

Orwell and 'The English Genius'

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“Men make their own history, but not of their own free will; not under circumstances they themselves have chosen but under the given and inherited circumstances with which they are directly confronted. The tradition of the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the minds of the living. And, just when they appear to be engaged in the revolutionary transformation of themselves [...] they timidly conjure up the spirits of the past to help them [...].” *Karl Marx*¹

“In 1807 the great theorist of modern war, Claus von Clausewitz, wrote an article called ‘The Germans and the French’ in which he compared the two nations. One was militaristic, and the subject-mentality of its people doomed them to political “obedience”; the other had a more literary bent, and its hypercritical inhabitants would be unlikely to submit to tyranny. The obedient militarists were, of course, the French, the critically minded literary types the Germans. [...] Clausewitz’s judgement was no doubt affected by his recent experiences as a French prisoner of war. But his was not an exceptional contemporary view, or a peculiarly German one. For another sixty years, many in Britain still saw France as the archetype of a bureaucratic police society and militarist power. Germany, on the other hand, long enjoyed a reputation as a quaint, half-timbered land – and a country whose industrial goods were still regarded, even in the 1870s, as cheap and nasty. Times change, and so do clichés.” *David Blackburn*²

IN THE manner of the French historian who was in the custom of beginning his lectures with the apparently obvious “Messieurs, l’Angleterre est une île”, let us begin by noting that George Orwell was an English writer. For the moment this is probably the only statement that can be made about Orwell, his merits as a writer, or his political legacy that would not invite argument.

For to say that Orwell’s legacy is a contested one would be something of an understatement; readers will be familiar enough with the main lines of argumentation on either side (or, perhaps, on all sides) for it to be unnecessary to rehearse them

in detail. The point that concerns us here is the difficulty with which it has been possible to find in Orwell’s overall work any semblance of *continuity*: it is as difficult for those who would enlist Orwell, on the strength of his later writings, to the cause of neo-liberal conservatism (Norman Podhoretz in the van) to maintain a fidelity with the *poumista* of 1937 enthusiastic at the sight of the workers of Barcelona, as he put it, “in the saddle”, as it is for those who would claim that Orwell remained faithful to socialist ideals (however distorted by his reaction to what he called “Stalinism”) right up to the clear anti-Communist propaganda of *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Practically all the extent interpretations of Orwell are forced to base themselves on the idea that there is a *break* in continuity in his thinking, a rupture of some sort, that occurs sometime between his decision to go to fight to revolutionary Spain and the immediate aftermath of the outbreak of the Second World War, and a good part of the debate that surrounds Orwell centres on this fact, be it motivated by explaining why Orwell shifted his views, or be it focused on salvaging the positive in Orwell’s contribution from the negative.

My fundamental argument here will be that this kind of approach to Orwell’s politics are as unsuccessful in accounting for the contradictions in his thought as they are in doing it justice; that instead of seeing, from this perspective, that what is fundamental in his thinking is a rupture (around the beginning of the Second World War), what is decisive in Orwell’s thought is an essential continuity. From the point when he committed himself to act on his decision to be a writer up until the early stages of the War what is striking about Orwell’s thinking is the way in which he built up his ideas, each logical step following from ones previously made; and a judgement on in which direction he was moving in the last decade of his life, although requiring, because of his early death, a greater deal of speculation, is informed by an assessment of what he had done before.

In addition to this, I am going to argue that fundamental to understanding the nature of the continuity in Orwell’s thought is comprehending his interpretation and reception of British (or

English) nationalism.³ Now it is in a way surprising that discussion on Orwell's nationalism should take the form of a half-forgotten siding within the mainline network of Orwellology, for the nationalism in Orwell's thinking is hardly hidden: the more mature Orwell wore his Englishness on his sleeve and wrote about it copiously, if not obsessively. And it is also important to register that the failure to see this, the unwillingness to register that nationalism forms the *leitmotif* of Orwell's work, rather than a peripheral, if interesting, sub-theme, weighs far more heavily on Orwell's interpreters on the left than it does on those from the right. For the little-Englanders and cold-war warriors, the evident "patriotism" of Orwell's later work is just more grist to the mill. No: it is on the left that the "patriotic deficit" makes itself felt most keenly. And we can go further. The inability of the left in Britain to understand the central significance of English-British nationalism within the overall arch of Orwell's thought arises precisely from its own incapacity to comprehend the role and function of the national in general and English-British nationalism in particular in the present-day. It is too for this reason – for the light that can be shed on this aspect of the outlook of the British left – that Orwell still merits study one hundred and one years after his birth.

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Orwell was born Eric Arthur Blair in 1903 in British-occupied India. After a privileged but undistinguished (and apparently exceedingly unhappy) education in a series of the better English "public" schools (including Eton) he joined the Indian Imperial Police, for whom he served for nearly five years in Burma. In 1927, aged 24, while home on leave, he decided not to return. Immediately, he went on what he called an "expedition" to the poverty of the East End of London; and in the spring of 1928 he took a room in Paris, where he was to remain for the next eighteen months, during which time he worked as a dishwasher and kitchen porter and nearly died of pneumonia. Upon his return to England at the end of 1929 he worked to establish himself as a writer, subsidising himself by teaching. His first book, an account of his travails in the East End and Paris, *Down and Out in Paris and London*, was published in 1933; it is with this book that he first began to use the name "George Orwell". His first novel, *Burmese Days*, was published in 1934. Two more quickly followed: *A Clergyman's Daughter*, in 1935, and *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, in 1936.

His next book was to be a commission from the Left Book Club's Victor Gollancz into the life of the poor and unemployed, for which he travelled north to Yorkshire and Lancashire at the beginning of 1936. The resulting *The Road to Wigan Pier* can be seen as Orwell's first explicitly "pol-

itical" book, for, though the first part was made up of the simple reportage for which he had been asked and at which he was by now well-practised, the second took the form of a fairly extended, if heterodox, essay on socialism.

But before the book had been published Orwell was already planning to go to Spain, initially to collect material for articles, and possibly a book; but very quickly he had decided to fight, and fight he did as a militiaman in the POUM, receiving a sniper's bullet through the neck for his troubles. While on leave in Barcelona, he participated in the May 1937 uprising. In June he was forced to leave for France, when the POUM was declared illegal – only getting out by the skin of his teeth.

The Road to Wigan Pier had already been published in March 1937; no sooner had he arrived back in England from Spain than he began to write *Homage to Catalonia*, which was published in April 1938. In June of that year Orwell was to join the ILP,⁴ of which he was to remain a member until the War. Falling ill with tuberculosis, he was forced to pass his time first in a sanatorium, and later the winter in Morocco, where he was to write another novel, *Coming Up for Air*. In the autumn of 1941 he wrote one of his most important political essays, 'The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius'. In 1943 he began work on *Animal Farm*, which was, after multiple rejections, finally published in August 1945. In 1946, following the death of his wife Eileen O'Shaughnessy during a routine operation, he and their adopted son, Richard, moved to the Hebridean island of Jura. There, his health already failing gravely, he wrote *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. At the end of 1949, dangerously ill, he was forced into hospital in London, and in January 1950, he died. He was only 46.

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Such are the facts of a remarkable and pitifully short life. But what made Orwell run? Or, as one of the more sensitive of the commentators that we have on Orwell, Raymond Williams, once said: rather than what did Orwell write, let us ask "what wrote Orwell?"⁵

Let us begin then with the first phases of apparent radicalisation. Orwell decided not to return to duty as a functionary of imperialism in 1927 not simply because he was tired of the job but for explicitly political reasons. He left hardly any contemporaneous record of the reasons for his decision, but later, in an autobiographical (and much quoted) account in *Wigan Pier*, he was to write:

"I was in the Indian Police for five years, and by the end of that time I hated the imperialism I was serving with a bitterness which I probably cannot make clear. [...] I had reduced everything to the simple theory that the oppressed are always

right and the oppressors are always wrong: a mistaken theory, but the natural result of being one of the oppressors yourself. I felt I had got to escape not merely from imperialism but from every form of man's dominion over man."⁶

But it was not simply the injustice of imperialism that had appalled Orwell, although he indeed recognised it as unjust; his critique of imperialism was in fact a good deal more subtle than that. Early in the novel *Burmese Days*, his account of this specific, concrete example of "man's dominion over man" (and of his own break from it), the hero, John Flory, who we can suppose is in good part a picture of the young Orwell, undergoes one morning something of a moral crisis: hungover, and drinking and arguing with his fellow Europeans:

"Flory pushed back his chair and stood up. It must not, it could not – no, it simply should not go on any longer! He must get out of this room quickly, before something happened inside his head and he began to smash the furniture and throw bottles at the pictures. Dull boozing witless porkers! Was it possible that they could go on week after week, year after year, repeating word for word the same evil-minded drivel, like a parody of a fifth-rate story in *Blackwood's*? Would none of them ever think of anything new to say? Oh, what a place, what people! What a civilisation is this of ours – this godless civilisation founded on whisky, *Blackwood's* and the "Bonzo" pictures! God have mercy on us, for all of us are part of it."⁷

