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'I Know How, But I Don't Know Why'

George Orwell's Conception of Totalitarianism

'Have you read this book? You must read it, sir. Then you will know why we must drop the atom bomb on the Bolshies!' With these words, a blind, miserable news-vendor recommended to me *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in New York, a few weeks before Orwell's death. Poor Orwell, could he ever imagine that his own book would become so prominent an item in the programme of Hateweek? — Isaac Deutscher, '*Nineteen Eighty-Four: The Mysticism of Cruelty*'

GEORGE Orwell was a radical socialist until he died. Yet his last two novels, *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, are far more famous for having been used as Cold War propaganda. Deutscher's tale is a poignant example of this. In the decades since his death in 1950, Orwell has suffered the indignity of being probably the only unrepentant radical socialist who has been championed by large numbers of conservative thinkers, and whose works have been regularly used to oppose the very ideas he fought for until his death. This article aims to explain this anomaly.

Like many who went through the British educational system in the 1960s and early 1970s, I read both *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as part of an O Level syllabus. Although Orwell was described as a socialist, the books were interpreted in an anti-socialist manner, that any attempt to introduce socialism would lead inexorably to Big Brother and brutal interrogations in the Ministry of Love. Only when I became a socialist in the late 1970s did I start to learn the truth about Orwell.

This article starts with a look at Orwell's conception of socialism as it formed in the 1930s, and at the basis of his hostility towards the official com-

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munist movement, or Stalinism as it is often called. It continues by showing how these two factors were developed by his experiences in the Spanish Civil War, particularly in respect of his fear of a totalitarian future, and then looks at the way in which he attempted to develop a strategy for socialism that could prevent a drift into totalitarianism. It then outlines the background to both *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, showing how the novels have been interpreted, and explaining how they could be used as anti-socialist propaganda. It then presents an appraisal of Orwell's conception of totalitarianism, and asks how well it has endured, particularly in the light of the collapse of the Soviet bloc. It concludes with an appendix looking at the recent revelations about Orwell's links with the Foreign Office's Information Research Department, the anti-communist propaganda organisation set up by Attlee's Labour government in 1948, as this clearly shows the consequences of the limitations of Orwell's theoretical and political approach.

Orwell's Conception of Socialism

Although Orwell's experiences as an imperial policeman in Burma were to propel him towards radicalism and a lifelong antipathy towards the power of the state over individuals, his first overtly political work was *The Road to Wigan Pier*. Published in 1937, the first part of the book is a series of vignettes of the industrial North of England in 1936. The second part is a credo of Orwellian socialism, and there are clear indications of his feelings and fears that would assume a full-blown dimension in *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

The book outraged many, including its publisher, Victor Gollancz, by its scathing attack on the socialist movement in Britain. Amidst the well-known epithets — 'nancy poets', 'vegetarians with wilting beards', 'earnest ladies in sandals', 'every fruit-juice drinker, nudist, sandal-wearer, sex-maniac, Quaker, "Nature Cure" quack, pacifist and feminist in England', to mention just a few — Orwell aimed a few barbs at the official communist movement, pointing to 'Bolshevik commissars (half-gangster, half-gramophone)', and 'shock-headed Marxists chewing polysyllables'. For him, socialism in Britain no longer smelled of 'revolution and the overthrow of tyrants', it reeked of 'machine-worship, and the stupid cult of Russia'.¹ Orwell's full-blooded antipathy to Stalinism, something that was most unusual during the late 1930s, when even many anti-socialist commentators had something appreciative to say about the Soviet Union, is clear.²

Orwell's hostility to Stalinism was based upon three factors. Firstly, he held all forms of socialist theory in contempt, and dismissed Marxism, stating that the left could not afford to be 'a league of dialectical materialists'. He showed little patience with the 'doctrinaire priggishness' and 'party squabbles' of the left. This was aimed at the Marxian left, with its penchant for polemics and theoretical

1. G Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, Harmondsworth, 1983, pp30-1, 152, 160, 189-90.
2. The industrial growth under the Five Year Plans and the introduction of extensive welfare and educational measures were praised by many Western academics, politicians and journalists who firmly rejected the repressive aspects of the Soviet regime. This is illustrated in my forthcoming book *The New Civilisation?: Understanding Stalin's Soviet Union, 1929-41*.

constructs, of which the Communist Party of Great Britain was by far the largest component.³

Secondly, his description of ‘Bolshevik commissars’ as ‘half-gangster, half-gramophone’ was based upon his experience of those in and around the Communist Party, but can also be seen as a criticism of the regime in the Soviet Union. Orwell read widely, and was acquainted with a wide range of critical writings on the Soviet Union. He reviewed three informative books in the late 1930s on the Soviet Union and the official communist movement, namely *Assignment in Utopia* by Eugene Lyons, a disillusioned American fellow-traveller; *The Communist International* by Franz Borkenau, a former prominent member of the German Communist Party; and *Russia Under Soviet Rule: Twenty Years of Bolshevik Experiment* by Nicholas de Basily, a well-informed Russian exile.⁴ He had also read Ante Ciliga’s *The Russian Myth*, and Max Eastman’s *The End of Socialism in Russia*, and owned a sizeable collection of far-left pamphlets.⁵ He was also in contact with a wide range of left-wing individuals, and, as anyone active on the left-wing scene will understand, he would have come across people’s ideas interpreted by a third party, even if he had not read any of their writings.

Thirdly, he disliked the hailing of Soviet industrial growth. This was a part of his general suspicion of industrialisation. Orwell condemned the technocratic concept that ‘progress’ was essentially the emancipation of humanity through the development of industry. He recoiled at the vision of the ‘huge glittering factories of glass and concrete’ of the future. He recognised that the machine age was here to stay, but he was deeply uneasy about it. Industrialisation was leading inexorably to ‘some form of collectivism’, but it need not be of a socialist form:

... it is quite easy to imagine a world society, economically collectivist — that is, with the profit principle eliminated — but with all political, military and educational power in the hands of a small caste of rulers and their bravos. That or something like it is the objective of fascism. And that, of course, is the slave state, or rather the slave world... It is against this beastly possibility that we have got to combine.⁶

3. G Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, op cit, pp189, 195. The CPGB’s membership rose steadily in the late 1930s, from 6500 in 1935 to 17 750 in 1939 (N Branson, *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1927-1941*, London, 1985, p188), which was many times the total membership of non-Stalinist Marxian groups in Britain.
4. See Orwell’s reviews in his *Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters*, Volume 1, Harmondsworth, 1984, pp368-71, 385-8, 416-9.
5. John Newsinger lists some of these, see his ‘Orwell and the Revolutionary Left’, *New Interventions*, Volume 8, no 4, Summer 1998. However, Alex Zwerdling’s assertion that Orwell had learnt a lot from Trotsky’s *The Revolution Betrayed* must be treated with scepticism, because he states that Goldstein’s ‘book’ in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is based on it (A Zwerdling, *Orwell and the Left*, New Haven, 1978, pp86-7). Even a cursory glance at *The Revolution Betrayed* and the relevant sections of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* proves that this assessment is quite inaccurate. It should also be noted that Orwell had read material on Nazi Germany, including Robert Brady’s *The Spirit and Structure of German Fascism* (London, 1937).
6. G Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, op cit, p189.

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The development of industry would be a major factor behind the rise of a collectivist ruling élite, running an étatised society without a profit motive. Orwell was worried that if the socialist movement could not win over the middle classes, they might be attracted towards such a society.⁷

Orwell's conception of socialism was essentially ethical, and he summed it up in the words 'justice and liberty'. Central to it was the call for decency in one's political activities, and he subsequently harshly condemned left-wingers who wrote off 'common decency' as 'bourgeois morality'.⁸ Orwell's socialism was, as Warren Wagar states (citing Julian Symons), 'of the heart rather than the slide-rule', and he makes the accurate observation that Orwell was amongst the socialists who were 'drawn to the cause by compassion or guilt or nostalgia for simpler ages, rather than by hard-boiled socio-economic analysis and theory'.⁹

Orwell called upon left-wingers to unite and build a socialist party as 'a league of the oppressed against the oppressors'. Here, however, he ran into a problem that was to dog him throughout his career as a socialist. Claiming that workers were predominantly concerned with the bread and butter issues of the day, and were not interested in socialist theory — indeed, he stated that 'no genuine working man grasps the deeper implications of socialism' — he implied that workers who did educate themselves would automatically be corrupted by becoming union or Labour Party officials, or by squirming their way into the literary intelligentsia and the radical middle class, the very people whom Orwell considered were predominant in the socialist movement, and whom he deeply distrusted.¹⁰

If, however, the socialist movement was 'invaded by better brains and more common decency', then he felt that the 'objectionable types' would no longer dominate it. So if the untheoretical workers could provide the 'common decency', who would provide the 'better brains'? It could not be the workers, because they would most likely be corrupted if they educated themselves. Although he assumed that the leadership of any revolt would tend to be from the middle class, he considered that socialists from a bourgeois background at bottom still despised the class that they claimed to champion.¹¹

7. Ibid, pp186-7.

8. G Orwell, 'The English People', *Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters*, Volume 3, Harmondsworth, 1984, p22. Stephen Ingle correctly states that 'general principles of conduct' interested Orwell 'more than political programmes' (SJ Ingle, 'The Politics of George Orwell: A Reappraisal', *Queens Quarterly*, Volume 80, no 1, Spring 1973, p32). Christopher Small, however, argues that Orwell's concept of decency is indefinable and impossible to analyse (C Small, *The Road to Minilw: George Orwell, the State and God*, London, 1975, pp117-35), whilst David Kubal maintains that 'a creed based on such fundamental human values as justice, decency and camaraderie' was insufficient 'to combat the realpolitik of Stalin, Hitler, Mussolini and Franco', and claims — rather unconvincingly to me — that Orwell subsequently abandoned it (DL Kubal, *Outside the Whale: George Orwell's Art and Politics*, London, 1972, p112).

9. W Wagar, 'George Orwell as Political Secretary of the Zeitgeist', in EJ Jensen (ed), *The Future of Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Ann Arbor, 1984, p180.

10. G Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, op cit, pp154-5, 189-95.

11. Ibid, pp44, 117, 193.

Orwell was effectively tying a Gordian knot, and it was one which he was never able to disentangle.

Socialism and Totalitarianism

Orwell travelled to Spain in December 1936 to fight in the Spanish Civil War. His experiences there proved to be extremely influential in two ways. Firstly, for the first time in his life, he saw the working class in a militant and confident mood. Secondly, he saw the murderous reality of the Stalinists, as they sought to destroy a revolution and crush all those who opposed them. The first factor was to fade in his consciousness until his confidence in the ability of the working class to shape its own destiny was little more than a memory and a hope for the future; the second was to remain a prominent and permanent influence upon his political outlook.

Many years later, Orwell stated that prior to 1936, he did not have 'an accurate political orientation'. However:

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.¹²

Arriving in Barcelona in December 1936, he found himself in a city in which, as he put it, 'the working class was in the saddle'. Although he was a bit disconcerted by this unfamiliar phenomenon, he was to look back at it with fondness:

Above all, there was a belief in the revolution and the future, a feeling of having suddenly emerged into an era of equality and freedom. Human beings were trying to behave as human beings and not as cogs in the capitalist machine... There is a sense in which it would be true to say that one was experiencing a foretaste of socialism, by which I mean that the prevailing mental atmosphere was that of socialism. Many of the normal motives of civilised life — snobbishness, money-grubbing, fear of the boss, etc — had simply ceased to exist.¹³

Orwell went to Spain in order, as he put it, to fight against fascism and to fight for 'common decency'.¹⁴ And if his belief in socialism was reinforced as he discovered this quality amongst the Spanish workers, so was his dislike of Stalinism.

