Voorhees 95).

In mid-1941, as a production assistant at the British Broadcasting Corporation, Orwell once again experienced the prevarications and deceptions that he had witnessed earlier in reports of the civil war in Spain. The propaganda of war, generated by both the Axis and the Allies was full of inconsistencies and out-and-out lies. What concerned him most, however, was the blatant corruption of history by the Nazi's and Russians and fear of some nefarious totalitarian transmutation to what he envisioned as "a nightmare world in which the leader, or some ruling clique, controls not only the future but the past" (Zehr 418). These inspirational concerns and fears would soon coalesce into *Animal Farm*, his first definitive political novel. "*Animal Farm*," said Orwell in 1947, "was the first book in which I tried, with full consciousness of what I was doing, to fuse political purpose and artistic purpose in one whole" (Woodcock 191).

And that he did—brilliantly. *Animal Farm*, written between November, 1943, and February, 1944, was a stunning success as the progenitor of anticommunist sentiment in the West, a biting yet at times humorous satire of authoritarian doctrine and a venerable foreshadowing of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the pièce de résistance yet to come. The specific political purpose of *Animal Farm*, which had aroused a sense of urgency in Orwell, was to explode the myth of the Soviet Union as the paradigm of the socialist state. "He also wanted to expose the dangers of totalitarianism, which he saw reflected in the politics of expedience, the devaluation of objective truth, and the systematic manipulation of the common people through propaganda" (Zehr 418). The delicate balancing act between the perceived evils of Soviet communism and Western capitalism being performed by Orwell on the tightwire of political existentialism led him to make statements such as this one in 1948, from *Writers and Leviathan*:

Most of us still have a lingering belief that every choice, even every political choice, is between good and evil, and that if a thing is necessary, it is also right. We should, I think, get rid of this belief, which belongs to the nursery. In politics, one can never do more than decide which of two evils is the lesser, and there are some situations from which one can only escape by acting like a devil or a lunatic (Gray 54).

The culmination of Orwell's literary career and, sadly, the beginning of the end of his life coincided with the publication of his political masterpiece, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The final word in antitotalitarian propaganda, it is a chronicle of hopelessness and a study in terror, pain, and deception. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*,

Orwell succeeds in transcending the limited emotional and psychological complexity inherent in the form of *Animal Farm* (Zehr 419). The tripartite system of world government therein presented is most likely a reference to the Yalta conference and represented his fears of the rapacity for power of the participants. Orwell was “unshakably convinced that Stalin, Churchill, and Roosevelt consciously plotted to divide the world, and to divide it for good, among themselves, and to subjugate it in common...‘They are all power hungry,’ he used to repeat” (Hollis 198).

Orwell lived only seven months after the publication of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, but that was “long enough [for him] to realize that his book was becoming [both] enormously successful and widely misunderstood” (Gray 56). While in bad health, in an effort to set the record straight, he commented on his intentions in writing it and the possibility of his fiction becoming reality:

My recent novel is NOT intended as an attack on socialism or the British Labor Party (of which I am a supporter) 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 (Gray 56).

At the age of forty-six, George Orwell died at the University of London Hospital on the twenty-first of January, 1950, still immersed in his struggle to ascertain the political path down which civilization was to travel. His writings were instrumental in displacing the myth of equality for the masses at the expense of the elite, be it capitalism or communism, and will be analyzed and consulted for many years to come. Unfortunately, with humanity’s propensity for self-indulgence and gratification, a classless society is a nonexistent society. Orwell’s work advocated a philosophy of moderation by illustrating the radical and inducing the reactionary. The gelid, overcast winter day on which he died marked not only his passing, but also the passing of the viability of extremist viewpoint in both political ideologies. History so far has proved him right; may it continue to do so.

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