For Orwell, alongside the injustice and the sordor, imperialism is disgusting principally because it corrupts.⁸ He returned to theme in the 1936 essay 'Shooting an Elephant':

"With one part of my mind I thought of the British Raj as an unbreakable tyranny, as something clamped down, *in saecula saeculorum*, upon the will of prostrate peoples; with another part I thought that the greatest joy in the world would be to drive a bayonet into a Buddhist priest's guts. Feelings like these are the normal by-products of imperialism; ask any Anglo-Indian official, if you can catch him off duty."⁹

Tired then of being sucked into the imperialist machine like this, and worried at being permanently corrupted by it himself (it is probably significant that Flory is the only central character in Orwell's early novels who does not ultimately pick up the pieces and struggle on; unable to continue to juggle his ethical conflicts he finally commits suicide) Orwell rejects it, and takes off into the world of what Jack London had called, when undertaking a similar adventure in order to assimilate the material which he would assemble into *The People of the Abyss*, the "lowest of the low". This was, of course, no "turn to the working class" (as Orwell was subsequently to recognise in *Wigan Pier*), but to a socially invisible, and often *déclassé*, "underclass".

But why did he do this? What was he looking for? One answer is, of course, "himself": living on the margins gave Orwell a kind of social solitude, away from what he knew and was familiar with (even if he was always careful to keep his escape routes open), giving him chance to reflect. But I think it wrong here to over-emphasise, as is commonly done, this theme of "rejection" on Orwell's part. This was not a negative journey, but a *positive* one. Orwell, I feel, felt let down by the world in which he had been educated; the values inculcated into him he had seen betrayed by the very corruption of imperialism, and what was being corrupted by this parasitic relation of dominion, despotism and self-interest was Englishness itself. It is not, as Raymond Williams argues,¹⁰ that he rejects the "England" of the ruling class and goes looking for it among the poor, but that he feels that the ruling class had itself turned its back on "Englishness". It is significant that he was down and out in Paris and then London, not the other way around. And his relief at the prospect of returning to England in the book is palpable, even if his prospects are poor (he is going, in his own words, only to be put in charge of a "congenital imbecile"). On the Channel crossing he reflects:

"I was so pleased to be getting home, after being hard up for months in a foreign city, that England seemed to me a sort of Paradise. There are, indeed, many things in England that make you glad to get home; bathrooms, armchairs, mint sauce, new potatoes properly cooked, brown bread, marmalade, beer made with veritable hops – they are all splendid, if you can pay for them. England is a very good country when you are not poor; and, of course, with a tame imbecile to look after, I was not going to be poor."¹¹

This, in part, explains the strange disjuncture in *Down and Out* between the two parts of the book: although, in London, he does indeed fall again on hard times, and mixes with people who are to him at least *socially* alien, he is clearly among his own (the first, Parisian, part of the book, filled as it is with strange and livid characters, has altogether a different, at times surreal, feel to it). He has not in fact rejected England at all, but rather found it again, when he had thought it lost.

Down and Out was followed by three novels; and the three share a curious theme, such that we can read them as a kind of trilogy. In *Burmese Days*, as we have seen, we have the powerful image of an imperialism that is not only unjust but which corrupts. The real Orwell, who came to the conclusion that serving the corrupting imperial machine and being true to himself were incompatible, got out. The fictional Flory, faced with the same dilemma, fails to escape the machine's clutches, and perishes.

But in the two following novels, we see that it is not just imperialism that corrupts. In *A*

Clergyman's Daughter, Dorothy Hare is forced to drop out – through an amnesia – from her impoverished yet stable middle-class world. Appealing though the new world of poverty in which she accidentally surfaces is, she is too indelibly marked by her previous life – she has the wrong accent, and, a major Orwell theme this, she is too obsessed with cleanliness – to be comfortable in it. The return to her old life is forced, and she returns with greater understanding, enriched by her experiences, but with now all possibility of escape closed, a fact of which she is sharply conscious. Although Dorothy's initial escape is involuntary, she is again a character corrupted, this time by upbringing, and it is this that ultimately drives her back to from where she came.¹²

Keep the Aspidistra Flying pursues similar themes. The hero (or, rather, in many sense the anti-hero, for Orwell's leading fictional characters are quite flawed beings, perhaps reflecting Orwell's real and evident discomfort at his own failings), Gordon Comstock, refuses the possibility of a job at the New Albion Publishing Co. writing advertising slogans for Q.T. Sauce and Truweet Breakfast Crisps, preferring to take the kind of miserable jobs that will keep him "free" and allow him to write. But the poverty he encounters in this way is far from liberating, as Comstock discovers¹³ and the drab daily struggle to make ends meet consumes all his creative energies. When his girlfriend becomes pregnant (and it is significant that in Orwell Comstock's downfall, or at least the end of his dream, happens at the hands of a woman¹⁴), Comstock is forced to embrace the world he has rejected, to marry and to take the advertising copy-writing job. Poverty too corrupts, as does conscious social self-seclusion. Comstock, trying to resist the monster that corrupts, is corrupted anyway, and is painlessly re-absorbed:

"[Comstock] was coming back to the fold, a repentant. He seemed to be walking faster than usual. There was a peculiar sensation, an actual physical sensation, in his heart, his limbs, all over him. What was it? Shame, misery, despair? Rage at being back in the clutch of money? Boredom when he thought of the deadly future? He dragged the sensation forth, faced it, examined it. It was relief."¹⁵

These three novels make for depressing reading. *Burmese Days* is the most illuminating politically, but the whole cycle (and Orwell's later works – *Coming Up for Air*, *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* – reflect a different kind of mind-set) has a pattern, which seems to me in turn to reflect Orwell's train of thought. Orwell is experimenting, not so much in literary form, but in life: he is looking for ways in which he can be true to his own sense of right and wrong, his own moral code, at the same time as fulfil his vocation to

write. His fictional characters in this period try to escape the social and moral parameters that they feel are being forced on them, and each, in his or her own way, fails. Escape is not an option. But it is *Orwell* that is following this path, only to find that it leads to a dead end; the conclusion that he seems to be coming to is that detachment, or exclusion, from reality is not tenable, at least not in the days in which he was living. One cannot sit outside the beast, and ignore it, for it will swallow you up anyway. One has to engage with one's world as it really is, for the alternative is defeat and despair (and even death). And it is impossible not to draw the conclusion that, in effect, what this was to mean for Orwell was that, as a writer, he had to engage in politics.¹⁶ It is not as though Orwell was disinterested in politics, for he was not; but he was not motivated in this way. Through the trilogy of novels of the early '30s, Orwell appears to cross some kind of Rubicon, and he comes out of the other end of this process a quite changed man. From this point Orwell becomes a "political" writer in the explicit sense of the word.

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Fortuitously, just as Orwell was being forced to accept that he would have to write politically in order to be able to write at all, an opportunity to do exactly this was presented to him. The publisher Victor Gollancz, one of the founders of the Left Book Club, who at the time held Orwell in high esteem, believing then that he had the making of great novelist in him, commissioned him to write a documentary account of unemployment and poverty among the working class of the north of England: what Gollancz had in mind was a "political", class-based version of *Down and Out in Paris and London* (the idea of the book was, in fact, Gollancz's, not Orwell's). Orwell jumped at the chance, and not only because he was desperately hard up, and the advance proffered, £500, was a considerable one for the time. He spent the first three months of 1936 in, successively, Manchester, Wigan, Liverpool, Wigan again, Sheffield and Barnsley; he stayed, thanks to a series of letters of introduction, with a number of ILP and Communist Party militants and sympathisers, and collected reams of material which he intended to work up into the book that was to be *The Road to Wigan Pier*.

The draft of the book (easily Orwell's most convincing work to this point), when it appeared at the end of that year, perplexed Gollancz. It was divided into two parts: the first, the straightforward reportage for which he had been asked: hard-hitting (if occasionally sentimental), often passionate and always angry. The second part, however – an extended essay on Orwell's then, nascent, conception of socialism – rankled.

Gollancz had wanted to make the book a Left Book Club choice, but the second part fitted ill among the ranks of bowdlerised “Marxism” the Club’s Communist Party and fellow-traveller writers were passing off as political theory. Gollancz proposed two editions: a small public run of the whole, and a larger Left Book Club printing of the first part. To his credit, Orwell refused; and the book was released as a Club choice with an extraordinary “special introduction” penned by Gollancz himself, in which he characterised the offending conclusion – with a certain amount of justice – as “eccentric” and “disputatious”.