Franco's military coup in June 1936 against Azaña's liberal coalition administration provoked a militant response. Workers and peasants seized factories and the land, which they then controlled through elected committees. They set up militias to fight Franco's troops. Although the political centre ground between the militant upsurge and Franco's forces was rapidly narrowing, the Communist

12. G Orwell, 'Why I Write', *CEJL*, Volume 1, op cit, pp26, 28.

13. G Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia*, Harmondsworth, 1989, pp2-3, 82-3.

14. *Ibid*, p188.

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International posed the struggle in Spain as between ‘the proletariat, the peasantry, the democratic bourgeoisie and the intellectuals on the one side, and the monarcho-feudalist reactionaries, the counter-revolutionary fascists, on the other’. The fight was ‘for the maintenance of the democratic republic’, not for socialism.¹⁵

This was not an academic matter, a case of fraternal debate. A civil war was soon to break out within the republican side, with the marginalised republican government being propped up by the local Stalinists and by Soviet military and intelligence personnel. The latter imposed a reign of terror, with their secret police acting autonomously of any domestic control, and infiltrating the republican police and judiciary. Their main targets were their left-wing rivals.¹⁶

If Orwell was at first more inclined towards the stance of the Communist International, that the war against Franco should be won before wide-ranging social reforms be implemented, he soon realised that this was unrealistic, as those who had first taken up arms against Franco combined that fight with the seizure and running of factories, transport and land; indeed ‘their resistance was accompanied by — one might almost say it consisted of — a definite revolutionary outbreak’. He came to recognise that the Stalinists’ policies were not only holding back and even reversing the struggle for social gains, but were demoralising the militants, and impeding the war effort against Franco.¹⁷

He reacted strongly to the slanderous campaign conducted by the Stalinists against other leftists, and he attempted to help those who had been imprisoned. He trod on many sensitive toes with his trenchant writings:

When I left Barcelona in late June [1937] the jails were bulging... But the point to notice is that the people who are in prison now are not the fascists but revolutionaries; they are not there because their opinions are too much to the right, but because they are too much to the left. And the people responsible for putting them there are... the communists.¹⁸

Orwell was very disturbed that his writings were censored and rejected by such publications as the *News Chronicle* and the *New Statesman*, which preferred to believe the official communist version of events in Spain.¹⁹

After his return from Spain, Orwell spent a lot of time grappling with the questions of socialism, Stalinism, democracy and totalitarianism. Unlike many left-wingers, he saw through the barrage of Stalinist propaganda. His delightful parody of the Moscow Trials has not been bettered:

15. *International Press Correspondence*, 8 August 1936.

16. Two recent attempts by partisans of the official communist movement to discredit Orwell’s Spanish accounts are Bill Alexander, ‘George Orwell and Spain’, and Robert Stradling, ‘Orwell and the Spanish Civil War’, in C Morris (ed), *Inside the Myth: Orwell: Views From the Left*, London, 1984. Both concentrate on minor points of dispute with Orwell, and say little (Stradling) or nothing (Alexander) about his statements about Stalinist atrocities in Spain.

17. G Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia*, op cit, pp90, 190.

18. G Orwell, ‘Spilling the Spanish Beans’, *CEJL*, Volume 1, op cit, p302.

19. G Orwell, Letter to Frank Jellinek, *CEJL*, Volume 1, op cit, p403.

Mr Winston Churchill, now in exile in Portugal, is plotting to overthrow the British Empire and establish communism in England. By the use of unlimited Russian money he has succeeded in building up a huge Churchillite organisation which includes members of parliament, factory managers, Roman Catholic bishops and practically the whole of the Primrose League... Eighty per cent of the Beefeaters at the Tower are discovered to be agents of the Comintern... Lord Nuffield... confesses that ever since 1920 he has been fomenting strikes in his own factories. Casual half paras in every issue of the newspapers announce that 50 more Churchillite sheep-stealers have been shot in Westmoreland or that the proprietress of a village shop in the Cotswolds has been transported to Australia for sucking the bull's-eyes and putting them back in the bottle.²⁰

Nevertheless, unlike many anti-Stalinist left-wingers, in particular the Trotskyists, he did not take a positive view of Bolshevism. One of his major criticisms of not merely Stalinism, but of the whole Bolshevik tradition, was that it restricted democracy. He insisted that socialism had to be democratic, and he rooted the rise of totalitarianism in the Soviet Union in what he saw as the Bolsheviks' rejection of democracy: 'The essential act is the rejection of democracy — that is, of the underlying values of democracy; once you have decided upon that, Stalin — or at any rate someone *like* Stalin — is already on the way.'²¹ He also made a significant comparison when he reviewed Eugene Lyons' *Assignment in Utopia*, stating that the society Lyons described 'does not seem to be very different from fascism'.²²

Orwell was convinced that the whole thrust of societal development was towards totalitarianism. At this juncture, he claimed that the government's preparations for the forthcoming world war would lead to the establishment of 'an authoritarian regime' along the lines of 'Austro-fascism'.²³ Although he used language reminiscent of the far left when he condemned the Communist International and its Popular Front campaign — the call for all social classes to demand an Anglo-Franco-Soviet 'collective security' alliance against Germany —

20. G Orwell, Review of Eugene Lyons, *Assignment in Utopia*, *CEJL*, Volume 1, op cit, pp368-9.

21. G Orwell, Review of N de Basily, *Russia Under Soviet Rule*, *CEJL*, Volume 1, op cit, p419. He rejected Trotsky's criticisms of Stalin, stating that he could not avoid taking responsibility for the evolution of the Soviet regime, and there was no certainty that 'as a dictator' he would have been preferable to Stalin (ibid). Later on, he stated that something like the purges was implicit in Bolshevik rule: 'I could feel it in their literature.' (G Orwell, 'Wartime Diary: 1940', *Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters*, Volume 2, Harmondsworth, 1984, p393)

22. G Orwell, Review of Eugene Lyons, *Assignment in Utopia*, *CEJL*, Volume 1, op cit, p370. At this point, Orwell wondered if the Soviet Union constituted 'a peculiarly vicious form of state capitalism' (ibid, p369).

23. G Orwell, Letter to Herbert Read, *CEJL*, Volume 1, op cit, p425. Many left-wingers in Britain thought that civil liberties would be severely restricted when war broke out. One Trotskyist group sent its leadership to the Republic of Ireland (S Bornstein and A Richardson, *War and the International: A History of the Trotskyist Movement in Britain, 1937-1949*, London, 1986, pp8-11).

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for mobilising support for a world war,²⁴ his anti-war stance of the late 1930s was predicated upon his concept of the totalitarianisation of society, rather than, as in the case of anarchists and Trotskyists, on an overall rejection of imperialist war.

Orwell's feelings as war approached can be ascertained, if rather obliquely, in his novel *Coming Up For Air*, which he wrote in early 1939. It brings out in a necessarily refracted form many of his concerns about the future, and many of the themes that are introduced in *Coming Up For Air* play a major role in his subsequent works, both fiction and non-fiction, and underlie much of his thinking at the start of the Second World War.

The main character is George Bowling, a middle-aged, middle-class insurance salesman who returns to Lower Binfield, his rural Oxfordshire birthplace, for the first time in over two decades. Bowling's lengthy reminiscences of his childhood and youth serve to reinforce the core of Orwell's thinking, that people thought that something good in society — a feeling of security, or, more exactly, a feeling of continuity — was disappearing, and would not, indeed could not, be regained. Furthermore, if in the past 'it was simply that they didn't think of the future as something to be terrified of', now the future is an enforced uniformity with everything 'slick and shiny and streamlined', 'celluloid, rubber, chromium steel everywhere, arc-lamps blazing all night, glass roofs over your head, radios all playing the same tune, no vegetation left, everything cemented over'. The futuristic glass and concrete factories of *The Road to Wigan Pier* make a reappearance. The rapidly approaching war hangs like a shroud over *Coming Up For Air*, but the war itself is not really the problem; it is the 'after-war' that is really frightening. For all the talk of uncertainty in the future, there is a very real certainty: 'The bad times are coming...' Images of a future repressive, regulated — in other words, totalitarian — society occur and reoccur throughout the book. 'Rubber truncheons', not any old truncheons, but rubber ones, crop up with monotonous regularity, and barbed wire, slogans, posters with 'enormous faces' and street tannoys announcing the latest victory make their appearance, a series of ugly interruptions to the dreamy reminiscences, a premonition of the dystopia of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.²⁵

Despite the vividness and sharpness of his overtly political writings, these glimpses in this novel of a postwar nightmare are perhaps the most illuminating insights into Orwell's fears as the world tipped into the biggest and most destructive war in history.

World War, Collectivism and Socialism

Orwell's anti-war stance disappeared as the Second World War drew near, although his shift to what can be best described as a revolutionary defencist standpoint was not so drastic when the underlying rationale is examined.²⁶ As we

24. G Orwell, Letter to Geoffrey Gorer, *CEJL*, Volume 1, op cit, p317.

25. G Orwell, *Coming Up For Air*, Harmondsworth, 1963, pp25-7, 106, 165, 225.

26. Some commentators view Orwell's shift on the war as a fundamental change. See Editor's

have seen, he considered that the drift towards war would see the imposition of a totalitarian regime in Britain. However, when war broke out in September 1939, Britain was still a parliamentary democracy, and so, on the logic that even an imperfect democracy was preferable to fascism, he considered that the war against the Axis powers had to be supported.²⁷

As Orwell moved from opposing a future war to supporting one in the present, he passed the official communist movement travelling in the opposite direction, as it took an anti-war stance in the aftermath of the signing of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact on 23 August 1939, and this intensified his already strong antipathy towards it.²⁸ The pact dealt a heavy blow to the Popular Front bandwagon, and further popularised the already common view that the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany were ‘rapidly evolving towards the same system’, as Orwell put it in a review of Franz Borkenau’s *The Totalitarian Enemy*, a book which not only claimed that Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union were practically identical societies, but considered that the world faced a collectivist future, and that the quest for power was the driving force behind totalitarian regimes — ideas that Orwell shared.²⁹

Orwell’s disgust was aimed mainly at the intellectuals whose sympathies had gravitated towards Stalinism. They had merely exchanged their British patriotism and Christianity for another set of orthodoxies: ‘All the loyalties and superstitions that the intellect had seemingly banished could come rushing back under the thinnest of disguises.’ They were deracinated, torn from their social backgrounds, and so they embraced official communism as something to believe in.

Introduction, *The Left and World War II: Selections From the Anarchist Journal War Commentary, 1939-1943*, London, 1989, p5; Adam Buick, ‘George Orwell, Spain and War’, *Socialist Standard*, May 1997.

