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# **George Orwell's Socialist Commitment and Moment of Political Optimism**

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Few commentators dispute that, whatever the extent of George Orwell's pessimism about socialism when he wrote *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), he continued to profess a commitment to socialism until the end of his life. In view of his statements on the subject, it could hardly be otherwise (1970l, 457-9; 1970o, 564; and Crick 1992, 565-70). But although most commentators agree that from no later than 1937 a socialist commitment was at the heart of Orwell's writing, few attempts have been made to explicate its precise character. One aspect of this disregard is that only rarely has substantial attention been paid to Orwell's most detailed discussion of socialism, *The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius* (1982), first published in 1941. In a 1985 article on this book, Gregory Claeys (1985, 186) wrote that 'of Orwell's major writings...[it] is unquestionably the most neglected'. Since then the neglect has persisted. Only cursory discussions are to be found, for example, in the biographies by Michael Sheldon (1991), Jeffrey Meyers (2000), Gordon Bowker (2003), and D. J. Taylor (2003), in studies of Orwell's politics by Stephen Ingle (1993) and Christopher Hitchens (2002), and in Scott Lucas's (2003) malicious attempt to discredit Orwell. However, in this article on Orwell's socialism and whether it survived the political pessimism of his last years, a central place will be given to *The Lion and the Unicorn*.

One reason for the book's neglect is that it has several dated features. Orwell contended that a British victory over Hitler's Germany depended on the beginning of a socialist revolution in Britain. He held that the working and middle classes had the potential to quickly become a social agency for establishing socialism, and for supporting a Labour-Party and other socialist challenge to Winston Churchill's coalition government. Such a challenge was necessary, Orwell believed, because if Germany offered peace terms Churchill's government would not defy the clamour of

Hitler's former appeasers for a negotiated settlement. The book also contains a conception of English national culture, features of which have long since gone. Another reason for the book's neglect is that it is a product of Orwell's most radical years as a socialist thinker and activist, and tends to embarrass both commentators who prefer the more liberal and conservative parts of his thought and left-wing critics who dispute his socialist credentials. (But, for sympathetic responses to the book, see Claeys 1985; Crick 1992; Crick's Introduction to Orwell 1982; and Kubal 1972.)

I shall argue however that *The Lion and the Unicorn*'s discussion of socialism transcends its time and place; that despite its brevity it is comparable to the main texts for understanding mid-twentieth-century British socialism (e.g. Attlee 1937; Durbin 1940; Laski 1943; Cole 1947; Bevan 1952; Strachey 1956; and Crosland 1964); and that it is still helpful for comprehending and confronting political issues. Although Orwell wanted *The Lion and the Unicorn* to be persuasive for readers unfamiliar with his previous work, it is more fully understood if looked at within the context of his political writing as a whole, a context that this article will cover.

### **Rebel without a Cause: Orwell's First Writings**

Orwell's road to socialism is usually and rightly dated from his 1927 resignation from the Burmese branch of the Indian Imperial Police. The resignation, in effect a declaration that he had become a rebel without a cause, would have surprised few of the friends from his school days. The knowledge we have of Orwell's schooldays, and of his thinking and feelings as a boy and adolescent make his decision to join the British police in Burma, five years earlier, more puzzling than his resignation. Orwell's life-long hatred of his preparatory boarding school, St Cyprian's, his more

sympathetic attitude to Eton, and the information since obtained by his biographers suggest that, despite the military and Indian civil-service background of his family, he was an unusual recruit for a colonial police force. As a boy Orwell was intelligent, a lover of the countryside, a devourer of books, often well in advance of his years, and a mischief maker. His attitudes to family, friends, school and other environments were those of a precociously class-conscious outsider, malcontent and cautious dissident.

But as Orwell was insufficiently motivated to study for a Cambridge scholarship, and had a family that could not afford Cambridge college fees, his life took a different course. After passing the necessary interviews and examinations, and with a vague idea of eventually becoming a writer, in 1922 he set sail for Burma and its police. Five years later, when he resigned, he was guilt ridden about British imperialism and the class privileges it had given him. He had come to despise both the conceit of the empire's power wielders and the servility of its subjects. He remained an anti-imperialist for the rest of his life, but one who retained a lingering respect for the personnel who served in Britain's colonies. Despite the hypocrisy and exploitation the empire generated, he thought that the subjects of British rule obtained some benefit from it, at least in comparison with those of other empires. His reactions to his Burmese service and to British imperialism are conveyed in his novel *Burmese Days* (1934) and in several essays, including 'Shooting an Elephant' (1970b), 'Not Counting Niggers' (1970d), 'Rudyard Kipling' (1970e), and 'Reflections on Gandhi' (1970n), as well as in *The Lion and the Unicorn*.