What was Orwell’s argument, that had so offended? In a nutshell, Orwell says this. The situation in which practically everyone finds themselves in is clearly getting worse and not better; and the clear way out of this for all right-minded people would be socialism. In fact, this is so obvious that it is a wonder it has not been done already. The problem is that these right-minded people, who should be socialists, are put off socialism, and they are put off it by the very people who today call themselves socialists (and here Orwell is talking about – he says so in the text – the Communist Party and the ILP). These people, who idealise the “working class” and “industrial proletariat” are largely to man (and presumably to a woman too, though characteristically it would not cross Orwell’s mind to say this) not working class but middle class and upper class, living the lives of the middle and upper classes, and expounding fancy theories in a language that practically no normal person could or would care to understand. In short, they are “cranks”. They create, therefore, a political milieu which no right-minded person would want to be a part of: potential working class socialists would be as horrified at participating in this milieu as would the upper class radicals be at having them there. By the same token, idealising the industrial proletariat as they do alienates too aspiring middle class socialists: the English class-system – a “shadowy caste-system” – is so entrenched and impermeable that no right-minded middle-class person is going to throw in his lot with the working class if he is going to be forced to be like them. Fascism is coming; society is becoming increasingly polarised: who does not become a socialist is in all probability going to become a fascist. We either build a new, mass socialist party, starting again from first principles – and the first principles of socialism are “justice and common decency” – or we go under the fascist heel. And we build a new socialist party by convincing the increasingly impoverished middle classes that the working class is their friend: not that they have to become alike, but that they share the same interests. And then, but only then:

“Perhaps this misery of class-prejudice will fade away, and we of the sinking middle class – the

private schoolmaster, the half-starved free-lance journalist, the colonel’s spinster daughter with £75 a year, the jobless Cambridge graduate, the ship’s officer without a ship, the clerks, the civil servants, the commercial travellers, and the thrice-bankrupt drapers in the country towns – may sink without further struggles into the working class where we belong, and probably when we get there it will not be so dreadful as we feared, for, after all, we have nothing to lose but our aitches.”¹⁷

Now, this is a critical text in any assessment of Orwell’s politics: not only is it his first foray in print as a political theorist (and his first public declaration of socialism as such) but it abounds with ideas that not only resonate with themes addressed in his earlier writings but, as we shall see, that will resonate in his writings yet to come. For the moment, for we are anticipating these future developments, let us just note the following points.

The first is Orwell’s conception of class. There are three aspects we need to take note of. The first is that, for Orwell, class is not fundamentally determined by economic wealth; indeed, even more subtly, Orwell argues that class runs *against* differences of economic wealth, and that an undue focus on economic differences are misleading when it comes to class:

“The essential point about the English class-system is that it is not entirely explicable in terms of money. Roughly speaking it is a money-stratification, but it is also interpenetrated by a sort of shadowy caste-system; rather like a jerry-built modern bungalow haunted by medieval ghosts. Hence the fact that the upper-middle class extends or extended to incomes as low as £300 a year – to incomes, that is, much lower than those of merely middle-class people with no social pretensions. Probably there are countries where you can predict a man’s opinions from his income, but it is never quite safe to do so in England; you have always got to take his traditions into consideration as well. A naval officer and his grocer very likely have the same income, but they are not equivalent persons and they would only be on the same side in very large issues such as a war or a general strike – possibly not even then.”¹⁸

Class is the stuff of “opinions” and “traditions”, or, as he later explains it, a person’s class comprises his “tastes, his habits, his manners, his imaginative background – his ‘ideology’, in Communist jargon”.¹⁹ But there is no idea in Orwell’s thinking here of *how* these “ideologies” are formed: how is social consciousness related to social being? Of course, it is a little unfair to criticise Orwell for not developing a theory of class in Marxists terms: that would be like criticising a cat for not barking, for Orwell was not and never claimed to be a Marxist. But it is reasonable to criticise Orwell for not developing his ideas on how class is formed, of where it comes from, since it

does play such a central part in his analysis. For what Orwell is clearly arguing for is a strategic alliance between the increasingly impoverished middle-classes and the traditional, industrial, working class. Indeed, it is the existing left's very failure to do this that forms his central critique of it. (It is perhaps ironic that Orwell's analysis here should receive such opprobrium from the Communist Party, since it really does appear very much like a form of "popular front" strategy.) The absence of a "theory" of class in Orwell is no mere "theoretical" question, but a practical one. Of course, to some extent Orwell should be credited for raising the question in this way. The British intellectual left, and its Marxist component in particular, have never been shy of economism. The ideological element of class, indeed the whole matter of consciousness, was underplayed in Orwell's time (as it is too in ours) on the left. But noting that something exists is not the same as explaining it.

The second point we need to grasp is that, although class is an ideological construction, this does not mean that it in any sense lacks rigidity. It forms, in fact, in Orwell, an absolutely fixed, rigid and impermeable structure. Through class barriers one simply cannot pass:

"Whichever way you turn this curse of class-difference confronts you like a wall of stone. Or rather it is not so much like a stone wall as the plate-glass pane of an aquarium; it is so easy to pretend that it isn't there, and so impossible to get through it."²⁰

Here we see a repeat of the dilemma explored by Orwell in a *Clergyman's Daughter*: although Dorothy felt attracted to the warmth and solidarity she encountered in her new life following her loss of memory, she could not ever feel comfortable in it: the prejudices of class – practically congenital it seems in Orwell – were too strong to be overcome. That was the reason for, and meaning of, her ultimate defeat and re-assimilation (and consequent loss of hope). This is a clear reflection of the uneasiness Orwell felt in relation to his own class background:

"For some months I lived entirely in coal-miners' houses. I ate my meals with the family, I washed at the kitchen sink, I shared bedrooms with miners, drank beer with them, played darts with them, talked to them by the hour together. But though I was among them, and I hope and trust they did not find me a nuisance, I was not one of them, and they knew it even better than I did. However much you like them, however interesting you find their conversation, there is always that accursed itch of class-difference, like the pea under the princess's mattress. It is not a question of dislike or distaste, only of *difference*, but it is enough to make real intimacy impossible. Even with miners who described themselves as Communists I found that it needed tactful

manoeuvrings to prevent them from calling me 'sir'; and all of them, except in moments of great animation, softened their northern accents for my benefit. I liked them and hoped they liked me; but I went among them as a foreigner, and both of us were aware of it."²¹

The third point to be noted – and we shall pass over it for the moment – is that, as we have seen, Orwell is talking specifically about the *English* class-system. Other countries, he suggests, are not like this.

Now there is an important point to be made here. Class is ideological, and fixed; rigid and impermeable. This is surely the reason why in the first, descriptive, part of the book there is practically no reference made to socialist workers, even though Orwell in fact spent the best part of his time with ILP and Communist Party militants. But Orwell notes, in the second part, that "Socialism, in its developed form is a theory confined entirely to the middle classes".²² This is interesting: for Orwell, a socialist is therefore, by definition, middle class. Working class socialists are, by this logic, either not socialists or not working class. In part – another curious resonance from the novels of the early '30s – this is because of the way that the class system corrupts. The working-class scholarship boy, for example, on winning access to "high-brow" middle class society, is forced, for survival's sake, to strip himself of whatever values of decency and solidarity inculcated by his upbringing, but he is unable ever to assimilate himself fully to the values of the middle-class society to which he aspires to enter. The middle-class socialist, on the other hand, by embracing "working-class" values in the form of idealising the "proletariat", transforms himself into a hypocrite, and a crank. Class barriers may be impermeable, but, through a kind of attractive magnetism, they are no less destructive for that. Neither class can live in the company of those to whose values he aspires. This is the logic that underlies Orwell's proposed strategic alliance between the middle class and the working class: for the one needs the other. The middle class needs the working class to save it from fascism; the working class the middle for its socialism.

Whatever the merits or otherwise of Orwell's argument regarding the difficulty in ridding oneself of one's in-bred class prejudices, there is little doubt as to the difficulty Orwell was having ridding himself of his own. Here is Orwell's picture of ideal working class life:

"In a working-class home [...] you breathe a warm, decent, deeply human atmosphere which it is not so easy to find elsewhere. I should say that a manual worker, if he is in steady work and drawing good wages – an 'if' which gets bigger and bigger – has a better chance of being happy than an 'educated' man. [...] Especially on winter evenings after tea, when the fire glows in the open

range and dances mirrored in the steel fender, when Father, in shirt-sleeves, sits in the rocking chair at one side of the fire reading the racing finals, and Mother sits on the other with her sewing, and the children are happy with a pennorth of mint humbugs, and the dog lolls roasting himself on the rag mat – it is a good place to be in, provided that you can be not only in it but sufficiently *of* it to be taken for granted.”²³

It is noteworthy that Crick, in his useful if overrated work, should defend this passage on the grounds that to charge it with sentimentality is “irrelevant”.²⁴ But it is precisely this mawkish, sentimentalised view of working-class life that Orwell attacks in the socialists: heaven forbid that “Father” should be reading a classic of European literature, or a work of political theory, despite all the evidence we have of the importance of self-education for that layer of ILP and Communist Party militants radicalised in the 1920s and ’30s, and not only in the north of England (Orwell’s contacts in the north would have been well-read if self-educated men). And heaven forbid that “Mother” should be reading at all! But then, were this to be the case, they would, on Orwell’s logic, cease, independently of any other consideration, to be working class at all. Orwell’s conceptions have an awfully predictable sense of self-fulfilment about them.