27. He explained his change of heart to Tosco Fyvel, stating that he realised that there was no danger of fascism in Britain (TR Fyvel, *George Orwell: A Personal Memoir*, London, 1983, p100).
28. Orwell considered that the Communist Party was led by people who were ‘mentally subservient to Russia’, and whose real aim was ‘to manipulate British foreign policy in the Russian interest’. Hence, when calling for an Anglo-Franco-Soviet alliance, a Stalinist ‘was obliged to become a good patriot and imperialist’ (G Orwell, ‘Inside the Whale’, *CEJL*, Volume 1, op cit, pp562-3). Unlike Trotsky, who recognised that this growing domestic patriotism had deeper roots, and was leading to tensions between communist parties and Moscow (LD Trotsky, ‘A Fresh Lesson’, *Writings of Leon Trotsky 1938-39*, New York, 1974, p71), Orwell’s conception was one-sided. Perhaps this is why Orwell did not comment upon the remarkable episode when the party’s general secretary Harry Pollitt and *Daily Worker* editor Johnny Campbell maintained their pro-war approach and voted against the Comintern’s anti-war line in October 1939, even though this episode, including their subsequent public grovelling and disingenuous self-criticisms — classic examples of what Orwell later called ‘doublethink’ — was publicly known.
29. G Orwell, Review of F Borkenau, *The Totalitarian Enemy*, *CEJL*, Volume 2, op cit, pp40-1; F Borkenau, *The Totalitarian Enemy*, London, 1940, pp7, 32, 253. Amongst the wide range of authorities which shared this view was the *New Statesman*, which had previously been quite appreciative of the Soviet Union: ‘By the inexorable laws of its dialectic, Bolshevism brought into being its antithesis, National Socialism. Today the question being asked is whether the ugly thing that now reigns from Vladivostok to Cologne is turning into the inevitable synthesis, National Bolshevism.’ (*New Statesman*, 9 December 1939)

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They could accept totalitarianism because they had no experience of despotism.³⁰ Later on, he added to their pantheon of sins 'leader worship'³¹ and the potential to transfer their allegiance to Hitler if he looked like winning.³²

Although Orwell recognised that there was no immediate danger of totalitarianism arising in Britain, he became ever more convinced of its likelihood in the not-too-distant future:

Almost certainly we are moving into an age of totalitarian dictatorships — an age in which freedom of thought will be at first a deadly sin and later on a meaningless abstraction. The autonomous individual is going to be stamped out of existence.³³

He noted the repression and degradation that was required for the establishment and maintenance of a totalitarian regime: 'So it appears that amputation of the soul *isn't* just a simple surgical job, like having your appendix out.'³⁴ Moreover:

Totalitarianism has abolished freedom of thought to an extent unheard of in any previous age... It not only forbids you to express — even to think — certain thoughts, but it dictates what you *shall* think, it creates an ideology for you, it tries to govern your emotional life... The peculiarity of the totalitarian state is that though it controls thought, it does not fix it. It sets up unquestionable dogmas, and it alters them from day to day. It needs the dogmas, because it needs absolute obedience from its subjects, but it cannot avoid the changes, which are dictated by the needs of power politics. It declares itself infallible, and at the same time it attacks the very concept of objective truth.³⁵

Orwell considered that the elimination of objective truth — the removal of the ability of a person to obtain accurate information and thus be able to interpret and change society — was perhaps the most sinister aspect of totalitarianism. He was insistent on the need for free expression of ideas: 'Any Marxist can demon-

30. G Orwell, 'Inside the Whale', *CEJL*, Volume 1, op cit, p565. Many observers, especially David Cauter, argue that many pro-Stalin intellectuals were naive folk (see David Cauter, *The Fellow Travellers: A Postscript to the Enlightenment*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1973), whilst George Watson avers that 'the literary evidence does not bear out the myths of innocence and self-deception', as they knew that they were supporting mass murder (G Watson, *Politics and Literature in Modern Britain*, Basingstoke, 1977, p70). Newsinger (op cit) states that Orwell's attitude towards the rank and file of the Communist Party was a lot more positive. Orwell considered that workers were favourable towards the Soviet Union because they felt that 'the common man' was in control there (G Orwell, 'London Letter to *Partisan Review*' [April 1944], *CEJL*, Volume 3, op cit, p153), with the implication that workers' pro-Soviet feelings were due to their naiveté.

31. G Orwell, 'London Letter to *Partisan Review*' [August 1941], *CEJL*, Volume 2, op cit, p175.

32. G Orwell, 'London Letter to *Partisan Review*' [May 1943], *CEJL*, Volume 2, op cit, p328.

33. G Orwell, 'Inside the Whale', *CEJL*, Volume 1, op cit, p576.

34. G Orwell, 'Notes on the Way', *CEJL*, Volume 2, op cit, p31.

35. G Orwell, 'Literature and Totalitarianism', *CEJL*, Volume 2, op cit, pp162-3.

strate with the greatest of ease that “bourgeois” liberty of thought is an illusion. But when he has finished his demonstration there remains the psychological *fact* that without this “bourgeois” liberty the creative powers wither away.³⁶

Orwell was adamant that socialism had to be built upon the gains of the capitalist era, and could not reject them without making a bad situation worse.

This idea of preserving the better aspects of today’s society emerges in Orwell’s wartime strategy of revolutionary defencism. Its main thrust was that Hitler had to be defeated, but he could not be defeated unless a far-reaching social transformation took place in Britain; in short, a socialist revolution was necessary to win the war.³⁷

Far from being ‘king and country’ flagwaving, Orwell’s patriotism was based upon two factors that were central to his concept of the struggle for socialism. Firstly, he considered that an internationalist appeal was ineffective, especially to the middle-class people whom he wanted to win to socialism; and secondly, he wanted to defend those aspects of British life that he felt were worth preserving, including what he saw as the ‘gentleness’ of British civilisation, the ‘liberty of the individual’, and ‘the respect for constitutionalism and legality’. He recognised that these factors were a product of Britain’s specific historical development, rather than springing from innate national characteristics, and were basically contingent upon objective factors, as he recognised that the British ruling class would act like any other were its power and privileges threatened. As he considered that the aim of socialism was ‘a world-state of free and equal human beings’ and not any kind of nationally-oriented affair, or peculiarly British venture, it is clear that he saw these aspects as necessary features of a socialist society on a global scale, that is, in all countries.³⁸

So how would the fight for socialism fare in a world seemingly hurtling towards totalitarianism? In *The Lion and the Unicorn*, Orwell repeats his call for a new socialist party, and then calls for the state ownership of ‘all productive goods’, that is, land, mines, ships and machinery, plus ‘approximate equality of incomes..., political democracy, and abolition of all hereditary privilege, especially in education’, whilst recognising that ‘centralised ownership has very little meaning unless the mass of the people are living roughly upon an equal level, and have some kind of control over the government’. Yet he does not elaborate upon this ‘kind of control’. Indeed, Orwell goes so far as to say that once the ‘productive goods’ are the property of the state, the ‘common people’ will feel that ‘the state *is themselves*’, thus virtually associating collectivism *per se* with socialism.³⁹ The crucial issue of the *control* of the ‘productive goods’ and the state machinery — the only way that collectivism can escape a totalitarian fate — is overlooked. Once again, Orwell painted himself into a corner.

36. G Orwell, ‘Inside the Whale’, *CEJL*, Volume 1, op cit, p568.

37. He argues this most succinctly in his essay ‘Patriots and Revolutionaries’, in V Gollancz (ed), *The Betrayal of the Left*, London, 1941, pp234-45. This position was shared by various left-wingers. See Tom Wintringham, *The Politics of Victory*, London, 1941.

38. G Orwell, ‘The Lion and the Unicorn’, *CEJL*, Volume 2, op cit, pp78-81, 93, 102.

39. *Ibid*, pp100-1, 120.

***Animal Farm*: Revolutionary Betrayal or Consummation?**

The Second World War entered a new phase after the German assault upon the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941. One immediate result was that the Soviet Union rapidly changed in people's perception from being a near-ally of Nazi Germany into a staunch and respected ally of Britain and, after December 1941, the USA as well. The rehabilitation of Stalin and the Soviet Union was not so much a return to the fellow-travelling days of the late 1930s, but part of the wartime ideology in Britain. It went much further, with the British government being obliged to give official approval to the Soviet Union, an endorsement which was simultaneously fulsome and uneasy.⁴⁰

Whilst respect for the Soviet Union in its fight against Nazi Germany was to some extent a refracted form of British patriotism — one account states that 'criticism of the USSR became tantamount to treason'⁴¹ — it could not avoid being conflated with the idea of the perceived superiority of a planned economy, and even with the idea of socialism.⁴² Only a tiny handful of people at various obscure points across the political spectrum refrained from joining in the Stalin-worship, and Orwell was one of them.⁴³

It was almost typical of Orwell that at the peak of British respect for the Soviet Union he should write a novel that was a sharp polemic against Britain's wartime ally. Needless to say, he had considerable problems getting *Animal Farm* published,⁴⁴ and even when it was released by Secker and Warburg, it was shorn of its polemical foreword, thus helping to rob it of its contemporary relevance.

The unpublished foreword to *Animal Farm* showed Orwell's great concern about 'the prevailing orthodoxy' of the 'uncritical admiration of Soviet Russia', which he considered was encouraging extremely unwelcome and ominous tendencies amongst British intellectuals. He flailed out at the 'veiled censorship' operating in their circles:

At any given moment there is an orthodoxy, a body of ideas which it is assumed that all right-thinking people will accept without question. It is

40. See Paul Addison, *The Road to 1945: British Politics and the Second World War*, London, 1982, pp127-63.

41. FS Northedge and A Wells, *Britain and Soviet Communism: The Impact of a Revolution*, Basingstoke, 1982, p151.

42. See Angus Calder, *The People's War: Britain 1939-1945*, London, 1992, pp260ff, 298, 348ff. The government's fears about this are described in Philip Bell, *John Bull and the Bear: British Public Opinion, Foreign Policy and the Soviet Union, 1941-1945*, London, 1990, pp42, 67. The membership of the Communist Party rose from 22 783 in December 1941 to 56 000 in December 1942, although it dropped off to 45 535 by March 1945 (N Branson, *History of the Communist Party of Great Britain, 1941-1951*, London, 1997, p252).

43. Even then, Orwell praised the Soviet system in his BBC wireless broadcast on 2 May 1942. See WJ West (ed), *Orwell: The War Commentaries*, New York, 1986, pp85-7. He did, however, later write off his BBC work as 'bilge' (G Orwell, Letter to Stafford Cottman, *Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters*, Volume 4, Harmondsworth, 1984, p180).

44. See Bernard Crick, *George Orwell: A Life* (Harmondsworth, 1982, pp452ff) for the problems Orwell encountered with publishers.

not exactly forbidden to say this, that or the other, but it is 'not done' to say it, just as in mid-Victorian times it was 'not done' to mention trousers in the presence of a lady. Anyone who challenges the prevailing orthodoxy finds himself silenced with surprising effectiveness. A genuinely unfashionable opinion is almost never given a fair hearing, either in the popular press or in the highbrow periodicals.⁴⁵

He stated that from the early 1930s, the bulk of British intellectuals had consistently accepted the Soviet viewpoint 'with complete disregard to historical truth or intellectual decency'. One could not obtain 'intelligent criticism or even, in some cases, plain honesty' from writers and journalists who were 'under no direct pressure to falsify their opinions'. Moreover, 'throughout that time, criticism of the Soviet regime from the left could only obtain a hearing with difficulty'. Most of all, he decried the trend amongst intellectuals towards restricting the expression of oppositional ideas that were seen as 'objectively' aiding an enemy, a process leading towards the destruction of 'all independence of thought', and to a 'totalitarian outlook'.⁴⁶

Although Orwell was aware that the tendency towards self-censorship went a lot further than the intelligentsia, he laid the blame for it mainly on the left-wing intellectuals who refused to criticise the Soviet regime when it committed acts that would be roundly condemned if perpetuated by another. For Orwell, the 'willingness to criticise Russia and Stalin' was 'the test of intellectual honesty'.⁴⁷ His message to pro-Stalin intellectuals was brutal:

Do remember that dishonesty and cowardice always have to be paid for. Don't imagine that for years on end you can make yourself the boot-licking propagandist of the Soviet regime, or any other regime, and then suddenly return to mental decency. Once a whore, always a whore.⁴⁸

Orwell also sensed amongst the pro-Stalin intellectuals a decided tendency towards power worship that was no different to that expressed by those who sided

45. *New Statesman*, 18 August 1995. Orwell suffered the indignity of having a book review rejected by the *Manchester Evening News* in March 1944 because it was critical of the Soviet Union. See Crick, op cit, p463. Addison (op cit, p138) talks of the 'near monopoly which communists and fellow-travellers possessed over the supply of information and publicity material about Russia' during the war.

