

The Political Ideas of George Orwell

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George Orwell is the pseudonym of Eric Blair who was born at Mothari, India on 25 June 1903; educated at St Cyprian's preparatory school, Eastbourne where he won a scholarship to Eton and. after completing his education, worked as a policeman in Burma, attaining the rank of sub-divisional officer, a private tutor, school teacher and an assistant in a book shop. He fought against the fascists in Spain in 1935-37, worked for the BBC for a time during the Second World War and for Tribune after the war. From about 1930 he tried to earn his living as a writer, finally achieving outstanding success with his last two novels *Animal Farm* (1945) and *Nineteen Eighty Four* (1949). His last years were dogged by tuberculosis and he died in London on 21 January 1950.

Orwell was a fine, though somewhat confused, journalist who became famous for the plain style of writing evident in his essays; his successful attempt to make political writing an art; his famous satires on totalitarianism; his search for objectivity and honesty in journalism depicted most graphically in *Homage to Catalonia* (1938). Many of Orwell's experiences are captured in his books and essays. Indeed any study of Orwell must keep in mind the fact that there is some fiction in all his autobiography and some autobiography in all of his fiction.

Orwell described himself as lower-upper-middle class, failing to realise that there are only two classes: the capitalist class which possesses but does not produce and the working class which produces but does not possess. Nevertheless, the myths that have sprung up about his poverty are incorrect. His father's pension was £438-10/- (£438.50) a year compared with the average annual wage of about £100 for a skilled manual worker in 1913-14.

Some twenty years later Orwell was commissioned by Victor Gollancz to write about conditions in the coal mining areas of the industrial north with an advance of £500 spread over two years – a considerable sum when Orwell himself stated that the miners earned less than £3 a week in 1934 (even allowing for expenses incurred in obtaining material for the book). Although Orwell did not make a great deal of money from his writing until the publication of *Animal Farm* in 1945, he was able to keep his head above water with a standard of living, although far from luxurious and certainly spartan by today's standards, that would have been the envy of many miners in the 1930s.

Throughout his novels, documentaries, essays and journalism Orwell relentlessly and uncompromisingly criticised imperialism, nationalism, capitalism, political dishonesty, power, totalitarianism, privilege and private education. He claimed to be a democratic socialist, joining the Independent Labour Party in June 1938 until after the outbreak of the Second World War, but his confused notions of socialism can be read in *The Lion and the Unicorn* (1941) in which he states:

“In England there is only one Socialist party that has ever seriously mattered, the Labour Party. It has never been able to achieve any major change, because except in purely domestic matters it has never possessed a genuinely independent policy. It was and is primarily a party of the trade unions, devoted to raising wages and improving working conditions. This meant that all through the critical years it was directly interested in the prosperity of British capitalism.”

Thus Orwell describes the Labour Party as “socialist” and continues in the same paragraph to describe, quite accurately, why it is not and cannot be socialist. He also suggested that there should be “Limitation of incomes, on such a scale that the highest tax-free income in Britain does not exceed the lowest by more

than ten to one", which even the majority of Conservatives would recognise as unsocialist. He also described Russia as "the only definitely socialist country", although it is true he had many harsh things to say concerning the perversion of socialism in Russia in many of his other books.

Nevertheless in this, arguably his worst book, Orwell describes the inefficiency and contradictions of capitalism when he wrote of British capitalists selling war materials to Germany:

"Right at the end of August 1939 the British dealers were tumbling over one another in their eagerness to sell Germany tin, rubber, copper and shellac - and this in the clear, certain knowledge that war was going to break out in a week or two. It was about as sensible as selling somebody a razor to cut your throat with. But it was "good business"."

In an article in the 1983 *Socialist Standard*, Brian Rubin argues that Orwell's "socialism" was in fact little more than a moral stance, a call for "justice" and "liberty" and a more humane and decent world. Rick Hales, in the 1980 *Socialist Standard* ("Literary lefties in the 1930s") claims that the literary left-wing tried to expiate their class-guilt mostly by becoming Communists or fellow travellers except for the two heretics of the left-wing Julian Symons, who became a Trotskyite, and George Orwell who became a tramp.