Orwell deploys other arguments in support of his charge against organised socialism’s failure to build support for itself. Writ largest amongst them is that which arises from his romanticism and his hatred of what he calls “machine-worship”. The socialist project has become indelibly associated, he argues, with a mechanised future that could only mean, by the elimination of the need for his sensual faculties, the reduction of man to a “brain in a bottle”. The theme is an important one, for it is to form an element in Orwell’s later conceptions – although it is, of course, more a reflection of Orwell’s own obsessive predilections than of any real popular revulsion – but since it is a peripheral one at this stage, for the moment we shall let it pass.

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We are still anticipating ourselves here, for when *Wigan Pier* was published, in March of 1937, Orwell was already fighting in the POUM²⁵ militia in Aragón, having left for Barcelona shortly before Christmas. Why had he gone to Spain? There is insufficient evidence to determine what was uppermost in his mind – fighting or writing – but it is fair to say that he was probably of the opinion that he would end up doing both, and, since that is what he did, the point is a marginal one. Why had he ended up in the POUM and the not the Communists’ International Brigade? It is clear that this was a matter more of convenience than of

political conviction, at least at this point: Orwell’s contacts with the ILP were better developed than those with the Communist Party, especially after he had had a meeting with the British Communist Party’s General Secretary Harry Pollitt in which he had declared that he could not commit himself to joining the International Brigade until he had actually gone to Spain and seen the lie of the land for himself. Nevertheless, Orwell did not travel with the ILP contingent, but alone, some days before, stopping off in Paris on the way to meet Henry Miller, who told him he was a fool to go.

It is difficult to overstate the impression Barcelona at the beginning of 1937 made on Orwell. If, since his decision to leave the Indian Imperial Police nearly ten years earlier, he had been searching for a role, an ideology, a social milieu – passing through tramping, the honest reflections of the novels of the early ’30s, the excursion to the north for *Wigan Pier* – it appears as if in revolutionary Catalunya he had found what he was looking for. What Raymond Williams called “the wandering years”²⁶ were at an end: at last, it seems, he could be part of something, precisely by being sufficiently *of* it. “I have seen wonderful things”, he wrote to Cyril Connolly. “And at last really believe in socialism.”²⁷ From personal struggle, Orwell had passed to common cause.

The idyll was not to last, however. At the beginning of May, Orwell returned to Barcelona on leave, to be disappointed by the change in atmosphere compared with that on his arrival five months earlier. In place of the comradeship, solidarity and practical equality of earlier, now “things were returning to normal. The smart restaurants and hotels were full of rich people wolfing expensive meals, while for the working-class population food process had jumped enormously without any corresponding rise in wages”.²⁸ In addition, tension had been rising between the Communist and Government controlled forces and those of the POUM and the Anarchists. On 3 May tension turned into near civil war, as the celebrated telephone exchange incident sparked nearly a week of street fighting. Orwell, who had been more inclined to accept the Communist position on the war – limiting its aims to a simple military defeat of fascism for fear of sympathetic bourgeois forces, both in Spain and abroad, being put off by more radical demands – immediately knew, here, what he had to do: “The issue was clear enough. [...] I have no particular love for the idealised ‘worker’ as he appears in the bourgeois Communist’s mind, but when I see an actual flesh-and-blood worker in conflict with his natural enemy, the policeman, I do not have to ask myself whose side I am on.”²⁹ Orwell had previously requested to join the International Brigade, although motivated more by the fact that it was more efficient and better equipped than the POUM militias than by the existing political

differences, and had asked to be posted to Madrid, where he thought he would be of more military use. But the May events changed his mind: it was not so much the fighting itself that disgusted him, but the torrent of lies denouncing the POUM and the Anarchists as paid fascist agents of Franco. As he would note subsequently, he could not now join any Communist-controlled unit for fear that it might be used against the working class.

Thus on 10 May he returned, now as an acting lieutenant, to his POUM unit on the lines near Huesca; which is why, in the early dawn of 20 May he found himself standing on sentry duty (apparently entertaining his comrades with tales of his experiences in the Paris brothels of the late '20s), when a sniper's bullet caught him clean through the neck. Incredibly, he survived, saved by fortuitous trajectory and the fact that the shot had been fired from a relatively new, high-velocity rifle, leaving a clean, cauterised wound. Ironically, had he been shot by one of the dilapidated weapons he and his comrades had been forced to use, he would have died on the spot.

After treatment and convalescence in a POUM sanatorium, he returned to Barcelona, where he found that all hell had broken loose. The POUM had been declared illegal, and Poumistas and Anarchists were being rounded up – many to be tortured and/or summarily executed. Reasoning that it was unsafe to return to his billet, Orwell spent the next three nights sleeping rough in Barcelona, during which time he made strenuous and courageous, but ultimately unsuccessful, efforts to secure the release of several imprisoned comrades, among them the Belgian Georges Kopp, his commander in the line. Finally, after straightening out his papers as best he could, Orwell, Eileen, his wife, who was in Barcelona working as an assistant in the ILP office, and two fellow ILPers, Stafford Cottman and John McNair, boarded a train for France on 23 June and crossed the frontier without incident. They had had to leave a number of their comrades behind,³⁰ but they reasoned that it would be easier to help them from outside Spain, for, if they had remained, they too would find themselves under lock and key (or worse) in fairly short order. By the first week of July George and Eileen were back in England.

Despite the effects of his tribulations and his wound, he got down to writing as quickly as he could: *Homage to Catalonia*, his account of his time in Spain, and at the same time his uncompromising view on the nature of the political conflicts over the Spanish conflict, was to be published in April of the next year (though not this time, obviously, by Gollancz, but by Freddie Warburg, who was gaining a growing reputation as the “Trotskyist” publisher). It was not a success: Orwell's distinctive and critical views were strong enough to put off a good part of an already committed socialist readership, and too interecine to make the book

attractive to a more general public. It was to attain the classic status that it today holds only a good time after the Second World War.³¹

In March, however, Orwell had fallen ill, with a haemorrhaged lung: a serious business in 1938. He was forced to pass a short time in hospital, and a further six months in a sanatorium (and he was to spend, on medical advice, the following winter in Morocco). Nevertheless, in June he joined the ILP – the first (and last) time he was a member of a political party. In a short article in *The New Leader*, ‘Why I Join the ILP’ Orwell explained his reasons:

“It is vitally necessary that there should be in existence some body of people who can be depended upon, even in the face of persecution, not to compromise their Socialist principles. I believe that the ILP is the only party which, as a party, is likely to take the right line either against imperialist war or against Fascism when this appears in its British form.”³²

* * *

But it is here that we have come to a difficult and controversial point in our story. For if it is true that there is a “rupture” in Orwell's thought, a break in continuity between the revolutionary socialist of Spain and the British patriot of the Second World War, then it occurs here, between his return from Spain and the outbreak of war itself.

When Orwell came back from Spain he was, of course, not just a committed and self-proclaimed socialist, but clearly one of a firmly revolutionary stamp. In addition, he was in the process of nailing his colours to a particularly persecuted and minoritarian current within the socialist camp. In 1938, he joined the ILP. Throughout this year, and the best part of 1939, he not only argued that the idea that there was a fundamental difference of quality between the democracies and fascism was a fraud and denounced the coming war as “capitalist-imperialist”, but called for revolutionary measures to prevent it. He even went as far as to suggest the setting up of an underground political force to this end.

But in 1940 (i.e. after the outbreak of war) he was writing like this:

“The night before the Russo-German pact was announced I dreamed that the war had started. It was one of those dreams which, whatever Freudian inner meaning they may have, do sometimes reveal to you the real state of your feelings. It taught me two things, first, that I should be simply relieved when the long-dreaded war started, secondly, that I was patriotic at heart, would not sabotage or act against my own side, would support the war, would fight in it if possible. I came downstairs to find the newspaper announcing Ribbentrop's flight to Moscow. So war

was coming, and the Government, even the Chamberlain Government, was assured of my loyalty.”³³

And like this: “It is all very well to be ‘advanced’ or ‘enlightened’, to snigger at Colonel Blimp and proclaim your emancipation from all traditional loyalties, but a time comes when the sand of the desert is sodden red and what have I done for thee, England, my England? As I was brought up in this tradition myself I can recognise it under strange disguises, and also sympathise with it, for even at its stupidest and most sentimental it is a comelier thing than the shallow self-righteousness of the left-wing intelligentsia.”³⁴

What had happened? What had occurred in Orwell’s head too bring about this, to say the least dramatic, turnaround in his thinking?