46. *New Statesman*, 18 August 1995.

47. G Orwell, Letter to John Middleton Murry, *CEJL*, Volume 3, op cit, p237. Some of Orwell's contemporaries considered, rightly in my opinion, that he was far too sweeping in his dismissal of radical intellectuals. George Woodcock claims that those influenced by official communism 'had always been a minority' (G Woodcock, *The Crystal Spirit: A Study of George Orwell*, Harmondsworth, 1970, p198). Robert Hewison states that notwithstanding the re-legitimisation of the Soviet Union after June 1941, there had been a steady drift away from the official communist movement on the part of British intellectuals since 1939 because of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and the 'slow seep' of information about the realities of Stalinism (R Hewison, *In Anger: Culture in the Cold War, 1945-60*, London, 1988, pp25-6).

48. G Orwell, 'As I Please' [September 1944], *CEJL*, Volume 3, op cit, p263.

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with Hitler or Mussolini, and this ‘cult of power’ was ‘mixed up with a love of cruelty and wickedness *for their own sakes*’.⁴⁹ Later on, he made the telling point that ‘it was only *after* the Soviet regime became unmistakably totalitarian that English intellectuals, in large numbers, began to show an interest in it’.⁵⁰

As for the novel itself, there can be no doubt that *Animal Farm* is based upon the experience of the Soviet Union, from the Russian Revolution, through the emergence and victory of Stalinism, to the wartime years. Some of the characters are eponymous. The taciturn, devious and ambitious Napoleon is clearly Stalin, and the more inventive and vivacious Snowball is an equally obvious Trotsky, although he ‘was not considered to have the same depth of character’ as Napoleon, which is an odd characterisation.⁵¹ There is, however, no porcine Lenin, as Major (Marx) dies just before the animals take over the farm, although the displaying of Major’s skull is reminiscent of the rituals around the embalmed Bolshevik leader. The pigs as a whole represent the Bolshevik party, the thuggish dogs are the secret police, and the other animals mainly represent the Soviet working class and peasantry.

Although Orwell’s sympathies are clearly with the animals, his overall view of them is not particularly complimentary. The pigs, the most intelligent and the only literate creatures, move immediately into a commanding position because of their superior intelligence, and become an increasingly ruthless ruling élite. The sheep are the most stupid, unable to command even the basics of the animalist credo, and are merely able mindlessly to bleat slogans at official command. Boxer, the big carthorse, is practically illiterate, and represses his occasional worries that things aren’t right with his mantras of ‘I will work harder’, and ‘Napoleon is always right’. Even though the animals attempt unsuccessfully to prevent the exhausted Boxer from being taken to the knackers, they willingly believe the pigs’ tale that he died at the vet. Not surprisingly, many commentators, both friendly and hostile, have accused Orwell of having a low opinion of the working class.⁵²

Despite the fact that the humans — that is to say, the capitalists — in *Animal Farm* are from start to finish presented in a negative light, it is not surprising that the novel was and continues to be championed by conservatives for their own purposes.⁵³ The moral of this book appears to be that, however awful the old

49. G Orwell, ‘Raffles and Miss Blandish’, *CEJL*, Volume 3, op cit, p258. Unlike the intellectuals, the ‘common people’ still believed in decency, fair play and the idea of ‘absolute good and evil’ (ibid, p259). Orwell was very interested in the question of power, and he favourably reviewed Bertrand Russell’s book on the subject when it was first published in 1938. He would not have disagreed with Russell’s assertions that revolutionary power was ‘very apt to degenerate into naked power’, or with his equation of Soviet ‘political technique’ with that of the fascist states. See B Russell, *Power: A New Social Analysis*, London, 1948, pp120-1; and Orwell’s review of it in *CEJL*, Volume 1, op cit, pp413-4.

50. G Orwell, ‘James Burnham and the Managerial Revolution’, *CEJL*, Volume 4, op cit, p212.

51. G Orwell, *Animal Farm*, Harmondsworth, 1973, p15.

52. For friendly appraisals, see John Molyneux, ‘*Animal Farm* Revisited’, *International Socialism*, 2/44, Autumn 1989; for hostile appraisals, see James Walsh, ‘George Orwell’, *Marxist Quarterly*, Volume 3, no 1, January 1956, who shows what the Communist Party thought of him.

53. Anne Applebaum, a young conservative writer, stated: ‘It is one of the best books on the psychology of revolutions. It acts as a kind of blueprint for the way revolutions actually hap-

rulers are, revolutions merely lead to the emergence of new and possibly more oppressive élites.⁵⁴ At the end of the book, a by-now bipedal and clothed Napoleon shows a delegation of humans around the farm. He tells them that the old revolutionary symbols and rituals have been abolished. It is clear that the other animals know their place. Having greatly cheered his visitors, they sit down to celebrate, only to come near to blows when they find themselves cheating at cards. The animals peering through the windows see that the pigs and men have become interchangeable, 'it was impossible to say which was which'.⁵⁵

The main problem with *Animal Farm* is that there is no analysis of how a ruling élite came into existence. The development of the pigs from a leadership into a ruling élite is just given; it is as if any leadership will inevitably become a ruling élite once it seizes power. Orwell attempted to reassure the American libertarian Dwight MacDonald, stating that he was referring to a revolution led by 'unconsciously power-hungry people', and insisting that the moral of the book was: 'You can't have a revolution unless you make it for yourself; there is no such thing as a benevolent dictatorship'.⁵⁶ But that's not how the book is usually interpreted, and MacDonald's qualms would not have arisen were it otherwise.⁵⁷

Stanley Plastrik, an American socialist, even wondered if Orwell had renounced socialism:

Is not the anti-socialist or liberal reader entitled to draw the conclusion that the tale is meant as a parable on the utopian character of the socialist cause? We believe so, although Orwell has not had the political conviction or courage to make this clear, perhaps reflecting the very uncertainty reigning in his head.⁵⁸

Of course, using different sorts of animals to represent social strata ensures that there will be insurmountable barriers from the very start. A cat or dog, let alone a goose or duck, cannot become a pig. Unlike social strata, these are immutable categories. But notwithstanding the imagery, it is Orwell's inability to explain the rise of a post-revolutionary élite which led to his book being used by conserva-

pen, and, as I observe more revolutions in my later life, it becomes more accurate.' (*Independent*, 14 August 1995)

54. John Mander considers that there was a dichotomy in Orwell's thinking, in that 'there must always be revolutions', but that 'all revolutions are totally useless' (J Mander, 'Orwell in the Sixties', *The Writer and Commitment*, Westport, 1975, p96). Patrick Reilly agrees, and states that '*Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* are authenticated by the fact that their creator did not want them to be true' (P Reilly, *George Orwell: The Age's Adversary*, New York, 1986, p267).

55. G Orwell, *Animal Farm*, op cit, pp119-20.

56. Cited in M Shelden, *Orwell: The Authorised Biography*, New York, 1992, p444.

57. FA Ridley warned that socialists had to be very careful when criticising Stalinism, stating that *Animal Farm*, 'justifiable enough in itself', was 'a godsend to Wall Street imperialism in mobilising public opinion against Russia'. He even went so far as to see Orwell as one of 'the "left" propagandists of Wall Street', alongside the US social democrats (*Left*, June 1947).

58. *Labor Action*, 30 September 1946.

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tives. Although Orwell was worried about this,⁵⁹ *Animal Farm* became popular with conservatives *precisely because* it sees the pigs' ascendancy into a ruling élite as an ineluctable process. If it did not, it could not be used as a pro-capitalist work.⁶⁰

Animal Farm did not represent any renunciation on the part of Orwell of the cause of socialism. Rather, it was intended to show the need for a libertarian brand of socialism.⁶¹ His opposition to both capitalism and totalitarian collectivism remained constant. Reviewing Hayek's anti-socialist tract *The Road to Serfdom*, Orwell noted:

Capitalism leads to dole queues, the scramble for markets, and war. Collectivism leads to concentration camps, leader worship and war. There is no way out of this unless a planned economy can be somehow combined with the freedom of the intellect, which can only happen if the concept of right and wrong is restored to politics.⁶²

This predicament was to be the axis around which Orwell's future writings would revolve.

Nineteen Eighty-Four: The Future Lost?

By the closing stages of the Second World War, Orwell had a fairly comprehensive notion that the world was facing a collectivist, étatised future which would be ruled in a totalitarian manner if some form of libertarian socialist society was not established. One major influence upon Orwell was James Burnham, who in two books published in 1942 and 1943 articulated many of Orwell's existing ideas about collectivism, totalitarianism and the quest for power.⁶³

Burnham had broken from the Trotskyist movement in the USA after he had concluded that the Soviet Union represented a new form of society, neither capitalist nor socialist, which, moreover, was the precursor of similar societies

59. See Alfred Ayers' comments in S Wadhams, *Remembering Orwell*, Markham, 1984, p68.

60. Orwell did sometimes betray a pessimistic and even fatalistic streak when looking at the prospects for socialism: 'It would seem that what you get over and over again is a movement of the proletariat which is promptly canalised and betrayed by astute people at the top, and then the growth of a new governing class.' (G Orwell, Review of Jack Common, *The Freedom of the Streets*, CEJL, Volume 1, op cit, p372)

61. See Fenner Brockway's comments in Wadhams, op cit, p150.

62. G Orwell, Review of FA Hayek, *The Road to Serfdom*, CEJL, Volume 3, op cit, p144.

63. It should not be thought that Burnham was the only influence upon Orwell. Franz Borkenau, with whom Orwell was friendly during the 1940s, shared many ideas in common with Orwell, Burnham and many others on these subjects. Newsinger (op cit) argues that Orwell's main influence was almost certainly Dwight MacDonal, whose own theory of the collectivisation of society was quite different to that of Burnham. As we have seen, the notion that Nazi Germany, Stalin's Soviet Union and other totalitarian states were essentially identical manifestations of a new form of collectivist society was commonplace with people of all manner of political outlooks in Britain and other Western countries. The prevalence in Britain of such theories of convergence during this period will be discussed in my forthcoming book *The New Civilisation?: Understanding Stalin's Soviet Union, 1929-41*.

across the world, with Nazi Germany and the 'New Deal' USA being developing examples. Promoting this gloomy prognosis in *The Managerial Revolution*, Burnham gave up on any idea of socialism. The basis of Burnham's theory was that the capitalist classes were being challenged by managerial and technical strata, who would increase their control over society, and eventually seize power. Managerial societies were almost by definition totalitarian, and would coalesce around three rival super-states.⁶⁴

In a subsequent work, Burnham held that the guiding principles of political struggles were Machiavellian, in other words, that the main object is to gain and maintain power, that one must interpret programmes and declarations in that light, and that in these days of the struggle between the dying capitalist class and the new managerial élite, the new despots will appeal to the masses under fraudulent democratic slogans. Burnham also concluded that a real democracy is unattainable, as 'when an opposition exists, this means only that there is a division in the ruling class', and a pretender to the existing élite will appeal to the masses to reinforce its challenge.⁶⁵

As the war drew to an end, Orwell asserted that humanity was facing 'the prospect of two or three monstrous super-states' armed with atomic weapons, each one 'self-contained', isolated from each other, 'at once unconquerable and in a permanent state of "cold war" with its neighbours'.⁶⁶ The intelligentsia in Britain was 'perfectly ready for dictatorial methods, secret police, systematic falsifications of history, etc'.⁶⁷ Orwell faced the postwar world with some trepidation.