On returning to England, partly to alleviate his feelings of guilt and partly to find material for use as a writer, Orwell went to an opposite social extreme. He turned to living in and around Paris and London among tramps, casual labourers,

petty criminals, prostitutes and other outcasts, an experience that led to his first published book, *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933). This was the first of the writings that the erstwhile Eric Blair published pseudonymously as George Orwell. In less than four years the book was followed by three socially critical novels, *Burmese Days* (1934), *A Clergyman's Daughter* (1935) and *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* (1936), the first and third of which were semi-autobiographical. For charting the evolution of Orwell's political thinking, it is the last of these early novels that is the most revealing.

*Keep the Aspidistra Flying* is a better novel than many critics allow. Had Orwell failed to write anything after it and died little known, it would still be worth retrieving from oblivion. Politically, however, it was an act of self indulgence. The novel's protagonist, Gordon Comstock, is an unsuccessful poet with writer's block who tries to escape the world of middle-class money making, respectability and flattering bosses, all of which he regards as worshiping the money-god. He earns a meagre living as an assistant in a London bookshop – as Orwell had, in Hampstead at the end of 1934. When the novel begins Comstock is as ineffectual in persuading the girl who loyally stands by him, Rosemary, into sleeping with him without a marriage certificate as he is at nearly everything else. The book ends with his marriage to Rosemary, by then pregnant, and his settling for middle-class life as a copywriter for an advertising firm. Much of the book's social criticism consists of Comstock's diatribes against the money-god, the cause of his and everybody else's unhappy, pointless lives. Orwell seems to sympathise with Comstock's outlook, and to use him to vent his own feelings. Although the novel displays psychological, sociological and cultural insight, it caricatures the role of money, class divisions, 1930s British institutions and capitalist civilisation.

Comstock's political views are anti-capitalist but not socialist. He sees no alternative to existing society, and, until the end of the book when he changes his mind, he looks forward to its destruction in an inevitable war. Socialism is regarded by him as little more than a refuge for cranks and wealthy dilettantes. If the book has a political message it is that social conditions may be improved slightly by public action, and in private life by oases of integrity, civilised living, friendship and bearable family relations. The book's social criticism partly stems from conservative attitudes, including the author's hatred of contraception and abortion, rather than from those of the 1930s or present-day Left. The book helps to explain what Orwell meant by describing his thinking of the time as Tory anarchist.

Orwell's passage from anti-capitalism and Tory anarchism to socialism began in 1936 when his publisher, Victor Gollancz, proposed that Orwell visit the industrial towns of northern England to research the conditions and lives of working-class people, especially the unemployed. Gollancz expected the project to appeal to Orwell, and any book it produced to the 40,000 members of the Left Book Club which Gollancz promoted. The promise of advanced royalties was attractive as it enabled Orwell to marry Eileen O'Shaughnessy, his first wife. The project led to *The Road to Wigan Pier*, Orwell's first public statement of a commitment to socialism.

### **Rebel with a Cause: *The Road to Wigan Pier***

*The Road to Wigan Pier* ([1937] 1959) has two parts. In the first Orwell met the conditions of his contract, reporting and commenting on the conditions in England's industrial north. The second part, however, was more autobiographical. Orwell explained in personal and intellectual terms the reasons why, despite his hostility to capitalism, he had not previously committed himself to socialism, why he now did

so, and why he still had reservations about socialism and the socialist movement. But these reservations, he declared, made him an internal critic of socialism not an adversary (1959, 218).

He gave as his main reasons for becoming a socialist those he shared with other mid- and late-1930s converts: the unemployment and poverty that afflicted the working class, the precarious position and fear of poverty of middle-class people, the lack of resistance by Conservative dominated governments to fascist threats from abroad, and the emergence of fascist trends in Britain. For Orwell, these facts demonstrated that capitalism was finished, and that a choice had to be made between the socialist and fascist alternatives to capitalism. More distinctive to Orwell was his view that, on economic policy, socialism and fascism were similar. Even more contentiously for a left-wing writer, Orwell suggested that fascist collectivism might be more productive than socialist collectivism, as a fascist regime would have no qualms about exploiting the empire, the source of much of Britain's wealth. His objections to fascism were moral and political rather than economic. Fascism had to be opposed because of its authoritarianism and brutality. In discussing fascism, in fact, Orwell used a metaphor that foreshadowed *Nineteen Eighty-Four's* totalitarianism: a 'world of rabbits ruled by stoats' (1959, 214). Socialism meant a more decent and civilised society; unlike capitalism and fascism it called for political liberty, free speech and relations among people that were just and humane (1959, 210-5).