Orwell's imaginative writing was not as good as his autobiographical or documentary work, but it was in his political journalism and polemical essays that he excelled. He was not an original writer, however, and many of his ideas had been written about previously; *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937) in which he discovered poverty in the industrial north and *Down and Out in Paris and London* in which he became a tramp had been written about by Jack London in *The People or the Abyss* (1902) and W. H. Davies in *The Autobiography of a Super-Tramp* (1908). The section in *A Clergyman's Daughter* in which the central character, Dorothy, spends the night in Trafalgar Square with a group of tramps is an attempt to emulate the stream-of-consciousness style of James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) and fails artistically. It was an experiment which Orwell did not repeat. Bernard Crick, Orwell's biographer, has drawn attention to similarities between Jack London's *The Iron Heel* (1907) in which is written "By virtue of that power we will remain in power . . . We will grind you revolutionists down under our heel, and we shall walk upon your faces", and *Nineteen Eighty Four*: "The party seeks power for its own sake. We are not interested in the good of others; we are interested solely in power . . . We know that no-one ever seizes power with the intention of relinquishing it", and "If you want a picture of the future, imagine a boot stamping on a human face - for ever". *Animal Farm* owes much to Swift's satire and, indeed, Orwell wrote an excellent essay "Politics vs. Literature: an examination of Gulliver's travels" in 1946. *Nineteen Eighty Four* owes a debt to Evgeny Zamyatin's book *We* (1925), which Orwell acknowledged in a letter to George Woodcock (1967), in which he stated that he had only been able to obtain a copy of the book in French and was looking for an English translation. However, it would be unfair to accuse Orwell of plagiarism because he borrowed ideas. Most topics and human emotions have been written about previously and genuine originality is difficult to achieve. It is sufficient to say that most of Orwell's work was well written and all of his work has survived him.

A common view held by the political right-wing is that Orwell exposed the horrors of "socialism" by predicting what would happen under a regime of the Stalinist model which the right-wing claims to be representative of all socialist ideals, conveniently ignoring the fact that he was writing about state capitalism represented as socialism and that the book was intended to be satire and not prediction. Also conveniently ignored are his other writings depicting the evils of imperialism, the inherent unfairness of privilege and the inefficiency and self-interest of capitalism.

The Communists had good reason to detest Orwell for exposing their treachery in Spain, during the civil

war, with the publication of *Homage to Catalonia* in 1938 in which he stated:

“ . . . among the parties on the Government side the Communists stood not upon the extreme Left, but upon the extreme Right . . . In particular, the USSR is in alliance with France, a capitalist-imperialist country. The alliance is of little use to Russia unless French capitalism is strong, therefore Communist policy in France has got to be anti-revolutionary.”

In 1940 Orwell wrote, in his long essay *Inside the Whale*:

“The more vocal kind of Communist is in effect a Russian publicity agent posing as an international socialist. It is a pose that is easily kept up at normal times, but becomes difficult in moments of crisis, because of the fact that the USSR is no more scrupulous in its foreign policy than the rest of the great powers.”

As a result, the Communists tried to portray Orwell either as a traitor who played into the hands of the right-wing or as the work of a disillusioned and desperately ill man. Brian Rubin quotes Llew Gardner of the *Daily Worker*: “When he wrote *1984*, the anti-socialist work that shocked the nation on television, George Orwell was sick in mind and body, a fast dying man” (18 December 1954.) Although Orwell had been seriously ill with tuberculosis since 1947 and his health had not been good before that – he acknowledged in a letter to George Woodcock that the book was gloomy because he had been feeling so ill when he wrote it – it is a gross distortion to suggest that he was mentally ill. Orwell had been making plans for a further novel and arranging for treatment in a Swiss clinic when he had his fatal lung haemorrhage. Certainly, he was expecting to live a little longer. Apart from the obvious political tactic of trying to denigrate Orwell, to see *Nineteen Eighty Four* in psychological terms is to ignore the fact that the book draws together ideas that Orwell had been expressing for more than ten years.

Orwell had some harsh words to say about political careerists: “. . . the type who becomes a Labour MP or a high-up trade union official. This last type is one of the most desolating spectacles the world contains. He has been picked out to fight for his mates, and all it means to him is a soft job and the chance of bettering himself” (*The Road to Wigan Pier*). He also referred to “Labour Party back-stairs crawlers”, and Bolshevik commissars as “half gangster, half gramophone”. In the same book, Orwell criticised elitism: “The truth is that to many people calling themselves Socialists, revolution does not mean a movement of the masses with which they hope to associate themselves; it means a set of reforms which ‘we’, the clever ones, are going to impose upon ‘them’, the Lower Orders”.