The world had changed considerably by the time that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was published in June 1949. The wartime 'Big Three' alliance was a fading memory as the world was divided into two camps, separated by what Churchill called the Iron Curtain. Stalinism appeared to be an irresistible, malignant, expansionist movement, clamping down upon rival political forces with an iron hand, and the Stalinist takeover in Czechoslovakia in 1948 in particular intensified anti-Soviet sentiments. In the West, the process of deradicalisation within the intellectual milieu was accelerated. Not a few succumbed to the Cold War atmosphere, whilst others drifted into despair.⁶⁸ With the bifurcated world reflected in an oppressive intellectual conformity in both the East and the West, there seemed to be little room in which a libertarian socialist such as Orwell could manoeuvre.⁶⁹

64. J Burnham, *The Managerial Revolution*, London, 1942, pp145-74.

65. J Burnham, *The Machiavellians: Defenders of Freedom*, London, 1943, pp164-89.

66. G Orwell, 'You and the Atom Bomb', *CEJL*, Volume 4, op cit, pp25-6.

67. G Orwell, Letter to HJ Willmet, *CEJL*, Volume 3, op cit, p178.

68. The process of deradicalisation had started in the late 1930s, and was intimately connected with the phenomenon of Stalinism. Bidding farewell to the socialist movement, the US radical Max Eastman concluded that the totalitarian state was 'the political form natural to a collectivised economy' (M Eastman, *Stalin's Russia and the Crisis in Socialism*, London, 1940, p156). Borkenau took the same view (*The Totalitarian Enemy*, op cit, p239).

69. Hewison (op cit, pp24-33) and Alan Wald's superb *The New York Intellectuals: The Rise and Decline of the Anti-Stalinist Left From the 1930s To the 1980s* (Chapel Hill, 1987) describe the proc-

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Nineteen Eighty-Four became a best seller, surpassing even *Animal Farm*'s prodigious sales by a wide mark.⁷⁰ The vision of a world divided up amongst three vast super-states, all ruled by vicious totalitarian regimes which suppressed all civil liberties and intellectual life, watched every move of their subjects, and continually rewrote their own histories, and the plight of Winston Smith, with his almost solitary revolt against the system and his breaking by the sinister O'Brien into total submission and repentance, struck a ready chord with large numbers of people.

Nineteen Eighty-Four was an immediate success, as it keyed into the consciousness of the Cold War. As Isaac Deutscher put it shortly after the book's release:

The novel has served as a sort of an ideological super-weapon in the Cold War. As in no other book or document, the convulsive fear of communism, which has swept the West since the end of the Second World War, has been reflected and focused in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.⁷¹

The American liberal Lionel Trilling found the book chilling because the society depicted in it was 'substantially little more than an extension into the near future of the present structure and policy of Stalinism', that not only existed in the Eastern Bloc, but potentially in the West. The lesson was clear; there could be no appeasement of Stalinism: 'Otherwise we shall go on playing Winston Smith, falling sooner or later into the hands of the O'Briens of the East, who will break our bones until we scream with love for Big Brother.'⁷² The American socialist Irving Howe stated that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* reflected the 'apocalyptic situation' facing humanity — either socialism or totalitarianism as depicted in the book.⁷³

Nineteen Eighty-Four caused quite a stir on the left. For the Stalinists, it merely confirmed what they thought about him.⁷⁴ Most left-wing opponents of Stalin-

ess of intellectual demoralisation in Britain and the USA respectively. *Horizon*, the leading non-partisan radical cultural-political review, petered out in 1949. The one cultural-political journal that did take off was *Encounter*, which started in 1953. Its political thrust was of an explicitly Cold War orientation. Although it was discreetly bankrolled for many years by the CIA, its continued existence also reflected the deradicalisation of many intellectuals.

70. By the mid-1950s, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* had sold 1.2 million copies in the USA, plus 596 000 copies of an abridged version, whilst sales of the paperback in Britain ran into the hundreds of thousands (J Rodden, *The Politics of Literary Reputation: The Making and Claiming of 'St George' Orwell*, New York, 1989, p46).
71. I Deutscher, 'Nineteen Eighty-Four: The Mysticism of Cruelty', *Heretics and Renegades*, London, 1969, p35.
72. L Trilling, 'The Unfuture of Utopia', *Partisan Review*, July 1949.
73. I Howe, 'Nineteen Eighty-Four: Utopia Reversed', *New Internationalist*, November-December 1950.
74. This was particularly the case in the USA, where his previous books were practically unknown, and where *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was immediately championed by the radical right. Howard Keylor, who was in the Communist Party of the USA at the time, told me that Orwell was seen as 'one of the ideologues of the extreme anti-communists'. Mike Jones informed me of the hostility he noted towards Orwell in the Communist Party in the early 1960s, and David Gorman told me that when he was a lad his father actually tried to confiscate his copy of *Homage to*

ism had welcomed *Homage to Catalonia* as it was a strong left-wing work which brought out both the revolutionary factors of the Spanish Civil War, and the counter-revolutionary nature of Stalinism. Their response to *Animal Farm* varied. Some saw it as a vindication of Trotsky, whilst others saw it as an expression of the idea that revolutions inevitably lead to the rise of a new élite. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was widely seen on the left as a deeply pessimistic and depressing work. Some thought that Orwell was stating that the fight for a better future was hopeless — this was certainly the view of Deutscher, who stated that it was ‘a document of dark disillusionment not only with Stalinism but with every form and shade of socialism’⁷⁵ — whilst others, notwithstanding their discomfort with the book, did not think that he had given up on socialism.⁷⁶

Although Orwell had not visited either Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union, some commentators have pointed out that he had managed to grasp many of the features of a totalitarian society.⁷⁷ In fact, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was drawn from a number of different influences.

Firstly, many of the features of Oceania were based upon Orwell’s personal observations. The proles are reminiscent of the most lumpen and degraded workers in *The Road to Wigan Pier*. The mores of Oceanian society are clearly based upon his memories of his days at a minor public school:

Virtue consisted in winning: it consisted in being bigger, stronger, handsomer, richer, more popular, more elegant, more unscrupulous than other people — in dominating them, bullying them, making them suffer pain, making them look foolish, getting the better of them in every way.⁷⁸

Much of the day-to-day dreariness and information manipulation of Oceanian life are an exaggerated extrapolation of Orwell’s experiences in wartime London and of the insidious censorship at the BBC and Ministry of Information in the 1940s.⁷⁹

Secondly, we have seen that Orwell had read several worthwhile accounts of

Catalonia

75. Deutscher, op cit, p44.

76. Thanks to John Archer, Don Bateman, Ray Challinor, Baruch Hirson, Harry Ratner and Charlie Van Gelderen for their ideas and reminiscences. Bateman, a member of the Independent Labour Party, told me that the only ILP members who were antipathetic to Orwell were the handful of Stalinists who remained in the party. Archer told me that he and his comrades in the Trotskyist movement were always very critical of Orwell, although other Trotskyists to whom I have spoken were less critical of him, at least until *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

77. For example, Czeslaw Milosz, who declared that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was appreciated by those Eastern Europeans who had managed to read it (C Milosz, *The Captive Mind*, Harmondsworth, 1980, p42). For a detailed account of the impact of Orwell’s two last novels in the Soviet bloc, see John Rodden, *Scenes From an Afterlife: The Legacy of George Orwell*, Wilmington, 2003.

78. G Orwell, ‘Such, Such Were the Joys’, *CEJL*, Volume 4, op cit, p411. See Jonathan Rose, ‘Eric Blair’s School Days’, in J Rose (ed), *The Revised Orwell*, East Lansing, 1992, pp75-96.

79. See WJ West, *The Larger Evils: Nineteen Eighty-Four: The Truth Behind the Satire*, Edinburgh, 1992, passim, for the way in which wartime censorship influenced *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

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Soviet society. Quite a few of Eugene Lyons' observations reappear in Orwell's novel, with two striking examples being the poster used during the attempt to complete the First Five Year Plan in four years, '2+2=5', which Orwell turned from a witty propaganda slogan into a sinister symbol of Smith's abject defeat at the hands of the Oceanian regime, and the UP telegram which looks just like an example of Newspeak.⁸⁰

Thirdly, there was a rich vein of utopian and dystopian novels from which he could draw. Orwell had read Jack London's *The Iron Heel* and Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We*, and was well acquainted with the works of Aldous Huxley and HG Wells.⁸¹

Fourthly, some of the features of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* were influenced by the more dramatic writings of Burnham and Arthur Koestler which Orwell had criticised for being too pessimistic. He stated that Burnham's refusal to challenge the idea that 'the lust for naked power' had become 'a major human motive' was because he, Burnham, believed that as a society of free and equal human beings had not yet existed, it could never exist. Orwell also suggested that the Soviet regime would either 'democratise itself' or it would perish, and that slavery was 'no longer a stable basis for human society'.⁸² And yet in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the basic thrust for the rulers of the three totalitarian regimes was the lust for power, as O'Brien was eager to tell Smith.⁸³ Similarly, Orwell wrote off Koestler's 'without education of the masses, no social progress; without social progress, no education of the masses' as a 'pessimistic conclusion',⁸⁴ only to have Smith talk of the proles: 'Until they have become conscious they will never rebel, and until after they have rebelled they cannot become conscious.'⁸⁵

Orwell's conceptions about social strata re-emerge in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Despite their degraded condition, the proles are the sole repository of human decency: 'The proles had stayed human... They were not loyal to a party or a country or an idea, they were loyal to one another.'⁸⁶ And confirming his worst fears about them, the pre-revolutionary middle strata had become the ruling élite of Oceania, which was composed, in the words of Goldstein's 'book', 'for the most part of bureaucrats, scientists, technicians, trade union organisers, publicity experts, sociologists, teachers, journalists and professional politicians... whose

80. E Lyons, *Assignment in Utopia*, London, nd, pp240, 338.

81. Orwell first acquired a copy of *We* in 1946. Deutscher states that much of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was lifted from *We*, but Crick disagrees, arguing that Orwell had started on his book long before he read *We* (Deutscher, op cit, pp36ff; Crick, op cit, pp387-8, 629). See also Jonathan Rose, 'The Invisible Sources of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*', in J Rose (ed), *The Revised Orwell*, East Lansing, 1992, pp131-47.

82. G Orwell, 'James Burnham and the Managerial Revolution', *CEJL*, Volume 4, op cit, pp211-2, 214. Orwell considered that Burnham's subsequent book, which called for the USA to launch an atomic bomb attack upon the Soviet Union before Moscow developed atomic weapons, was alarmist. See G Orwell, 'Burnham's View of the Contemporary World Struggle', *CEJL*, Volume 4, op cit, pp366ff; J Burnham, *The Struggle for the World*, New York, 1947, pp242-5.

83. G Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Harmondsworth, 1969, pp211-2.

84. G Orwell, 'Arthur Koestler', *CEJL*, Volume 3, op cit, p279.

85. G Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, op cit, p60.

86. *Ibid*, p135.

origins lay in the salaried middle class and the upper grades of the working class', and who 'had been shaped and brought together by the barren world of monopoly industry and centralised government'.⁸⁷

And this leads us to a further possible influence — Max Nomad, the associate of Jan Waclaw Machajski, the Polish revolutionary who considered that socialism represented the accession to power of a new exploiting class. In an article first published in 1937, Nomad referred to the 'neo-bourgeois' pretenders for political power, listing 'office-holders, teachers, professional men, technicians, clergymen, commercial and financial experts, journalists, writers, artists, politicians, professional revolutionists and agitators, trade union organisers and so on'.⁸⁸ Furthermore, Nomad and Orwell agree that these pretenders for power key into the dissatisfaction of the lower orders in order to use them as their assault troops against the existing ruling élite, and thus facilitate their own route to power.