A question to which Orwell gave considerable attention followed from these claims for socialism: why doesn't socialism, if it promises more for most people than a dying capitalism or barbaric fascism, attract greater support? His main answer was that socialism had become too closely associated with industrialisation and industrial

progress. It had come to mean ever more mechanical, electronic and other technology, with what Orwell called 'the Machine'. He regarded the principal culprits as being the Fabians, particularly Sydney and Beatrice Webb, Bernard Shaw and H. G. Wells, and the Communists and other admirers of the Soviet Union who trumpeted its five-year plans as the solution to stagnating capitalist economies. But ordinary people and sensitive intellectuals, Orwell contended, were put off socialism by its association with the Machine. They had no wish to return to a pre-industrial society or to ban further industrial and technological progress – but neither did they wish to make further industrialisation the principal social goal. The world that too many socialists propagated, Orwell wrote,

is above all things an *ordered* world, an *efficient* world. But it is precisely from that vision of the future as a sort of Wells-world that sensitive minds recoil. Please notice that this essentially fat-bellied version of 'progress' is not an integral part of Socialist doctrine; but it has come to be thought of as one, with the result that the temperamental conservatism which is latent in all kinds of people is easily mobilised against Socialism (1959, 188-9).

In addition, Orwell asserted that people were repelled by the freakishness of many socialists. In developing this argument he vented his many prejudices against, among others, vegetarians, fruit-juice drinkers, sandal wearers and homosexuals. He also blamed socialist propaganda, observing that most people found its 1930s Marxist, class-hatred language distasteful and meaningless. The continual ridiculing of middle-class values as bourgeois typified the counter-productiveness of socialist propaganda. Socialists failed to grasp that people would not support social changes that entailed the abandoning of values and ways of life they considered basic to a civilised existence. An effective socialist party, therefore, would discard such self-damaging rhetoric. Instead, it would build upon the principles and objectives of

socialism that furthered decent ways of life, and that protected them against capitalism and industrialism.

Orwell, who always saw life in tragic terms, also criticised the naïve utopian view of socialists that socialism or anything else could remove the difficulties and pain from human life. A consequence of viewing progress in industrial and technological terms was that it made softness a major goal of life. The ultimate purpose of such so-called progress was to make work unnecessary and life easy. Orwell by contrast saw life as inevitably hard and urged that it was not ease and comfort that should be sought but courage and related virtues. Socialism should not be presented as a heaven on earth in which there would be no suffering and conflict, but as a more effective way of struggling against unnecessary hardship and inhuman relations among people. Nine years later, in a different context, Orwell made the same point. He concluded a review of political books by Christian writers with the observation that at least their work helped 'to counteract the too-easy optimism and the ill-thought-out materialism which are among the weaknesses of the left wing movement' (1986-98, 66).

Orwell thought that, unless the socialist movement was more realistic about human existence and promoted personal virtues, even an economically successful socialism would do little to improve life. *The Road to Wigan Pier's* conclusion was that although a commitment to socialism was a vital political necessity so too was the retention of a critical mind.

The job of the thinking person...is not to reject socialism but to make up his mind to humanise it....In the machine-world they have got to be a sort of permanent opposition [within the socialist movement], which is not the same thing as being an obstructionist or a traitor....For the moment the only possible course for any decent person, however much of a Tory or an anarchist by temperament, is to work for the establishment of socialism....To oppose Socialism *now*, when twenty million Englishmen are

Norman Wintrop: George Orwell's Socialist Commitment and Moment of Political Optimism underfed and Fascism has conquered half Europe is suicidal. It is like starting a civil war when the Goths are crossing the frontier (218).

Neither in *The Road to Wigan Pier* nor in most of Orwell's other political writing did he define precisely concepts such as *individual liberty, justice and decency*, or fully explain the character of an effective socialist party. He relied on the care of his writing and the common sense of his readers for his meaning to become clear. In this and other respects he brought to socialist and revolutionary politics the practical cast of mind that Edmund Burke brought to conservatism and counter-revolution. Orwell drew from political and social issues the relevant conceptual tools for analysing and confronting them rather than what Burke accused the French revolutionaries and Orwell accused so many socialist intellectuals of doing: imposing on politics and society conclusions drawn from abstract reasoning.

### **Orwell and Socialism's Spanish Defeat**

In December 1936, six months after his marriage and five months after the Spanish Civil War began, Orwell left England for Spain. He intended to report on the war and to assist in the Republic's defence against General Franco's German and Italian supported regiments. Shortly after arriving in Barcelona he joined one of the volunteer military brigades of the small POUM (Workers' Party of Marxist Unity), and a few weeks later transferred to a British ILP (Independent Labour Party) brigade that fought on the Aragon front alongside the POUM militias. Orwell served at the front until April when he was granted leave. On his return to Barcelona, after being appalled by its loss of the revolutionary élan of a few months earlier, he witnessed the Republic's police and military attempts to end the Spanish anarchist trade-union control of parts of the city and its essential services. Orwell blamed the

Spanish Communists, the many Russian agents in Spain, and their pressure on the Republic's government for the attacks on the non-Communist revolutionary Left.