It is necessary to reject a number of extant interpretations. The common left *vulgate* is that Orwell, appalled at the behaviour of what he was now unambiguously calling “Stalinism” in relation to Spain, had turned away from socialism altogether, and his reversion to patriotism was simply a reversion to type. This is just not backed up by Orwell’s actions in this period. He came back from Spain *more* committed to socialism than ever before, if vitriolic in his denunciations of “Stalinism”; he not only wrote *Homage to Catalonia* in this period but subsequently vigorously defended its analysis and conclusions. He was, in addition, as vigorous as illness would permit him in denouncing the coming war in clear revolutionary socialist terms. And, of course, he joined the first (and last) political party of his life, the ILP, stating his reasons explicitly in the terms we have seen above. If Orwell did become disillusioned with socialism *per se*, that was to come later, much later.

But we also have to reject Orwell’s own account of his conversion: the dream the night before the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact. It cannot have been like this. Orwell was not an instinctive thinker, an actor on impulse. He would think through a problem carefully, even obsessively: it would gnaw away at him and he at it, until he saw clearly the morally correct course of action, and then, with unusual (and admirable) courage, he would act on his carefully arrived at conviction come what may. If Orwell had made a decision that he would have to support the war it would have to be because he had thought the matter through carefully beforehand.

Once again, we can find important clues regarding Orwell’s general thinking through his fiction, which almost seems to have had the function, whether consciously intended or not, of giving him an opportunity of thinking out loud. While convalescing in Morocco Orwell had written his fourth novel, *Coming Up for Air*. It is nowadays customary to bracket this book along with the novels of the early ’30s, *Burmese Days*, *A Clergy-*

man’s Daughter and *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*. But this is unwarranted, for in *Coming Up* Orwell introduces new themes which, a result of his experiences and reflections, are absent from his earlier work. It is not so much that *Coming Up*, as is normally recognised, is a “better” book (although in many respects it is: Orwell writes with more finesse and confidence, and with a surer touch; yet this is hardly surprising for he is, naturally, now a more experienced and well-thought-of writer), but that the dilemmas Orwell poses for his central character are of quite a different order than in his earlier work. In the earlier novels, his characters are reactive – forced to deal with contradictions thrust upon them by circumstance: Flory, juggling his duties as a functionary of Empire with his loyalties to his Burmese friend; Dorothy Hare, the consequences of her breakdown with the unbearable weight of her upbringing; and Comstock, his hatred for the “money-god” and his desire for the freedom to write with the exigencies of daily life. These characters do not choose their torture: it is thrust upon them by their circumstances, and beyond their control (and they all are, in different ways, defeated by it). But in *Coming Up*, George (“Fatty”) Bowling has no such dilemmas, at least not until he looks for them himself. The central character is now *proactive*.

George is not motivated by the unbearable contradictions of moral uncertainty, but by boredom; his crisis not so much one of moral dilemma but existential *ennui*. He stops to reflect on his life, and he sees the new god that the middle class, him included, now kneels before:

“A queer sort of god. Among other things [...] bisexual. The top half would be a managing director and the bottom half would be a wife in the family way. In one hand it would carry an enormous key – the key to the workhouse [...] and in the other [...] a cornucopia out of which would be pouring portable radios, life-insurance policies, false teeth, aspirins, French letters, and concrete garden rollers.”³⁵

Disgusted, he casts his mind back to his pre-First World War childhood, idyllic by comparison. He decides to visit the scenes of youth, but, inevitably, they are unrecognisable. Stung by the realisation that the past, which he really values, no longer exists, and that the present offers nothing, he returns home to face the music from his (characteristically, for Orwell, perpetually nagging) wife. And for the first time, George is faced with a real dilemma:

“She’d found me guilty and now she was going to tell me what she thought of me. [...] Really there was no reason why this row shouldn’t go on till three in the morning. No use playing injured innocence any longer. All I wanted was the line of least resistance. And in my mind I ran over the three possibilities, which were:

“A. To tell her what I’d really been doing and somehow make her believe me.

B. To pull the old gag about losing my memory.

C. To let her go on thinking it was a woman, and take my medicine.

But, damn it! I knew which it would have to be.”³⁶

And thus ends the book, with the question – to the reader? – of which one it has to be open.

This is hardly the thought-process of a depressed and despairing Orwell, turning his back, through the betrayals of Stalinism, on socialism; *Coming Up for Air*, is, in fact, the most optimistic of his fiction by a considerable distance. Orwell is saying quite clearly that the future is ours to make if we want to: carrying on as normal is no longer possible; but neither is misty-eyed nostalgia for places past visited (even if in such places can be found the values necessary for an outline of the kind of future we need to build). This is Orwell at the peak of his political thinking: the youthful radicalisation begun in Burma is now truly flowering.

What I suggest is happening is this. The young Orwell was appalled by imperialism, not so much at the moral level (or least not yet), but by the mechanics of it. The inherent injustice of imperialism corrupts the imperialisers. Conscious of this, and not wanting to be corrupted, he gets out. But this knowledge, which is in part self-knowledge, creates for him a dilemma. He cannot be (or feels he cannot be) simply another within the given social group of his birth, because of this revulsion. He looks for another social milieu: among the down and outs; but that life, though he is accepted into it, is not a solution to his existential difficulties because the debilitating struggle for daily existence prevents him from being a conscious participant (which for Orwell means being a writer). He cannot be comfortably among the working class, whom he greatly admires (principally for their “decentness” – an important concept for Orwell – in other words, because they are not, or are less, corrupted by the system) because of the damage inflicted on him by his upbringing. Nevertheless, this overall experience leads him to the conclusion that the solution to this dilemma is not one of personal salvation – he breaks from “lifestylism” – but one of fighting for a better world: one in which decency can flourish, or, in other words, one in which the corrupting influences can be ameliorated. So he embraces socialism: for him, “justice” and “decency”.

But his socialism is at this stage both personal and abstract: it is the “obvious” “common-sense” solution to an inequitable world, but not, as yet, collective. In addition, he cannot see the existing socialist movement as embodying the kind of practice which can lead to an amelioration of “anti-decentness”. But nevertheless Orwell is a man of

action; he must follow his intellectual conclusions. He makes the decision to fight in Spain – for he sees the coming European fascist menace as the epitome of all that is opposed to decency – but it is a private decision. He goes as an outsider, but finds a world – a revelation! – in which he can participate as a *part* of it. But this personal idyll is quickly destroyed, ultimately by what he sees as the power-hungry self-interest of a totalitarian power (the Soviet Union), but at the same time a self-interest which is able to win the allegiance of exactly that left which he earlier despised for their hypocrisy. The left-wing intelligentsia, against whom Orwell rails so consistently, finds its natural ally in a power-hungry dictatorship because they are both equally corrupted (and corrupting). In addition, it cannot have been lost on Orwell that the solidarity he felt and of which he was able to be a part was created outside of England, and in a context of revolutionary civil war.

So his dilemma is this: how can we create a movement that embodies the essential elements of decency, which Orwell now knows can exist, outside of such extreme conditions and in England (as Orwell understands it)?³⁷ The key for Orwell seems to be to find native, English traditions of decency, if they exist, and mould a politics, to build a future, on these lines. Orwell’s association of the “modern” with corruption – writ large in the second part of *Wigan Pier* – is key here. He imagines, Rousseau-like, an image of rural innocence, which embody the values he aspires to, values betrayed by the modern, money-grabbing, commercialised and urban world which falsely speaks their name. Creating the world of decency and solidarity he lived in Spain in England must involve recreating this world of the past in the present. He constructs this politics around what he sees as the real, if partially lost, sense of English “decency” which he feels that ordinary people share (and ordinary, working class people, rather than the intelligentsia, for they have evaded, or been evaded by, the corruptions of the modern world to a greater degree) even if it has for them for the moment been betrayed. This is the content of his later patriotism: a reclamation of the values of Englishness inculcated into him as boy (Orwell recalls his pre-school childhood as a happy one) in the modern world; a renewal of Englishness in the present. And, fundamentally, for Orwell, this project is equivalent to socialism.