Although *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is deeply pessimistic, as Smith is not merely defeated but is mentally eviscerated to the degree that he accepts without question the legitimacy of the regime, Orwell's non-fiction writing is more optimistic. The total dystopia of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was not a certainty: 'I do not believe that the kind of society I describe necessarily *will* arrive, but I believe... that something resembling it *could* arrive.' Moreover, it was not a description of the Soviet regime, as Oceania had only been 'partly realised' in the Soviet Union.⁸⁹ Considering also that he believed in the possibility of the democratisation of the Soviet regime, his vision of the future was not as gloomy as his last novel suggested.

That leaves us with the question of the intensification of power worship in the modern era. He had no answer to Burnham, as he basically accepted his proposition. Deutscher, who worked with Orwell during the war, explained that he was 'at heart... a simple-minded anarchist' for whom 'any political movement forfeited its *raison d'être* the moment it acquired a *raison d'état*':

To analyse a complicated social background, to try and unravel tangles of political motives, calculations, fears and suspicions, and to discern the compulsion of circumstances behind *their* action was beyond him. Generalisations about social forces, social trends and historic inevitabilities made him bristle with suspicion.⁹⁰

Without a system of investigation, Orwell was forced ultimately 'to adopt and to cling to the oldest, the most banal, the most abstract and the most barren of all generalisations... "sadistic power worship"'.⁹¹ The conflicts amongst a vast array

87. Ibid, pp164-5.

88. M Nomad, 'Masters — Old and New', in GB Huszar, *The Intellectuals: A Controversial Portrait*, Glencoe, 1960, p338. For Machajski, see Marshall Shatz, *Jan Waclaw Machajski: A Radical Critic of the Russian Intelligentsia and Socialism*, Pittsburg, 1989.

89. G Orwell, Letter to Francis Henson, *CEJL*, Volume 4, op cit, p564.

90. Deutscher, op cit, p47.

91. Ibid, p48. Orwell's concentration upon power-worship in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* has been seen as a valid exercise. The right-wing social democrat François Bondy saw it as a more convincing

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of social forces are reduced to the banality of a conspiracy theory. Not surprisingly, Deutscher considered Orwell to be a fanatic who wanted easy answers, a harsh but not unfair characterisation, albeit one that would be considered sacrilegious by those who view Orwell as some sort of saintly figure.

Too many factors in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* remain unexplained. How did the Party establish itself as a ruling élite? Why did the proles permit it to do so? Why did the British revolution become a super-Stalinist dystopia? If the proles were, comparatively speaking, free, why did anyone join the Outer Party, seeing that the existence of its members was pretty miserable and in material terms little better than that of the proles? Why, in Goldstein's 'book', was it the case that 'the aim of establishing liberty and equality was more and more openly abandoned' in 'each variant of socialism that appeared from about 1900 onwards'?⁹²

Needless to say, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* has provoked a vast industry of acclaim and criticism.⁹³ The pessimism expressed in it has been explained, often by left-wing writers, as resulting from Orwell's political demoralisation. Paul O'Flinn claims that his lack of any coherent political philosophy had caused him by the late 1940s to be 'liable to be gusted along by the Cold War hurricane', a victim of a 'potentially revolutionary' approach which 'thrashes around in despair, looking for and failing to find a base'.⁹⁴ Michael Maddison states that Orwell was dismayed by the decline of the working class as an actor on the historical stage, as 'in the decade from 1939 to 1949 no revolutionary wave broke over the surface of politics'. And so: "'They" — the bureaucrats and power politicians — were able to change the face of the world, and in the process trampled on "us"; such would be a condensation of Orwell's views.'⁹⁵ Alex Zwerdling states that it would be wrong to say that Orwell had abandoned socialism, but his inability to answer the questions that he raised about it 'eventually... brought himself to the edge of despair'.⁹⁶ Opinions differ sharply over what Smith's hopes in the proles represented in Orwell's thinking, between those who detect the author's optimism despite the fact that the proles lived on in a slumber and Smith's opposition was crushed,⁹⁷ and those who claim there is nothing in the text to justify claiming a 'prole victory' or the idea of 'democratic invincibility'.⁹⁸

method of understanding Stalinism than 'all the historical studies' which assigned to 'terminology and the particulars of the programme... more than purely symptomatic importance'. He was aiming in particular at Deutscher's *Stalin (Socialist Commentary)*, September 1949). Folke Dovring's cheap and nasty hatchet-job on Lenin similarly appeals to Orwell: 'By embracing the quest for power at all costs, Lenin became the originator of the purebred power state in modern time, the prototype so incisively characterised in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.' (F Dovring, *Leninism: Political Economy as Pseudo-Science*, Westport, 1996, p143)

92. G Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, op cit, p163.

93. Much of Rodden's excellent *The Politics of Literary Reputation* (op cit) is devoted to this industry.

94. P O'Flinn, 'Rereading *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in 1984', *International Socialism*, 2/23, Spring 1984.

95. M Maddison 'Nineteen Eighty-Four: A Burnhamite Fantasy?', *Political Quarterly*, January-March 1961.

96. Zwerdling, op cit, pp4, 37.

97. Paul Foot, 'Orwell and the Proles', *Words as Weapons*, London, 1990, pp272-3.

98. Patrick Reilly, *Nineteen Eighty-Four: Past, Present and Future*, Boston, 1989, pp126-7.

Conservative analysts see *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as a sign that Orwell was moving away from socialism. Dennis O'Keefe states that the conservative claim on the book is strong, it is 'explicitly anti-socialist, converging with the work of a number of writers... in the view that socialism is essentially the hypertrophy of the state', and implicitly accepting that capitalism is the only system that can guarantee the liberty of the individual.⁹⁹ Others scoff at the notion that Orwell was looking at totalitarian tendencies in Western countries.¹⁰⁰ Norman Podhoretz asserts that Orwell would have been amongst those leftists of the late 1940s who were to slide across to conservatism.¹⁰¹ Orwell's critics in the official communist movement share the conservatives' view that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is a pro-capitalist work. Leslie Morton stated in 1952 that he played upon 'the lowest fears and prejudices engendered by bourgeois society': 'His object is not to argue a case, but to induce an irrational conviction in the minds of his readers that any attempt to realise socialism must lead to a world of corruption, torture and insecurity.'¹⁰²

Left-wing assessments often concentrate upon the sinister activities of the capitalist state — phone-tapping, visual surveillance, computer details on individuals, news and language manipulation, etc — to show the present-day relevance of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.¹⁰³ This upsets right-wing commentators, who pour scorn on the equation of the Western states' covert operations and Oceania's Thought Police and telescreens.¹⁰⁴ Nonetheless, it is worth noting that however general the surveillance was under Stalinism, it is only under modern capitalism that the technology exists that could reach anywhere near that required to carry it out to the level achieved in Oceania. If anything, Stalinism was marked by its *inability* to achieve consistent technological advance.

Although Robert Conquest counters the left's arguments by stating that the totalitarian society portrayed in Oceania was based upon the Soviet Union, and that it came into being through the overthrow of capitalism, rather than through its development,¹⁰⁵ it is clear that Orwell was concerned about the trends towards totalitarianism within society *as a whole*. He hit out hardest at Stalinism

99. D O'Keefe, 'Orwell's Political Probate', *Salisbury Review*, April 1985. See also Arthur Eckstein, 'George Orwell's Second Thoughts on Capitalism', in J Rose (ed), *The Revised Orwell*, East Lansing, 1992, pp191-205.

100. Robert de Camara, 'Homage to Orwell', *National Review*, 13 May 1983.

101. N Podhoretz, 'If Orwell Were Alive Today', in B Oldsey and J Browne (eds), *Critical Essays on George Orwell*, Boston, 1986, pp19-30. See Gordon Beadle's reply, 'George Orwell and the Neo-Conservatives', *Dissent*, Winter 1984.

102. AL Morton, *The English Utopia*, London, 1978, p274.

103. See Paul Lashmar, 'Information as Power', in P Chilton and C Aubrey (eds), *Nineteen Eighty-Four in 1984: Autonomy, Control and Communication*, London, 1983, pp79-88; Paul Siegel, 'George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: A Worldwide "Managerial Revolution"?'', *Revolution and the Twentieth-Century Novel*, New York, 1979, pp168-70; and W Russel Gray, '*Nineteen Eighty-Four* and the Massaging of the Media', in CT Wemyss and A Ugrinsky (eds), *George Orwell*, Westport, 1987, pp111-6.

104. See Paul Johnson, 'Orwellian Overkill', *Spectator*, 7 January 1984; and John McEwen, 'Ideas and Images', *Spectator*, 14 January 1984.

105. R Conquest, 'Orwell: *Nineteen Eighty-Four*?', *Tyrants and Typewriters*, London, 1989, p88.

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because it represented to him the furthest development of the trend. But state censorship and self-censorship in wartime Britain worried him greatly:

The MoI [Ministry of Information] does not, of course, dictate a party line or issue an *index expurgatorius*. It merely 'advises'. Publishers take manuscripts to the MoI, and the MoI 'suggests' that this or that is undesirable, or premature, or 'would serve no good purpose'. And though there is no definite prohibition, no clear statement that this or that must not be printed, official policy is never flouted. Circus dogs jump when the trainer cracks his whip, but the really well-trained dog is the one that turns his somersault when there is no whip.¹⁰⁶

Orwell is not talking about Stalinism here, rather he is addressing the nascent totalitarian behaviour within the official structures of Britain which was not enforced by fear or fiat, but was voluntarily adhered to by those concerned.¹⁰⁷ As we have seen, Orwell's ideas for Oceania were drawn not only from people's observations of totalitarian societies, but from tendencies within Britain and, by extension, of liberal democracies in general. Orwell aimed many barbs at left-wing intellectuals who should have known better than to have supported Stalinism — indeed, he attacked Stalinism so heavily *because* he was a left-winger — but the right wing has no justification to claim his heritage. But it does, and the reason for that lies in the structure of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Taken by itself, the novel does look like an anti-socialist work. Taken in conjunction with his other writings, the story is quite different.

Orwell's Legacy: He Knew How, He Didn't Know Why

The self-justification for the Ingsoc regime in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is power for its own sake, not for Big Brother as a person, but for the Inner Party as a social stratum. However, power is very rarely an object in and of itself. Dictators are little different to democrats in this respect. Although state power was projected both in Nazi Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union through one person, personal power was neither the desire of Hitler and Stalin, nor the reality of their rule, however much their personal caprices actually affected society. Both saw themselves as the living embodiment of a quest. Hitler saw his task as rebuilding and extending a mythical Germany, and in that he did not deviate. Stalin started as a proletarian revolutionary, and through the process of gaining power in an isolated, backward state, came to personify a new nationalist ruling élite building a new Russia, although he continued to use the egalitarian language of the Russian Revolution.¹⁰⁸

106. G Orwell, 'As I Please' [July 1944], *CEJL*, Volume 3, op cit, p212.

107. Orwell was also deeply suspicious of Roman Catholicism, which he saw as essentially totalitarian. For the Catholic imagery in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, see Siegel, op cit, pp159-60.