Despite his concern about the situation in what remained of the Republic's territory, Orwell returned to the ILP section of the POUM militias, now denounced by the Communists and depicted by most of the Spanish and British press as treacherous, Trotskyite allies of Franco and the fascists. On May 20th, 1937, he was severely wounded by a sniper's bullet. He left the front for treatment and convalescence, and in June, when he was collecting his discharge papers, the POUM was declared illegal. Orwell, in order to escape the killing and imprisonment without trial of POUM members and supporters, had to hide himself, when again in Barcelona, from police and informers. At the end of June he and his wife escaped from Spain.

On returning to England he challenged the British Communist Party's misinformation about Spain. He protested about the hounding of the non-Communist Left, and the censorship, police and other measures of the Communist influenced government of the Republic, actions that resembled those of an anti-socialist, fascist regime. These were issues on which most of the British press and the main weekly paper of the Left, the *New Statesman*, were silent. Orwell's dislike and distrust of prominent left-wing intellectuals increased when Kingsley Martin, the *New Statesman's* editor, refused to publish an article by him on Spain, and when Victor Gollancz refused to publish his book on his Spanish experiences, *Homage to Catalonia* - eventually published in 1938 by Secker and Warburg.

Orwell argued that Spain's social revolution was as important as the military struggle against Franco. He rejected the view that the only Spanish conflict of consequence was between parliamentary democracy and fascist dictatorship, and

that everything else was a diversion. He denied that demands to further redistribute land and wealth, and to end the privileges and power of the Catholic Church were fascist inspired plots to divide and weaken the Republic. What both the Communists and the anti-socialist forces in Spain, Britain, France and elsewhere were reviling and trying to crush, he maintained, was a widely supported socialist revolution. For Orwell, either this revolution would succeed or, even if the Republic's armies defeated Franco's, fascism in one form or another would be the victor. The reason was that the social revolution could be halted only by a ruthless and brutal dictatorship.

The events witnessed by Orwell in Barcelona on his second and third visits convinced him that the quasi-revolutionary talk by the Communists about postponing socialist change until after a successful military struggle against Franco was spurious. Even if the Republic achieved a military victory, the Communists, he had concluded, would oppose a popular, egalitarian revolution. Communist policy had nothing to do with socialist goals. It was to satisfy French, British and other governments that the Soviet Union and the Soviet dominated Communist International would be reliable, anti-socialist partners in an alliance against Hitler's Germany.

Later, Orwell was to affirm that what he had learned in Spain never left him, and that it had a seminal effect on his writing. In a well-known passage in his 1946 essay on 'Why I Write' he wrote that the

Spanish and other events in 1936-7 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 understood it (1970k, 28).

Orwell's socialist commitment was to remain consistent in its anti-Stalinism, and in its sensitivity to the dangers in the power of modern governments - socialist, democratic or anything else.

Until the end of 1941 Orwell applied to Britain the political outlook he had acquired in Spain. During these four years he was a revolutionary socialist who insisted that, as had been demonstrated in Spain, it would be impossible to defeat the fascism typified by Hitler's Germany and Italy's Mussolini without successful socialist revolutions. Prior to the outbreak of the Second World War he agreed with the ILP and other socialist quasi-pacifists who held that a war waged by Britain and France against Nazi Germany, even if victorious, would bring an end to liberal rights, independent trade-union and labour movements, and parliamentary democracy. Such a war, Orwell wrote (e.g. 1970c, 415-16), should be opposed, with preparations for opposition made beforehand.

But when German armies invaded Poland and Neville Chamberlain's government declared war on Germany, Orwell's English patriotism came to the fore. He supported the war effort and tried unsuccessfully, for medical reasons, to enlist in the army. For nearly a year and a half, however, he was convinced that a British victory would be impossible without the beginning of a socialist revolution. The *Lion and the Unicorn* (1982), which he wrote between August and October 1940, contained his most thorough explanation of what he meant by socialist revolution. The book also marked a transition in his political thinking, in that it expressed both his late 1930s conception of socialist politics, in which Britain was believed to be approaching a pre-revolutionary crisis, and, what was to persist for much longer, a left-Labour-Party socialist strategy. Two years later in fact, after employment with the BBC, he

became the literary editor of *Tribune*, the weekly organ of the Labour Party Left, then edited by Aneurin Bevan.

Despite *The Lion and the Unicorn* being written during Britain's worst and most isolated days of the war, shortly after the Dunkirk evacuation of British troops from France and during the Blitz, it expressed Orwell's brief period of optimism about achieving socialism. Hardship and adversity in the struggle for socialism, he warned, were unavoidable; but also possible were military victory, and beginning a transition from capitalism to socialism in Britain that would encourage in other nations both resistance to German occupation and socialist struggles.