Nonetheless, Orwell’s opposition to war in 1938 and 39 was genuine enough; but it was not that he was reluctant to fight fascism, but that he saw the British ruling class as the harbingers of British fascism, and its own anti-fascism as insincere. War between incipient British fascism, and openly revealed German fascism, would be a mere internecine conflict: “What meaning would there be”, he was to write in 1939, “Even if it were successful, in bringing down Hitler’s system in

order to stabilise something that is far bigger and in its different way just as bad?"³⁸ For Orwell, anti-fascism meant not war against Nazi Germany "in defence of democracy" but social revolution at home. He was, in addition, at this time sure that the ordinary people would see this too.³⁹

Eileen was closer to the popular mood than he husband, of course, and war did come, without mass opposition. But Orwell's sudden conversion to the national cause was not the abrupt *volte face* it appears to be. For although it was clear to him that the war – i.e. the struggle against Hitler – had to be supported, he absolutely did not support it on a conventional basis. For Orwell after September 1939, like Orwell before, social revolution was the order of day (at last understood in terms of necessity). Not only would the war not be won without revolution; war would itself bring revolution to Britain:

"Only revolution can save England, that has been obvious for years, but now the revolution has started, and it may proceed quite quickly if only we can keep Hitler out. Within two years, maybe a year, if only we can hang on, we shall see changes that will surprise the idiots who have no foresight. I dare say the London gutters will have to run with blood. All right, let them, if it is necessary. But when the red militias are billeted in the Ritz I shall still feel that the England I was taught to love so long ago for such different reasons is somehow persisting."⁴⁰

It is clear that, from Orwell's point of view, what had really changed was the conjuncture, not his own basic position.

But the really striking, and revealing, sentence in this article is the one that refers to "the England I was taught to love so long ago" still "somehow persisting". For not only does Orwell see an essential continuity between his position pre and post September 1939, but, in addition, he now clearly couches this position in terms of "the England I was taught to love". And it is the search for, and the struggle for, this England that marks the fundamental continuity in Orwell's thought. What was this England? Or, more accurately, how did Orwell now see this England? In his essay 'The Lion and the Unicorn', written in 1941,⁴¹ he laid out his thinking on this very point with some precision. This essay is very important in the development of Orwell's thinking that the reader will forgive substantial citation.

England, suggests Orwell, is different:

"When you come back to England from any foreign country, you have immediately the sensation of breathing a different air. Even in the first few minutes dozens of small things conspire to give you this feeling. The beer is bitterer, the coins are heavier, the grass is greener, the advertisements are more blatant. [...] And the diversity of it, the chaos! The clatter of clogs in the Lancashire mill towns, the to-and-fro of the

lorries on the Great North Road, the queues outside the Labour Exchanges, the rattle of pin-tables in the Soho pubs, the old maids hiking to Holy Communion through the mists of the autumn morning [...]."

Thus far sufficiently sentimental to have been famously (and laughably) misquoted by John Major in his 1993 St George's Day speech. But let us allow Orwell to continue:

"But talk to foreigners, read foreign books or newspapers, and you are brought back to the same thought. Yes, there is something distinctive and recognisable in English civilisation. It is a culture as individual as that of Spain. It is somehow bound up with solid breakfasts and gloomy Sundays, smoky towns and winding roads, green fields and red pillar-boxes. It has a flavour of its own. Moreover it is continuous, it stretches into the future and the past, there is something in it that persists, as in a living creature. What can the England of 1940 have in common with the England of 1840? But then, what have you in common with the child of five whose photograph your mother keeps on the mantelpiece? Nothing, except that you happen to be the same person. [...]

"National characteristics are not easy to pin down, and when pinned down they often turn out to be trivialities or seem to have no connection with one another. [...] Nevertheless, nothing is causeless, and even the fact that Englishmen have bad teeth can tell something about the realities of English life.

"Here are a couple of generalisations about England that would be accepted by almost all observers. One is that the English are not gifted artistically. They are not as musical as the Germans or Italians, painting and sculpture have never flourished in England as they have in France. Another is that, as Europeans go, the English are not intellectual. They have a horror of abstract thought, they feel no need for any philosophy or systematic 'world-view'. [...]

"[There is] another English characteristic which is so much a part of us that we barely notice it, and that is the addiction to hobbies and spare-time occupations, the *privateness* of English life. We are a nation of flower-lovers, but also a nation of stamp-collectors, pigeon-fanciers, amateur carpenters, coupon-snippers, darts-players, crossword-puzzle fans. All the culture that is most truly native centres round things which even when they are communal are not official [...]. The liberty of the individual is still believed in, almost as in the nineteenth century. But this has nothing to do with economic liberty, the right to exploit others for profit. It is the liberty to have a home of your own, to do what you like in your spare time, to choose your own amusements instead of having them chosen for you from above. The most hateful of all names in an English ear is Nosey

Parker. It is obvious, of course, that even this purely private liberty is a lost cause. Like all other modern people, the English are in process of being numbered, labelled, conscripted, 'co-ordinated'. But the pull of their impulses is in the other direction, and the kind of regimentation that can be imposed on them will be modified in consequence. No party rallies, no Youth Movements, no coloured shirts, no Jew-baiting or "spontaneous" demonstrations. No Gestapo either, in all probability.

"[...] The gentleness of the English civilisation is perhaps its most marked characteristic. You notice it the instant you set foot on English soil. It is a land where the bus conductors are good-tempered and the policemen carry no revolvers. In no country inhabited by white men is it easier to shove people off the pavement. And with this goes something that is always written off by European observers as "decadence" or hypocrisy, the English hatred of war and militarism. It is rooted deep in history, and it is strong in the lower-middle class as well as the working class. [...] The mass of the people are without military knowledge or tradition, and their attitude towards war is invariably defensive. No politician could rise to power by promising them conquests or military "glory", no Hymn of Hate has ever made any appeal to them. In the last war the songs which the soldiers made up and sang of their own accord were not vengeful but humorous and mock-defeatist. The only enemy they ever named was the sergeant-major.

"[...] The reason why the English anti-militarism disgusts foreign observers is that it ignores the existence of the British Empire. It looks like sheer hypocrisy. After all, the English have absorbed a quarter of the earth and held on to it by means of a huge navy. How dare they then turn round and say that war is wicked?

"It is quite true that the English are hypocritical about their Empire. In the working class this hypocrisy takes the form of not knowing that the Empire exists. But their dislike of standing armies is a perfectly sound instinct. A navy employs comparatively few people, and it is an external weapon which cannot affect home politics directly. Military dictatorships exist everywhere, but there is no such thing as a naval dictatorship. What English people of nearly all classes loathe from the bottom of their hearts is the swaggering officer type, the jingle of spurs and the crash of boots. Decades before Hitler was ever heard of, the word 'Prussian' had much the same significance in England as 'Nazi' has today. So deep does this feeling go that for a hundred years past the officers of the British army, in peace time, have always worn civilian clothes when off duty. [...]

"Here one comes upon an all-important English trait: the respect for constitutionalism and

legality, the belief in "the law" as something above the State and above the individual, something which is cruel and stupid, of course, but at any rate *incorruptible*.

"It is not that anyone imagines the law to be just. Everyone knows that there is one law for the rich and another for the poor. But no one accepts the implications of this, everyone takes it for granted that the law, such as it is, will be respected, and feels a sense of outrage when it is not. Remarks like 'They can't run me in; I haven't done anything wrong', or 'They can't do that; it's against the law', are part of the atmosphere of England. [...]

"In England such concepts as justice, liberty and objective truth are still believed in. They may be illusions, but they are very powerful illusions. The belief in them influences conduct, national life is different because of them. In proof of which, look about you. Where are the rubber truncheons, where is the castor oil? The sword is still in the scabbard, and while it stays there corruption cannot go beyond a certain point. The English electoral system, for instance, is an all but open fraud. In a dozen obvious ways it is gerrymandered in the interest of the moneyed class. But until some deep change has occurred in the public mind, it cannot become *completely* corrupt. You do not arrive at the polling booth to find men with revolvers telling you which way to vote, nor are the votes miscounted, nor is there any direct bribery."

But something is rotten in the state of England. England is "a family, a rather stuffy Victorian family, with not many black sheep in it but with all its cupboards bursting with skeletons. [...]. It is a family in which the young are generally thwarted and most of the power is in the hands of irresponsible uncles and bedridden aunts".

And, later, "England is a family with the wrong members in control. Almost entirely we are governed by the rich, and by people who step into positions of command by right of birth. Few if any of these people are consciously treacherous, some of them are not even fools, but as a class they are quite incapable of leading us to victory".

There is only one realistic solution: "It is only by revolution that the native genius of the English people can be set free. Revolution does not mean red flags and street fighting, it means a fundamental shift of power."

Orwell then introduces a programme of measures, around which he proposes to transform the war into a "revolutionary war", which include the nationalisation of land, mines, railways, banks and major industries; the limitation of incomes; educational reform ("along democratic lines"); and "immediate Dominion status for India, with power to secede when the war is over".

And Orwell concludes like this: "There is no question of stopping short, striking a compromise,

salvaging 'democracy', standing still. Nothing ever stands still. We must add to our heritage or lose it, we must grow greater or grow less, we must go forward or backward. I believe in England, and I believe that we shall go forward."⁴²

The message of this extraordinarily powerful essay is clear. Orwell's revolution, a socialist revolution, may be a revolution against the English ruling class, but not a revolution against England as such; it is a revolution for England: for the England held back by its own ruling class, who have usurped and betrayed the "English genius".