108. Stalin and his successors talked about the Soviet Union being a socialist country with the working class being in control, and reproduced the Marxist classics, whilst their conduct ran contrary to the egalitarian essence of Marxism, because so long as the ruling bureaucracy

The tendency for a ruling élite to move towards representing nothing but itself, ruling purely for the sake of power, appears to emerge when a ruling group no longer believes in any set of ideas, but is unable or unwilling to hand over power to anyone else. It particularly affects those ruling élites which have come to power as Stalinist and/or national liberation movements, in other words, with some sort of egalitarian or liberatory concepts, have become divorced from those who put them in power and have come to stand above them, but having monopolised political and often economic power, cannot or will not hand it over.¹⁰⁹ Hence, ruling for pure power is a reflection of a loss of direction, an ideological loss of faith, which can only represent a regime or indeed a system in the course of decay.

In his three-volume critique of Marxism, the Polish philosopher Leszek Kołakowski considers that as early as the mid-1950s the importance of the official ideology was ‘manifestly declining’ amongst the party and state bureaucrats in Eastern Europe, and that ‘the reins of power were now held by cynical, disillusioned careerists who were perfectly aware of the emptiness of the communist slogans they made use of.’¹¹⁰ Latter-day Stalinist societies were marked by a deep-running cynicism. Although as late as the Brezhnev era, leading bureaucrats enthused publicly over the wonders of Soviet-style socialism, their heart had long gone out of it. By the 1980s — only 50 years since the First Five Year Plan, and little over 30 years since the Sovietisation of Eastern Europe — the Eastern Bloc bureaucracies were seriously considering going over to the market; a process which would necessitate rejecting an ideology in which they only expressed themselves, rather than believed, and adopting one in which they could really believe.

The classic totalitarian regimes were extremely ideological. Ordinary life was politicised to a much greater degree than under a parliamentary democracy. But the politicisation of everyday life in a totalitarian system quickly leads to its opposite — the destruction of politics — particularly when the ideology no longer coincides with reality. Ideology and politics become a meaningless ritual for most people. There will be occasional upsurges in ideologically-charged activism, such as the Cultural Revolution in China, but even that was only a decade-and-a-half after the establishment of the regime, and merely represented the use of radical phraseology by one section of the Chinese bureaucracy to mobilise amongst the population against another section.¹¹¹ Any ideological enthusiasm

rested upon the foundations laid by the October Revolution — that is, so long as capitalism was not restored — it was obliged to use the language of 1917, as what sort of ideology could emerge out of a society that was not only neither capitalist nor socialist, but did not constitute a new mode of production? See LD Trotsky, ‘Does the Soviet Government Still Follow the Principles Adopted 20 Years Ago?’, *Writings of Leon Trotsky 1937-38*, New York, 1976, p126.

109. When power has been monopolised and focused through an individual or a small clique, it is extremely difficult for him/them to imagine power being wielded by anyone else. Also, any coherent opposition may have been driven into exile, or even eliminated physically.

110. L. Kołakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism: The Breakdown*, Oxford, 1978, p465.

111. See P’eng Shu-tse, *The Chinese Communist Party in Power*, New York, 1980, pp282, 433.

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seems to erode after a couple of decades.¹¹² Orwell, however, did not view the Oceanian regime's power-hungry rule as a product of a society in decay. Like many others, particularly those who saw the Soviet Union as a new form of society, he thought that it would continue for a long time. This is hardly surprising at the time, but it looks a little quaint today.¹¹³

Within a few years of Orwell's death in 1950, the Soviet bureaucracy set into motion a far-reaching reform programme, one feature of which was a great reduction of the level of coercion. In 1965, Raymond Aron, a leading protagonist of the totalitarian school, had to admit: 'I think that the picture of the world of 1984 drawn by George Orwell applies rather to 1951-52 than to 1984. These extreme phenomena are contemporaneous with the first phases of industrialisation, rather than with phases of economic ripeness.'¹¹⁴ Although the post-Stalin reforms represented the liberalisation of the regime, rather than the democratisation which Orwell saw as a possibility, the fact that it took place and that the Soviet élite did not return to the wholesale terror of the Stalin era favours Orwell's journalism rather than his last novel.

Furthermore, the combination of the shock of de-Stalinisation and the recognition of its limitations broke the hypnotic hold of the Soviet Union upon many radical intellectuals. Of course, since then a number of them have made fools of themselves pursuing their Stalinist Mecca in Mao's China, Hoxha's Albania and even Pol Pot's Cambodia, whilst others have been seduced by Third Worldism, ecology, feminism and post-modernism, the descendants of the trends cruelly satirised by Orwell in *The Road to Wigan Pier*. Altogether, however, the breaking of the lure of Moscow and the weakening of its corollary, the ideology of the Cold War, have permitted the emergence of an atmosphere more conducive to open and honest intellectual discussion.

Finally, to confound all those who saw the Stalinist system, whether positively or negatively, as a durable socio-economic formation, the events of 1989-91 demonstrated that the whole Stalinist edifice had reached the end of the road. In his introduction to the Ukrainian edition of *Animal Farm*, Orwell pointed out that many readers had assumed that the final scene was intended to show that the pigs and humans — that is, the Soviet and the Western élites — had become

112. The partisans of the totalitarian school of Soviet analysis have always placed much emphasis upon the 'fanaticism' within the party in Stalinist countries, although even Carl Friedrich and Zbigniew Brzezinski's classic study had to admit in the mid-1960s that the 'revolutionary qualities' amongst Soviet youth were on the wane, and that some were more interested in jazz than 'socialist construction'. Nevertheless, they could still claim that it would be difficult for youngsters 'to resist the totalitarian temptations' (C Friedrich and Z Brzezinski, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy*, New York, 1968, pp59, 65, 69).

113. Orwell's belief that totalitarianism could fundamentally change people has come under criticism. Soon after Stalin's death, and with specific reference to *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Crane Brinton stated that if totalitarianism could really transform human beings, we could look forward to 'more Yezhov periods, more Lysenkos, and more Stalins', which was something he very much doubted would happen (C Brinton, *The Anatomy of Revolution*, New York, 1956, p249).

114. R Aron, *Democracy and Totalitarianism*, London, 1968, p226. See also George Woodcock, *Orwell's Message: Nineteen Eighty-Four and the Present*, Madeira Place, 1984, pp143-7.

reconciled. This, he added, was not the intention; he meant the book ‘to end on a loud note of discord’.¹¹⁵ That is ironic, as recent events have shown this misinterpretation to be a more accurate portrayal of the fate of Stalinism — the quest on the part of Soviet bloc élites to maintain their privileged positions by championing the market, and their overnight rejection of the old state ideology — than the centuries of endless war amongst three identical Stalinist states portrayed in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

To return to the question of Orwell and socialism, if one accepts the idea that he wrote *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in order to show what degree of surveillance and oppression is required to eradicate the autonomy of the individual, and to destroy the idea in Smith’s head that the future lies with the proles,¹¹⁶ then it is clear that, so long as society did not descend into the depths of Oceania, the future for Orwell *did* lie with the working class. And even if, as he admitted, the prospects for socialism during the late 1940s were slim,¹¹⁷ Orwell never repudiated his belief in it.

Orwell’s right-wing champions are obliged to base their claim upon him by promoting their projections of his political trajectory had he lived beyond 1950. This is simultaneously a valid and futile endeavour, as it is possible to ascertain trends in a person’s political development, yet it is impossible to predict precisely where those trends will lead him or her. Of course, Orwell may have ended up with the renegades from the socialist movement whose hatred of Stalinism led them into the arms of the Congress for Cultural Freedom. Not a few of his contemporaries did abandon any commitment to socialism; one such casualty being CA Smith, the former chairman of the Independent Labour Party, of which Orwell was a member in the late 1930s,¹¹⁸ another being Orwell’s friend Franz Borkenau. Faced with such projections, however, it is worth noting that Orwell criticised the Labour government for being too mild, stating in the spring of 1946 that it was ‘astonishing how little change’ seemed ‘to have happened as yet in the structure of society’, noting that the nationalisation of the railways had been accompanied by lavish compensation to their previous owners, nothing had been done about disestablishing the Church of England, dealing with the House of Lords, replacing Tories in the higher echelons of the state, or

115. G Orwell, ‘Author’s Preface to the Ukrainian Edition of *Animal Farm*’, *CEJL*, Volume 3, op cit, p459.

116. This is my interpretation of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. I have not seen it expressed in any of the appraisals of Orwell’s works that I have perused, although I readily admit that I have not read every product of the vast Orwell industry.

117. G Orwell, ‘Towards European Unity’, *CEJL*, Volume 4, op cit, p423.

118. Smith claimed that ‘the rapid evolution towards central planning and state control’ was ‘irresistible and irreversible’, and that in this process of incipient totalitarianisation: ‘Communism is not socialism’s chief ally — it is socialism’s chief enemy... Capitalism is the enemy of yesterday and today; communism is the enemy of today and tomorrow.’ (*Left*, May 1947) Not surprisingly, Smith soon found himself in the tender embraces of the right wing, and was a founder of the red-baiting organisation Common Cause. Orwell, as we have seen, recognised that the main problem facing socialists was to elaborate a democratic form of collectivism, and not give up the fight for socialism.

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democratising education.¹¹⁹ He thought that the Labour government's anti-communist purge was 'part of the general breakdown of the democratic outlook'.¹²⁰ He refused to join the Duchess of Atholl's League of European Freedom as it had 'nothing to say about British imperialism'.¹²¹ And he called for the United Socialist States of Europe, which, as John Newsinger points out, was a long-standing Trotskyist demand.¹²²

Nevertheless, Orwell helped his political enemies by making his vocation as an advocate for socialism needlessly difficult for himself. He avoided elaborating theoretical constructs by using sweeping statements that did not necessarily coincide with reality. He overplayed the degree to which intellectuals fell for the lure of Stalinism. He also dismissed the idea that middle-class socialists could remain lifelong adherents to the libertarian socialism that he championed — on that basis, how could he explain his own socialist principles? — and that workers could educate themselves as socialists without becoming hacks or charlatans, although he knew many such people. He stopped short of recommending workers' control of industry as a means of forestalling the rise of a managerial élite, although this was well understood on the far left.¹²³ He continually raised unnecessary dilemmas, and thus handed the initiative to his opponents. Moreover, he had no properly-formed concept of working-class independence, that the institutions of the labour movement must maintain their political independence from those of the ruling class. This, together with his tendency to support the 'lesser evil', led him, notwithstanding his calls for radical social transformation, to back British imperialism in 1939, and to declare that if the Cold War developed into a real conflict, he would side with the USA.¹²⁴ It also led him into collaborating with an agent of the Information Research Department, an anti-communist wing of the Foreign Office that was set up by the Labour government in 1948.¹²⁵

'I know how, I don't know why', says Smith when confronted by the perplexing realities of Oceanian society.¹²⁶ Orwell was a good observer, capable of *describing* phenomena, often in a most evocative manner. He could point to the small details, in order to make the broad sweep simultaneously more intricate

119. G Orwell, 'London Letter to *Partisan Review*' [May 1946], *CEJL*, Volume 4, op cit, pp220-1.

120. G Orwell, Letter to George Woodcock, *CEJL*, Volume 4, op cit, p470.

121. G Orwell, Letter to the Duchess of Atholl, *CEJL*, Volume 4, op cit, p49.

122. Newsinger, op cit; G Orwell, 'Towards European Unity', *CEJL*, Volume 4, op cit, pp423ff. It was also a demand of other left-wing currents. See the statement by the International Committee of Study and Action for the United Socialist States of Europe, which included the ILP, *Left*, July 1947.