### **Socialism and the English Genius**

*The Lion and the Unicorn* (1982) has three principal topics all of which are signified by its sub-title, *Socialism and the English Genius*. The first is the distinctive character of the British people and its traditions, upon which Orwell based many of the book's arguments. He preferred, however, to call the people and its traditions English. The second topic is the opportunities that accompanied the dangers for the British people resulting from Hitler's European conquests. The very survival of the nation, Orwell declared, demanded that genuine patriots turn to socialism, and that socialists enlist patriotic feelings rather than sneer at them as had so many pre-war left-wing intellectuals. For Orwell, the war and revolution were inseparable; the war could not be won without a democratic socialist restructuring of society, and the completion of such a revolution required the defeat of Hitler's Germany (1982, 95-6, 100-1). The third topic is the nature of the socialist ends and means that were specific to Britain's desperate situation. In discussing these topics Orwell built upon his pre-war

political conclusions and articulated the political commitment he was to avow for the rest of his life.

In the book's first part, 'England Your England', Orwell highlighted the virtues, vices and eccentricities of the British people. They included a dislike of militarism, authoritarianism and pomposity, a love of private life, an engrained gentleness, toleration of opposed opinions, a respect for freedom of speech, obstinacy in defence of cherished ways of life and, when called upon, a willingness to act together and make sacrifices. British patriotism was said to be grounded on these qualities rather than on a militarist-nationalist desire to rule over others. Only hypocrisy enabled the people to live with the Empire and its exploitation of other peoples. The qualities of the British people, however, would enable them to overcome their hypocrisy and support socialist change. The basic decency of Britain's people, Orwell thought, would encourage them to struggle for a more just Britain and for freedom for the colonial peoples, even though the struggle would entail hardship and, in the early years, an economically lower standard of living – consequences of a transition to socialism that Orwell accused most socialists of ignoring.

Orwell explained what he meant by socialism, partly by outlining a six-point program. The first three items of the program typified 1940s left-Labour-Party thinking about achieving a socialist Britain; the next two confronted the problem of empire; the sixth was a condition for Germany's defeat, and a secure post-war world. The six points were

1. Nationalization of land, mines, railways, banks and major industries.
2. 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.
3. Reform of the educational system along democratic lines [later explained as steps towards a

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state controlled system, in which progress was based on merit, and snobbery discouraged (107-8)]. 4. Immediate dominion status for India, with power to secede when the war is over. 5. Formation of an Imperial General Council, in which the coloured peoples are to be represented. 6. Declaration of formal alliance with China, Abyssinia and all other victims of the Fascist powers (1982, 104).

The book's socialism is politically but not economically liberal. A planned economy, which Orwell thought was more efficient for war and peace, was to replace market capitalism, but with parliamentary and other liberal-democratic institutions intact. Constitutionalism, independent judges, and competing political parties would help to ensure that ordinary people retained the necessary political power to prevent new elites from governing tyrannically or despotically. Orwell saw the Labour Party as the main political agency for change. But a necessary condition for a relatively peaceful parliamentary road to socialism, though some violence and coercion would probably be required, was that socialism had middle-class as well as working-class and trade-union support. The revolution had to have popular support. 'The general tendency of this [six-point] programme', Orwell recognised, 'is unmistakable. It aims quite frankly at turning this war into a revolutionary war and England into a Socialist democracy' (1982, 104-5).

Although Orwell regarded socialism's principles and goals as universal, and realised that without socialist successes in other countries there could be no socialism in Britain, he chastised British socialists for their neglect of British patriotism. Socialists might think internationally, but the working and middle classes did not. Like all peoples the British had a distinctive national culture and, when they thought about politics, they thought in national terms. Ideas that intellectuals dismissed as myths were taken seriously. Ordinary people and, for all their defects, the judges respected the law. Probably more than in any other country there was no out-and-out corruption in British public life. Britain probably had fewer latent quislings than

other nations, and at times of crisis its people knew what they must do (1982, 48-50, 52-4).

But Orwell's praise of the British, or the English as he misleadingly called them in a book about the survival and future of Britain, went along with contempt for the nation's privileged classes. Men and women of money and the remains of the nobility who supported the pre-war Conservative governments were accused of stupidity. All they knew of Fascism and Communism was that the former was less of a threat to property and property owners. Once the war began, most of them wanted not victory but a negotiated peace (1982, 90-1). Also disturbing were the deficiencies of left-wing intellectuals, the politics of whom too often expressed little more than resentment about the absence of intellectually satisfying middle-class jobs. A few months after the publication of *Lion and the Unicorn*, Orwell observed that 'English left-wing intellectuals of all shades do not like the society they are living in but at the same time do not want to face the effort or the responsibility of changing it' (1986-98e, 71). The effect of the literary, quasi-political life to which intellectuals had turned was to weaken public morale and persuade Hitler to think that Britain was decadent. As Orwell saw it, Britain might not be decadent, but it was weakened by the separation of intelligence and education from patriotism.