The anarchists tend to hold Orwell in high regard, appreciating his criticism of totalitarian regimes of both the right and left and his understanding of imperialism and capitalist values which can be seen in his earliest books. In 1933 he wrote: “Why are beggars despised? – for they are despised universally, I believe it is for the simple reason that they fail to earn a decent living, In practice nobody cares whether work is useful or useless, productive or parasitic, the sole thing demanded is that it shall be profitable . . . Money has become the grand test of virtue. By this test beggars fail, and for this they are despised”, and one of Orwell's characters, Bozo, the Parisian tramp tapped his forehead and said: “I'm a free man in here” (*Down and Out in Paris and London*).

Despite having strong words to say against authoritarianism, Orwell had an acute awareness of the dangers that could arise from the apparent renunciation of power and the nature of moral coercion and the force of public opinion. In 1946, in an essay entitled *Politics vs. literature* he wrote:

“In a society in which there is no law, and in theory no compulsion, the only arbiter of behaviour is public opinion. But public opinion, because of the tremendous urge to conformity in gregarious animals is less

tolerant than any system of law. When human beings are governed by “thou shalt not”, the individual can practise a certain amount of eccentricity: when they are supposedly governed by “love” or “reason”, he is under continuous pressure to make him behave and think in exactly the same way as everyone else.”

Animal Farm, the book that launched Orwell to fame, is a clever satire on the perversion of revolutionary aims. The plot of the book concerns the rebellion of the animals against their human oppressors and taking over the farm to be run for the benefit of animals. Gradually the pigs take over the management of the farm and make all the decisions, first publicly, but later in private. Eventually there is a power struggle between the pigs and Snowball is driven off the farm by dogs trained by Napoleon. Animals considered traitors are slaughtered and trade with other farms is re-established. The farm grows richer without making the animals richer, except for the pigs and dogs. At the end of the book when the men and pigs play cards and cheat leading to a quarrel the other animals, consumed with curiosity, look through the window: “The creatures outside looked from pig to man, and from man to pig, and from pig to man again; but already it was impossible to say which was which”. The comparison with Stalinist Russia and the purge of Trotsky is irresistible. The book also introduced the famous and frequently quoted phrase: “All animals are equal but some animals are more equal than others”.

Nineteen Eighty Four depicts a nightmare future in which all the citizens of a totalitarian state live under constant surveillance from telescreens controlled by Big Brother. The central character, Winston Smith, embarks on a clandestine love affair with Julia, a party member, and joins The Brotherhood, an illegal organisation dedicated to the overthrow of Big Brother. He is caught, tortured and brainwashed. He ends up loving Big Brother. Orwell enlarged on the theme of the falsification of history in this book:

“If the Party could thrust its hand into the past and say of this or that event, it never happened – that, surely, was more terrifying than mere torture and death?

And if all others accepted the lie which the Party imposed – if all records told the same tale – then the lie passed into history and became truth. ‘Who controls the past’, ran the Party slogan, ‘controls the future who controls the present controls the past’.

And when memory failed and written records were falsified – when that happened, the claim of the Party to have improved the conditions of human life had got to be accepted, because there did not exist, and never again could exist, any standards against which it could be tested.”

The *Nineteen Eighty Four* theme of the two minutes Hate period each day had been written about by Orwell in 1939: “It was a voice that sounded as if it could go on for about a fortnight without stopping. It's a ghastly thing, really, to have a sort of human barrel-organ shooting propaganda at you by the hour. The same thing over and over again. Hate, hate, hate. Let's all get together and have a good hate. Over and over. It gives you the feeling that something has got inside your skull and is hammering down on your brain” (*Coming Up for Air*).

It is surprising that Orwell should get so near the truth in *Nineteen Eighty Four* by having Winston Smith read in The Brotherhood's forbidden book: “But no advance in wealth, no softening of manners, no reform or revolution has ever brought human equality a millimetre nearer. From the point of the Low, no historic change has ever meant much more than a change in the name of their masters”, without drawing the conclusion that a socialist movement without leaders would solve the contradictions of power.

The importance of George Orwell as a writer lies in his questioning of institutions, power structures and political statements. The state, law, religion, charity, public schools, political parties and the media all came under his scrutiny. The morals behind individual beliefs were questioned in essays such as *Raffles and*

Miss Blandish:

“People worship power in the form in which they are able to understand it. A twelve-year-old boy worships Jack Dempsey. An adolescent in a Glasgow slum worships Al Capone. An aspiring pupil at a business college worships Lord Nuffield. A *New Statesman* reader worships Stalin. There is a difference in intellectual maturity, but none in moral outlook” (1944).

Despite Orwell's influence political journalism is as corrupt as ever. However, if we, individually, question what we read and try to be honest and objective in what we write then it is a start. Above all it is important that our socialism is not compromised and that we do not put our trust in leaders but our confidence in the power of the working class.