123. For example: 'Nationalisation without workers' control will lead, not to socialism, but to state capitalism — a trend definitely towards fascism... Workers' control is the safeguard, the key to real socialist direction. The requisite democratic machinery should be set up within every nationalised industry, effectively co-related with the central government, and ready to work to a coordinated national plan. We can then look forward to the entire reorganisation of the state structure and function, and the emergence therefrom of a *true* social democracy.' (*Left*, February 1946)

124. G Orwell, Letter to Victor Gollancz, *CEJL*, Volume 4, op cit, p355.

125. See the Appendix below, 'Orwell and the Spooks'.

126. G Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, op cit, p67.

and more comprehensive. But he was far weaker in *explaining* phenomena. What lay at the root of the purloining of his literary legacy was his lack of theory. His understanding of the development of Soviet society was superficial. In many ways, it resembled the traditional critiques of Bolshevism presented by social democrats and anarchists, which were centred upon the Bolsheviks' suppression of their opponents, and their establishment of a political monopoly, an approach which is obliged either to overlook the democratic features of Bolshevism in 1917 and the relationship between the Bolsheviks and the Russian working class, or to see it as a disingenuous and dishonest ruse to win support.¹²⁷ But unlike many left-wing critics of Bolshevism whose writings on the subject, irrespective of whatever else one might think of them, were of some substance, Orwell's observations amounted to little more than a few isolated assertions, thin to the point of banality.

Orwell could describe totalitarianism, but he was quite unable to understand how it arose. His nightmare vision of a super-Stalinist world was an exaggeration, but it did reflect to a fair degree the reality of the Soviet bloc at the end of the 1940s. Certainly, it was closer to that reality than the sugared portrayals in Stalinist publications of the time.¹²⁸ But, unable to explain why the liberatory promise of the October Revolution became mutated into the horrors of Stalinism, or to present a socialist programme that could avoid the establishment of a new élite, his attempt to fight for a radical, democratic socialism was hijacked by Cold War ideologues, who used the absence of any analysis in Orwell's last two novels in order to promote the idea that any attempt to replace capitalism by socialism will lead to the frightful world of Oceania and Big Brother.

In his essay on the Russian writer Fyodor Sologub, Zamyatin declared:

The whip has not yet been given its full due as an instrument of human progress. I know of no more potent means than the whip for raising man from all fours, from making him stop kneeling down before anything or anyone. I am not speaking, of course, of whips woven of leather thongs;

127. See my article 'Did the Bolsheviks Seize Power By Deception?', *New Interventions*, Volume 5, no 3-4, October-November 1994. Looking at why there was no Lenin figure in *Animal Farm*, Zwerdling (op cit, p91) states that Orwell wanted 'to emphasise the enormous disparity between the ideals of the revolution and the reality of the society it actually achieves', which does not actually explain the omission. It goes without saying that investigating the Lenin period is a crucial factor in understanding the development and degeneration of the Soviet regime, and Orwell's omission of a porcine Lenin did much to prevent the book from being able to explain the betrayal of the revolution.

128. I imagine Jim Higgins was being his usual irreverent self when he told me that most Soviet citizens would have preferred Oceania to Stalin's Soviet Union. In a book issued under the auspices of the Communist Party, Antony Easthope rambles on about 'Smith's homosexual love for O'Brien' and the significance of a heavy paperweight bouncing around in Winston Smith's trouser pocket — he clearly has some peculiar fixations! — whilst saying nothing about whether *Nineteen Eighty-Four* managed to reflect the realities of Soviet society at that juncture! To his credit, Stuart Hall suggests that it did (A Easthope, 'Fact and Fantasy in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*'; S Hall, 'Conjuring Leviathan: Orwell on the State', in C Morris (ed), *Inside the Myth: Orwell: Views From the Left*, London, 1984).

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I am speaking of whips woven of words, the whips of the Gogols, Swifts, Molières, Frances, the whips of irony, sarcasm, satire.¹²⁹

Animal Farm and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* were satires. Yet they failed in their purpose because they could only *describe* the phenomenon they were satirising, were unable to *explain* it, and therefore could be misused. Orwell's 'whips woven of words' fell readily into the hands of his political opponents, those who were and remain bitterly opposed to his vision of a democratic, libertarian socialism, and whose condemnations of viciously authoritarian regimes are, to put it politely, selective. Orwell did protest against the way in which his last novel was used as anti-socialist propaganda, but compared to the millions of people who have read *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* within the ideological framework of the Cold War,¹³⁰ only a very few have consulted his writings which provide a far broader and clearer idea of his overall political outlook.

Appendix: Orwell and the Spooks

The right-wing press had a field day with the discovery in 1996 of correspondence in the Public Record Office between Orwell and Celia Kirwan, who was a friend of Orwell's, the sister-in-law of Arthur Koestler, and an employee of the Foreign Office's clandestine propaganda wing, the Information Research Department.¹³¹ The correspondence revealed that Orwell was asked in 1949 by the Foreign Office if he would help in the writing of material which could be used in its war of words against the Soviet Union. Orwell, terminally ill, turned down the invitation, but did provide the IRD with the names of 35 fellow-travellers, taken from a notebook containing 86 names. The papers repeated their celebrations two years later when the names in the notebook — or most of them — were finally revealed in one of the 20 volumes of the newly-released Orwell *Collected Works*.¹³² Once again, the right wing could claim Orwell as one of their own.

Why was Orwell willing to collaborate with the murkier parts of the British state, the same sort of bodies which he had long denounced? Orwell was always a supporter of the lesser evil, and without ever renouncing his calls for the socialist transformation of Britain, he adopted a defencist stand during both the

129. M Ginsburg (ed), *A Soviet Heretic: Essays by Yevgeny Zamyatin*, Evanston, 1992, p221.

130. By 1971, over 20 million paperback copies of these two books had been sold around the world. Sales for *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in Britain between September 1983 and January 1984 stood at 430 000, and it was selling 62 000 copies per month in the USA in 1984. By 2003, the combined sales of *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* amounted to over 40 million copies (Gray, op cit, p111; Rodden, *The Politics of Literary Reputation*, op cit, pp49, 408, Rodden, *Scenes From an Afterlife*, op cit, p218).

131. For a brief look at the IRD and its murky operations, see Robin Ramsay's fascinating pamphlet *The Clandestine Caucus: Anti-Socialist Campaigns and Operations in the British Labour Movement Since the War*, Hull, nd, pp6-7, 16-18.

132. We only know the names of those who have died. The editor of the *Collected Works* left out the names of those who are still alive. Did he think they might sue, or was he just avoiding hurting their feelings? Whatever the reason, it is a loss to the historical record that they were omitted.

Second World War and the ensuing Cold War, as he saw parliamentary democracy as a lesser evil than either a Hitlerite or Stalinist dictatorship. By the late 1940s, with Stalinist rule extending across Eastern Europe, Orwell, by now a sick and pessimistic man, was willing to take whatever steps he felt were necessary to defend democratic rights in Britain. Furthermore, despite his suspicion of state institutions, he had no conception of the necessity for socialists to maintain their political independence from the state. This is why he was willing to make common cause with institutions that were bitter enemies of socialism, rather than propose a politically independent course.

In the covering letter to his list, Orwell stated that he wanted to help ensure that 'unreliable' people would not be 'worming their way into important propaganda jobs'.¹³³ Orwell admitted to Kirwan that her 'friends', as he put it, probably knew all about those named by him, although he added that it was probably a good idea to have such 'unreliable' people listed. He gave the example of Peter Smollett, an important official at the wartime Ministry of Information, who could well have advised against the publication of *Animal Farm*, and has since been revealed as a Soviet agent.

The list itself is a strange collection. Some of the names are of well-known Americans — Walter Duranty, Edgar Snow, Anna Strong, Paul Robeson, Upton Sinclair — whose fame (or notoriety) did not require Orwell to point them out. Some British Stalinists — DN Pritt, Lester Hutchinson, WP and Zelda Coates, JD Bernal, Hewlett Johnson — were so well known that the very idea of their being used to write British official publications during the Cold War is laughable. Some were well-known sympathisers of Stalinism, such as Sean O'Casey and George Bernard Shaw; some, like Kingsley Martin, had been soft on Stalinism; and others, including Michael Redgrave and JB Priestley, were politically naive individuals. Whether they were Stalinists without a party card, or credulous believers in a happy land, far far away, the whole thing with most fellow-travellers was that they were *publicly* sympathetic to the Soviet Union. Secret Soviet sympathisers like Smollett are very few and far between in Orwell's list.¹³⁴ Stephen Spender is strange inclusion, as he had long dropped out of the Communist Party, and was shortly to get star billing in that anti-communist credo *The God that Failed*. The listing of Orson Welles and Charlie Chaplin is even more baffling. To be honest, a glance through the contents pages of *Labour Monthly* and other Stalinist publications could well have provided a better list of fellow-travellers, and there can be no doubt that Kirwan's 'friends' regularly scanned them.

The rise of Stalinism posed a real problem for the left. Here was a state and a world-wide movement, emerging from a workers' revolution and using the liberatory language of Marxism, which was extremely repressive, particularly

133. This letter and the released names in Orwell's notebook are reproduced in the *Daily Telegraph*, 22 June 1998.

134. As it is, apart from the unfair inclusion of Isaac Deutscher, Orwell's list did not mention anyone on the far left, so we are not talking here of a broad anti-left witch-hunt.

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towards its left-wing opponents and the working class. How could the non-Stalinist left respond to it? When an article by Trotsky on the Moscow Trials appeared without his approval in the right-wing US press, he responded that he and his colleagues wanted to expose the lies of Stalin to the widest possible audience. Moreover, he stated: 'If I should have to post placards, warning the people of a cholera epidemic, I should equally utilise the walls of schools, churches, saloons, gambling houses and even worse establishments.'¹³⁵ One of Trotsky's last articles looked at the financial and secret police links between the Soviet Union and communist parties in Europe and America, and could quite easily have been used by the right wing against the official communist movement.¹³⁶ Other left-wingers, including Hugo Dewar and Walter Kendall, had anti-Stalinist articles published in right-wing journals such as *Survey*. Victor Serge's *Destiny of a Revolution* was promoted in Britain by the National Book Association, a right-wing rival to the Left Book Club. None of this compromised the authors' principles, as they retained their political independence, and the material published benefited the left more than the right.

Similarly, if left-wing anti-Stalinist material was used by the IRD or other Western governmental bodies for their own ends, then that did not necessarily reflect badly upon the authors.¹³⁷ There is, however, a difference between this and working with institutions which have always been hostile to the aims of the left, and with whom cooperation can only work against the interests of the left. Although Orwell had little to offer the IRD, the fact that he was willing to collaborate with it shows that he had strayed into unacceptable behaviour for anyone on the left.¹³⁸

Stalinism had to be fought within the labour movement, and the fellow-travellers had to be exposed as venal or gullible apologists for Stalin's regime. Nonetheless, this could only be done by a principled campaign that clearly differentiated itself from the right's anti-communism. Those who wished both to combat Stalinism and maintain their socialist principles could not do so unless they maintained their political independence from the British state and its agents on the right wing of the labour movement. And just as Orwell's theoretical limitations enabled his *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* to be used by anti-communists around the world, they led him to collaborate with anti-socialist forces in Britain. He did not understand that the cause of socialism cannot be aided by collaborating with those who are its bitter enemies.

135. LD Trotsky, 'On Hearst', *Writings of Leon Trotsky 1937-38*, op cit, p265.

136. LD Trotsky, 'The Comintern and the GPU', *Writings of Leon Trotsky 1939-40*, New York, 1977, pp348-91.

137. It also emerged that the IRD was promoting Orwell's *Animal Farm* to the extent of considering an Arabic translation, and was using anti-Stalinist material from *Tribune*, to which Orwell had contributed, for its own anti-communist purposes (*Guardian*, 11 July 1996).

138. About the only mitigating factor would be if the IRD was presented to Orwell in a way that disguised its sinister nature.