Orwell's desire to overcome divisions between a nation's intelligentsia and its ordinary people runs through all his writing. Most of the writers he admired were popular writers whose work also compelled the respect of intellectuals, for example Shakespeare, Dickens, Mark Twain, Zola, Conrad, Galsworthy, Kipling, Jack London and Somerset Maugham. Likewise, the style of writing which Orwell practiced and advocated (1970f and j) was one that carefully, precisely and, when necessary, bluntly makes complex feelings and ideas accessible to a popular audience. And at

the root of the democracy and socialism he favoured was a respect for truth. Political leaders should speak to and respond to their followers and the nation clearly and honestly. If a political participant believed that it was politically desirable to kill or impose suffering on people then he or she should at least say so and not hide his or her meaning in dead clichés, vague ready-made phrases, a florid rhetoric or other obscurantism.

A common culture was integral to the socialism to which Orwell was committed. It meant that although artists and writers were entitled to see their main audience as their peers, and to put the integrity of their work before its popularity, they did not despise other citizens, and they accepted a responsibility to improve standards. Although campaigns to uplift ordinary people – ‘raise their consciousness’ to use a later piece of jargon – were undesirable, people should be discouraged from dismissing artists and writers as useless highbrows. Citizens should take an interest in public affairs, and at least try to distinguish genuine leaders and intellectuals from charlatans. Orwell, for these reasons, was always angered by populist journalists and others who, instead of trying to improve standards, pandered to the anti-intellectualism of the British (e.g. 1970g, 294-5, 297-9).

Orwell's promotion of a common language and his respect for working and middle-class people were connected to his wish to preserve the concept of truth and to make it central to public life. These ideas were all expressed, inter alia, in his contempt for aggressive nationalist and other ideologies. In his ‘Notes on Nationalism’ (1970i), for example, he stretched the word *nationalism* to encompass all ideological movements and clusters of prejudices. *Nationalism*, in other words, was used to describe the rhetoric of not only rival imperialisms and militarist nations but

also of Stalinism, Trotskyism, anarchism, pacifism, anti-Semitism, Zionism, the Catholicism of the 1930s and 1940s, and other dogmas and doctrines.

When Orwell wrote *The Lion and the Unicorn*, he thought that the events prior to the war and the disasters of its first eighteen months had confirmed that capitalism was in terminal decline. Capitalist nations, in addition to being unjust, were seen as less productive than Germany and Russia, nations with planned economies, and to lack answers to vital political and cultural questions. Orwell, however, made no distinction between capitalism, an economic system, and the policies of a nation's political rulers. Just as he saw close connections between capitalism and the pre-war appeasement of Hitler, so he wrote that 'Hitler's conquest of Europe...was a *physical* debunking of capitalism' (1982, 74). But one reason why he regarded Nazi victories as a defeat for capitalism was that, unlike most socialist contemporaries, he did not regard Nazism and Fascism as representing the last or any other stage of capitalism. For Orwell, Mussolini's Italy and Hitler's Germany were obscene variants of socialist collectivism. They had taken policies for remedying economic crises from reformist socialism to which they had substituted militarist, territorially expansionist and dictatorial ends for the socialist goals of liberty and equality (1982, 74-7). The defeat of the fascist dictatorships was imperative as, unlike capitalist regimes, fascist regimes utilised the coercive and indoctrinating powers of modern technology to make effective opposition impossible – an idea that was to be put to terrifying effect in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

British resistance to German National Socialism, Orwell believed in 1940's worst days of the war, had to come not from the Churchill government but from below, from a socialist movement that understood that Britain's social structure and class divisions were obstacles. He declared that the war had 'turned Socialism from

a text-book word into a realisable policy.... Patriotism, against which the Socialists fought so long, has become a tremendous lever in their hands' (1982, 102). But one problem moderated Orwell's optimism about socialism, the leadership of the Labour Party. He wrote that with few exceptions the party's leaders had settled for being a permanent opposition within a Conservative governed capitalist nation. Something more was required from socialists and their leaders than 'kicking theoretically against a system which in practice you are fairly well satisfied with' (1982, 100). He expected however that within a year a democratic socialist movement that meant business would emerge. It would be both parliamentary and extra-parliamentary, and it would combine socialist goals with liberal rights and conservative instincts.

It will not be doctrinaire nor even logical. It will abolish the House of Lords, but quite probably will not abolish the monarchy....It will group itself round the old Labour Party and its mass following will be in the trade unions, but it will draw into it most of the middle class and many of the younger sons of the bourgeoisie. Most of its directing brains will come from the new indeterminate class of skilled workers, technical experts, airmen, scientists, architects and journalists.... But it will never lose touch with the tradition of compromise, and the belief in a law that is above the State. It will shoot traitors, but it will give them a solemn trial beforehand and occasionally it will acquit them. It will crush any open revolt promptly and cruelly, but it will interfere very little with the spoken and written word. Political parties with different names will still exist, revolutionary sects will still be publishing their newspapers and making as little impression as ever. It will disestablish the Church, but will not persecute religion. It will retain a vague reverence for the Christian moral code, and from time to time will refer to England as 'a Christian country'....It will show a power of assimilating the past which will shock foreign observers and sometimes make them doubt whether any revolution has happened (1982, 112-3).