Orwell outlines the characteristics of this "English genius" in some detail, and he does so in such terms of mawkish sentimentality that it is easy to dismiss his account as mere whimsy. This would be a mistake. To what extent can we say that his picture is a false one? He notes, of course, that illusions are no less powerful for being illusions; and the whole here is indeed greater than the sum of the parts. The whole, the English national character, as Orwell outlines it and understands it, is indeed fictional, through being illusory, even though, and herein lies its power, it is widely believed to be true even to this day; but it is equally true that a number of its constituent parts find their reflection in truth, in real history and real historical processes, or, at the very least, in their interpretation.

It is worth summarising then in synthetic form the major outline of Orwell's description.

First, he recognises the existence of national character as a general concept: England is different because its "national characteristics" are different, and even though such characteristics may appear trivial they are real, tangible facts, with historical bases. Second, that the distinguishing features of English national character (at least those that were uppermost in his mind as he wrote) are: a lack of a capacity for abstract thought (reflected in an absence of an artistic tradition as much as in a theoretical-philosophical heritage), the predominance of "private life" (what others might call "civil society") and a tradition of respect for the law and constitutionality, and an absence of militarism.

The third aspect of Orwell's picture is that this character, this sum of national characteristics, is a timeless and millennial one, stretching as it does into the past as much as into the future.

There are several points to be made about this. First, we need to recognise the real historical origins of the separate characteristics. Take the question of the famous "English empiricism": the English people's supposed reluctance to engage in "abstract thought". With whatever earnestness and by whomever the idea is propounded, this is, in fact, a case of self-delusion on a grand scale. The contributions of English and British thinkers to the human repositories of philosophy, politics,

economics, science and so forth are too numerous too even begin to go into, and too obvious for any seriousness to be attached to the idea that the English really do have "a horror of abstract thought". Nevertheless, the idea is widely held to be true, both by the left and the right, both within Britain and without. But it is so not because it really is so, but because the British political machine, for reasons of legitimisation and integrity, wants it to be believed to be so. Two great historical facts – that the modern monarchical state in England, and then Britain, was established on the basis of its own counter-revolution, and that, one century later, it was cast into the international leadership of the alliance against the French revolution – left their mark on that political machine's public *Weltanschauung*. In both historical periods, anti-theoreticism – in other words, not meddling with tradition – was necessarily lauded as much in theory as it was ignored in practice for reasons of simple historical contingency.

The weight of the private over the public in English life is surely a consequence of this fact. The state built up in the British Isles over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries following, in Tom Nairn's words, the seventeenth-century "victory of one absolutism over another",⁴³ was a colossus that enjoyed the ability to impose its will on its subalterns through hegemony and clientage rather than threat and force: what other countries did through bureaucracy and rules the British state – the only modern great European state founded in this way unambiguously on counterrevolution – through patronage, gentlemen's agreements and "muddling through". Hardly a reflection of "genius", however; more a product of the conspicuous display of, largely sheathed, but nonetheless real, wealth and power.

This *modus operandi* finds its reflection in English-British civil life in general: in the predominance of private custom over state regulation, of personal networks over government bureaucracy; in the vagaries of English common law, even in the system of parliamentary representation itself (and, let us recall, that even up until relatively recently the upper chamber of the British legislature was filled, in this, the "mother of democracies",⁴⁴ through patronage, gentlemen's agreements and accident of birth). The features of Englishness that Orwell outlines are truly tangible realities, far from myth, with concrete roots in real history. But, if we understand "national characteristics" like this, then they cease to be truly "national characteristics". This is not national character, but national *history*. It is not that England is like this because this is how the English people are, but rather the reverse. The fact is that the English "national character" is the sum of the ideological con-

structions contingent upon national construction, rather than being the rock on which England is built. What Orwell cannot see here is the very *historical contingency* of this construction.

A concrete example. Orwell notes the absence of militarism in public life, even a popular abhorrence of it. This is again undoubtedly true; Orwell even points us in the general direction of the historical reason for this absence: "A navy employs comparatively few people, and it is an external weapon which cannot affect home politics directly. Military dictatorships exist everywhere, but there is no such thing as a naval dictatorship." But it seems incredible that Orwell cannot take the next step and see that the reason for the predominance of the navy in the British military structure. It is of course not the case that the British have such a big navy because there is something in their national character that attracts them to boats. The navy precisely predominates because of the historical and geographical configuration of the British Empire.⁴⁵

And there is a further aspect to this problem. Orwell clearly sees English national characteristics as virtues, and virtues moreover that are being betrayed by the current English set-up. These values are being precisely subverted by "the wrong family members". But this is again all backwards. These features of English social and political life are the result of counter-revolutionary defeats. They predominate because the radical wing of the seventeenth-century English revolution was defeated (as its equivalent was not, for example, a century later in France); because of the deliberate crushing of any incipient indigenous English radicalism under the Hanoverians (and whatever else might be said of Hanoverian England, it was most certainly neither "decent" nor "gentle"); because of the integration of the whole of British society into the carnival of reaction that was the florescence of the British empire in Victorian Britain.⁴⁶ It is not that the English cling to the millennial values of decency, gentleness and respect for constitutionalism despite the wrong family members being in control, but that these values persist, despite the best intentions of incipient English-British radicalism, precisely *because* of who is in control. The England that is England is so because it was forged by the white heat of counter-revolution: any victorious socialism in Britain will be made against this history, not with it. Orwell sees contradiction where there is none; and rupture where there is continuity.

There is a further objection to be made to Orwell's account. The image of the wrong family members in control, of the "irresponsible uncles and bedridden aunts", superannuated and incompetent, is an attractive one, and seems to bear witness even to the most banal observations of the peculiarities of British public life: monarchy,

the honours system, the public schools, the particularly British parliamentary rigmarole and mumbo-jumbo, and absurd ceremonies such as the trooping of the colour, the state opening of parliament, royal investitures and weddings, and so on. But it misses a crucial point. These "irresponsible uncles and bedridden aunts" not only built the most powerfully hegemonic domestic state system of power in human history, but oversaw the industrial revolution (which unleashed the modern capitalist mode of production on an unsuspecting world) and built the empire of greater geographical reach and economic power hitherto seen at that time. In terms of what they were able to achieve, rather than conforming to their image of pre-modern relics the "irresponsible uncles and bedridden aunts" in fact appear to us as the *archetype* of modernisation. And all this they did, of course, in the name of England and civilising Englishness. And Orwell proposes sweeping all this away: in the cause of socialism, true, but not the classical "socialism" of Marxist stamp but the socialism of "justice and common decency", the socialism of the "English genius". The argument is self-contradictory, and, in the end, simply does not hold up.

* * *

Orwell, however, thus guided, and ever the man of action, did his utmost to participate in the war effort. Determined to fight, but quite unable, due to the now desperate state of his lungs, to get the necessary medical clearance, he served in the Home Guard; indeed, he was to agitate forcefully for the transformation of the Home Guard into a genuine people's militia (a quite logical consequence of his political thinking). In addition, in 1941, under the rubric of "essential war work", he found a job at the BBC, producing, and later presenting, programmes (a bitter irony this!) for the BBC's news propaganda service to India.⁴⁷

But he must have felt an intrinsic disappointment as the war progressed.⁴⁸ For Orwell believed not only that war would bring revolution to Britain, but also that without revolution it could not be won. Both sides of this proposition proved themselves to be mistaken. And it is a curious fact that English concerns rather fell away from his preoccupations during the war (and its aftermath), at least in terms of politics. The bulk of his output (which continued to be prodigious) that did deal with Britain, whether through the now over-lauded 'As I Please' column in *Tribune* (whose literary editorship Orwell was to take up at the end of 1943), or elsewhere, tended largely to degenerate into whimsy: how to make a good cup of tea, the perfect pub, the tradition of "saucy" English seaside postcards. 'The Lion and the Unicorn' had led Orwell up rather a blind alley, and he began to be concerned with matters further

away.

When he left the BBC for *Tribune*, Orwell began work on his fifth novel (that should really be “novel”, for the book, which emerged as *Animal Farm*, took the form of a bitterly satirical and allegorical fantasy). We can say that with this book Orwell had reached the peak of his literary powers. He too was – unusually for him, for he drove himself ridiculously hard and was normally unscathing in self-criticism – of that view: “*Animal Farm* was the first book in which I tried, with full consciousness of what I was doing, to fuse political purpose and artistic purpose into one whole.”⁴⁹ If the commonly made comparison with Swift has any value at all (and it does seem a little forced to me), then it has it here.