David L. Kubal (1972) has neatly summarised *The Lion and the Unicorn's* thesis: 'Revolution was a necessity, but revolution severed from traditional wisdom and the country's culture resulted in Stalinism....The check on and the guidance of power must be derived from an established cultural heritage' (1972, 33-4).

In Orwell's brief moment of revolutionary political optimism, the issues were clear and a time for fundamental decisions had arrived. He wrote that '*Laissez-faire* capitalism is dead. The choice lies between the kind of collective society that Hitler will set up and the kind that can arise if he is defeated' (1982, 119). Any peace treaty with Hitler could be only temporary. Hitler had no choice but to annihilate Britain and its influence. It

is precisely the [British] idea of human equality - the "Jewish" or "Judaean-Christian" idea of equality that Hitler came into the world to destroy....Thought of a world in which black men would be as good as white men and Jews treated as human beings brings him the same horror and despair as the thought of endless slavery brings to us (1982, 119).

Within a year of *The Lion and the Unicorn's* publication Orwell's political optimism and sense of urgency had left him. He thought that he had misjudged the situation, and that socialism and the winning of the war were less closely related. His moment of optimism, however, had led to a clear account of the socialist principles and goals to which he was committed, an account that is expanded upon in his 1940-1941 and later essays and journalism (e.g. 1986-1998a, b, c, d and e).

### ***Animal Farm, Nineteen Eighty-Four and the Problem of Orwell's Pessimism***

A widely held view of Orwell is that not only does pessimism about socialism permeate the two allegorical novels of his last years, but that despair about socialism is their conscious or unconscious political message and the final content of his political thought. Anti-socialists as well as anti-communists, from laissez-faire liberals to obdurate traditional conservatives, have seized upon *Animal Farm* (1945) and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) for evidence that, had Orwell lived longer, he would have stopped calling himself a socialist. Neo-conservatives (e.g. Norman Podhoretz 1983) believe that he would have followed the trail of those socialist contemporaries

who made their peace with a rejuvenated global capitalism. Conservatives of a more traditional variety, however, suggest that the patriotic, conservationist, commonsense, more Burkian features of his thought would have amply filled the vacuum left by socialism (e.g. Wyndham Lewis 1971). But two of the most thorough and probing analyses of Orwell's post-1945 pessimism about socialism are by writers who are sympathetic to his socialism: A. M. Eckstein (1987) and Alex Zwerdling (1974). For all such writers *Animal Farm*, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and the latter's horrific ending of a boot stamping on the human face for ever nullify Orwell's protestations about remaining a socialist.

There are, however, several problems with this response to Orwell's last two novels. It is true that *Animal Farm* gives us a major conservative and liberal objection to violent revolutions – even those with popular support – that they will end in the despotic rule of the revolutionary elites that triumph over rivals. But this was not Orwell's conception of his book (e.g. his 1947 Preface to a Ukrainian translation 1970l, 457-9). Also of course, *Animal Farm* suggests among much else not only anti-socialist objections to violent seizures of power but also the similar objections of democratic socialists.

But facts about Orwell's understanding of one or both of his last two novels do not end the controversy. It is also alleged that, after Orwell was disappointed by Britain's post-war Labour government, and by post-war democratic-socialist parties and governments elsewhere, his reformist objections to Leninism were joined by Leninist objections to reformism. In other words Orwell conceded that the post-war forces opposed to parliamentary socialism were too strong; that the ruling and moneyed classes of capitalist nations were determined to resist any loss of power; that there was insufficient support for socialism from either the working or middle

classes; and that socialism's reformist leaders lacked the necessary will to obtain public support. This lack of support for democratic-socialist change is sometimes said to have intensified Orwell's concern over the threats to free speech, the freedom of writers and the future of literature by the constant extending of state power by both left- and right-wing governments.

There can be little doubt that, after the 1941 publication of *The Lion and the Unicorn*, pessimism about socialism, and the state of Britain and the world became central to Orwell's political writing. He thought that the Labour leaders, during the war years, had lacked political initiative. He was delighted by the party's 1945 election victory, and he respected the two Cabinet members who were associated with the party's Left, Stafford Cripps and Aneurin Bevan, but he expected most Labour leaders to remain addicted to feeble compromises. Although the policies of the 1945-50 Labour government proved to be a little more radical than he had anticipated, he was well aware of their limitations.

The main reason for his political pessimism, however, was the implications of atomic weapons. He wrote that atomic weapons would further the formation of large, bureaucratised, authoritarian regional states, as predicted in James Burnham's *The Managerial Revolution*, several years before the 1945 bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (Burnham [1941]1945). The most likely centres for such states, Orwell suggested, were the United States, Russia, Europe and China or Japan (e.g. 1970h, 25-6; 1970m, 423-4). In common with Burnham, Orwell saw the regionalisation and bureaucratisation of the world as unavoidable. Only as a part of a wider socialist community, therefore, could a socialist Britain provide an alternative to Russian communism and American capitalism (e.g. 1970m, 424-7). The need for protection against atomic weapons, Orwell argued, would make the construction of regional

powers more certain and, when combined with despotic government, would make such giant states invulnerable to both internal opposition and, unless a third world war occurred, external aggression.

Another explanation for the apparent political despair of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is that Orwell was sick and dying when he wrote it. But no matter how much the physical suffering of his last years was reflected in the bleakness and horror of his picture of the future, it does not affect the fact that the book was a political warning rather than a prediction. It pointed to the implications of Nazism and Stalinism, and it warned against a direction that collectivist government could take. But there is nothing in the book or in anything else from Orwell's last years to suggest that, whatever the extent of his political pessimism, he stopped thinking that democratic socialism was the most dependable and effective force for resisting fascist, communist and other totalitarianism. In Orwell's view, for all the limitations of the policies of the 1945 British Labour-Party government, they demonstrated that a serious attempt could be made to combine socialist goals with contested elections, opposition parties, the rule of law, free speech and other liberal rights and democratic principles.

Moreover *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was a warning – by means of pushing trends to extremes – not just about fascism and communism but also about trends in capitalist and democratic nations. It was for example from such Western societies that, in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the three giant despotisms that divided the planet between them learned many of their techniques for keeping the proles, the bulk of their populations, contented and servile. The novel in fact offers several explanations for the origin of its totalitarian despotisms. They include corporatist trends within an earlier capitalism, nuclear wars, the technology that is useful to the new rulers, the

power hunger of their rulers, and apathetic, demoralised masses. All these causes imply that totalitarianism in one form or another is a permanent possibility for humanity, among post-Orwell examples for which are Mao Zedong's China, the Pol Pot regime and Saddam Hussein's Iraq.

But for the Western world, although it is not difficult to spot features of current life that are more authoritarian than in Orwell's days, an Oceania-like totalitarianism is not an immediate threat. Orwell in fact never had to face and did not foresee many of the challenges that now confront Western and other nations, for example novel forms of international disorder, terrorism of all kinds, ethnic extremism, failed states and the erosion of sovereignty in others, man-made environmental disasters, and the weakening of national cultures. Nevertheless one of the main political challenges he confronted still persists and it is linked to many of the more recent, principally how to withstand the injustices and destabilising effects of modern capitalism.

Capitalist civilisation, contrary to Orwell's view and that of most of his socialist contemporaries, has proved to be far from finished. Since Orwell's day capitalism has become increasingly global and has gone from strength to strength. It follows that for capitalism's flag wavers, people who think that an ever increasing production of material goods by national and global markets, and the science and technology to which they are bonded will solve or at least make manageable all social and cultural problems, Orwell's political thought has little to offer. His political and indeed many of his other writings are likely to be appreciated by admirers of contemporary capitalism only if they separate their confidence in current institutions and practices from their aesthetic judgements. Unless they make such a distinction, the character and value of Orwell's essays, journalism, and his political

Norman Wintrop: George Orwell's Socialist Commitment and Moment of Political Optimism and other novels will elude them. But for cultural and other social critics who are less sanguine about the state of the world, and for socialists, neo-Keynesians and other sceptics about global economic markets and the economic policies of most states, Orwell's political thought retains its relevance. It tries to ground a commitment to a liberal and democratic socialism on understandings of human nature and of social and political possibilities that do not depend on self deception, and which provide the basis for a realistic and morally defensible politics.

Orwell's political and other writing is no substitute for wide and intelligent reading, empirical research, rational thought, political imagination and common sense. It offers, however, a strong intellectual foundation for the thinking of people who, in Orwell's conception of the socialist movement's core, are a part of or at least potentially sympathetic to it. These are people who, like Orwell, are aware not only of the obstacles that the Left must confront from the institutions and forces it opposes, but also from its internal failings and divisions, and the people and groups it attracts. The value and relevance of Orwell's political writing have always been, primarily, for those participants in and supporters of the Left who are prepared to stand against the intolerant, authoritarian and managerial if not outright totalitarian directions that a socialist or neo-socialist politics can take. If the Left is to revive and to become again a serious alternative to dominant economic and political forces, then Orwell's teachings, from both his moment of optimism and his years of pessimism, will continue to be an important intellectual source and stimulus.

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