And once again, we can see that the book was not the product of some sudden revelation, but of a problem that Orwell had been gnawing away at, or, perhaps, more properly, that had been gnawing away at him, for several years, as Orwell was himself to acknowledge in 1947 (which would have been when he was already writing *Nineteen Eighty-Four*):

“[...] for the past ten years I have been convinced that the destruction of the Soviet myth was essential if we wanted a revival of the Socialist movement. On my return from Spain I thought of exposing the Soviet myth in a story that could be easily understood by almost anyone and which could be easily translated into other languages.”⁵⁰

The plot of the book, subtitled by Orwell “A Fairy Story”, is well known. There is a revolution on Mr Jones’ farm: the drunken master is ousted and the animals take over its collective running. At first, all is paradise, justice, equality and progress. But the revolution is usurped by the pigs, who, by virtue of their superior intelligence, begin to show the same lust for power and privilege as the ousted humans: “We pigs are brainworkers. The whole management and organisation of the farm depend on us. Day and night, we are watching over your welfare. It is for *your* sake that we drink that milk and eat those apples.” The egalitarian credo of the revolution is amended to “All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others.”⁵¹ Finally, neighbouring farmers are invited by the pigs, who have become virtually indistinguishable from their old human masters, to admire what has been done. That the book was an allegorical account of (Orwell’s view of) the course of the Russian Revolution is both intentional and obvious. In fact, although Orwell finished it in early 1944, it was not published until after the war’s end, principally because of the embarrassment it was felt it would cause to Britain and the United States’ principal ally at the time against Nazi Germany, the Soviet Union.

Now even though the work is a work of genuine literary merit, a number of political

difficulties arise in relation both to Orwell’s fable and his way of telling it. A curious aspect of the book – obviously necessary given the form of allegory that Orwell had chosen to work with – is the way that the different social strata are represented by different types of animals: pigs, dogs, sheep, and so on. But this device makes it impossible for Orwell to account for how the revolution degenerated in the first place.⁵² The pigs are the elite because they are more intelligent; they are more intelligent because they are pigs; and a sheep cannot be a pig. (Even the transmutation of the pigs into men at the book’s close is limited, for the point is, and herein lies the tragic element of the tale, that the pigs are reduced to *imitating* men; they cannot, as the reader well knows, really *become* men). Two points arise from this defect. First, since social differentiation understood in this way is fixed, the degeneration of the revolution appears inevitable. Second, we have the curious resonance with Orwell’s earlier writings on class, for, if we recall the second half of *Wigan Pier*, central to Orwell’s argument was the fact that class was precisely immutable. The fascination of the book lies in this contradiction: that there had been a revolution gives us hope; but the way in which its degeneration is presented as logically inevitable immediately snatches this hope away from us.

Of course, Orwell was also to write, in his 1944 essay on Arthur Koestler, that:

“Perhaps some degree of suffering is ineradicable from human life, perhaps the choice before man is always a choice of evils, perhaps even the aim of Socialism is not to make the world perfect but to make it better. All revolutions are failures, but they are not all the same failure.”⁵³

Significantly, Orwell is criticising Koestler’s pessimism: for saying, in effect, that, since all revolutions are doomed to failure from the outset (because, for Koestler, that has been the historical experience from Spartacus to Lenin), that (in Orwell’s words) “There is nothing for it except to be a ‘Short-term pessimist’, i.e. to keep out of politics, make a sort of oasis within which you and your friends can remain sane, and hope that somehow things will be better in a hundred years.” But Orwell comes to exactly the same conclusion; or, at least, that conclusion is really the only tenable reading we can make of *Animal Farm*.

We have seen that Orwell used his fiction to develop an idea, to think out loud; to pursue a proposition to its logical conclusions as he wrestled with a moral dilemma. And the real dilemma that Orwell seems to be exploring here is that, although revolution is necessary, it is bound to end, in some sense, betraying its original ideals. But there is a crucial difference between Orwell’s exploration of moral conundrum now compared with ten years earlier. Exploring the possibilities open to John Flory, Dorothy Hare and Gordon Comstock led

him *out* of a moral abyss, first into the rather abstract moral socialism of *Wigan Pier* and the unambiguously revolutionary socialism of *Homage to Catalonia*. The difficulty here is that Orwell's worrying in *Animal Farm* did not lead to such a happy closure; for it led his most pessimistic and bleakest work of all: to *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

* * *

Published in the summer of 1949, although it seems that he was already working on what was to become *Nineteen Eighty-Four* since at least late 1943, if there is one work of Orwell's which has clouded the debate as to where he really stood politically it is this one. Set in an England, now called Airstrip One, of the not too distant future, it depicts a world which has been split up into three competing power blocs (shades of Teheran and Yalta). England is one-party state of clear "Stalinist" (as Orwell would understand the word) vintage. Its central character, Winston Smith (a significant name: a combination of everyman and a resonance of a heroic past) is a worker in the Ministry of Truth, where he works rewriting old records of the past to make them conform to present realities. Smith is a member of the ruling Party; the party's ideology is INGSOC – English Socialism.

But Smith rebels. He keeps a diary, which is strictly forbidden. He falls in love (or is it lust?) and embarks on an illicit affair. He tries, encouraged by O'Brien, whom he believes to be a critical member of the central party apparatus, to contact the Brotherhood – an illegal opposition, whose leader, Emmanuel Goldstein, is a cross between Trotsky and Andreu Nin, and whose analysis of what has happened is outlined in Goldstein's (we are told) book *The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism*, a detail betraying the influence on Orwell of James Burnham. But O'Brien turns out not to be a critical member of the Party, but part of a sting operation: Smith and Julia, his lover, are arrested. Smith is tortured, under the strain of which he not only breaks down and confesses everything, even betraying Julia, but is mentally so broken that he is reduced to allowing himself to be willingly co-opted back into the machine he had tried to break from (shades of the fantastic confessions of the Moscow show trials).

Bleak indeed. If in *Animal Farm* Orwell gave us hope (the revolution) and betrayal in equal measure, in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* he just gives us betrayal. Such indeed was the reaction to the book – and its commercial success was considerable, comfortably outstripping even that of *Animal Farm*⁵⁴ – that Orwell was to release a public statement, dictated from his hospital bed to Warburg, clarifying his views:

"It has been suggested by some of the reviewers of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* that it is the

author's view that this, or something like this, is what will happen inside the next forty years in the Western World. This is not correct. [...] The moral to be drawn [...] is a simple one: *Don't let it happen. It depends on you.*"⁵⁵

And in a letter written shortly after publication, Orwell wrote: "My recent novel is NOT intended as an attack on Socialism. [...] I do not believe that the kind of society I describe necessarily *will* arrive, but I believe (allowing for the fact of course that the book is a satire) that something resembling it *could* arrive."⁵⁶

Now, whatever else may be said about Orwell's work, one of its defining characteristics is a ruthless intellectual honesty (an admirable and frequently all too rare quality). Once Orwell had made up his mind about something, be his view popular or not, he was courageous enough to stick to his convictions and follow them through to their logical conclusions. This is why, I think, that for Orwell's defenders on the left these statements regarding the political intent of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* are taken as sufficient evidence that the book *cannot* be interpreted as a general attack on socialism, whatever those who want it to be so might say. Orwell said so, so that is how it must be. Sadly, here, the argument simply does not stand up; it is, in fact, an example of the kind of dogmatic thinking that Orwell himself regarded as anathema. If we read *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as a work of "political" literature it cannot be read in the way that Orwell would subsequently have us read it; it cannot be taken simply as an account of *one* possible and contingent future for it is an inspection of something quite fundamental about human beings in general. As Raymond Williams once put it:

"It is profoundly offensive to state as a general truth, as Orwell does [in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*], that people will always betray each other. If human beings are like that, what could be the meaning of a democratic socialism? [...] [*Nineteen Eighty-Four's*] projections of ugliness and hatred, often quite arbitrarily and inconsequentially, onto the difficulties of revolution or political change, seem to introduce a period of really decadent bourgeois writing in which the whole status of human beings is reduced."⁵⁷

Orwell's subsequent statements, and the political message of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, are, in other words, simply incompatible. Isaac Deutscher: "*Nineteen Eighty-Four* is a document of dark disillusionment not only with Stalinism but with every form and shade of socialism."⁵⁸ As a warning, the book "defeats itself because of its underlying boundless despair".⁵⁹

It is often said that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is the bleak book that it is because of Orwell's physical condition: that it is the last, despairing cry of pain from a dying man. True, Orwell was grievously ill when he wrote the book; but the explanation

is inadequate. Orwell did not believe he would shortly die, although he was coming to accept that, on his recovery, he would have to lead the life of a chronic invalid. However, Orwell's condition could well explain the book's technical defects; and they are many. The characterisation is especially weak and wooden, even by Orwell's standards; the narrative is unevenly, even erratically, paced; the depiction of the social structure of Airstrip One so crude that it brings to mind Orwell's own comment of 1936 that seeing the account of the class structure of Britain being put forward by an "orthodox Communist [...] is like watching someone carve a roast duck with a chopper";⁶⁰ and the material extraneous to the narrative – the excerpts from Goldstein's book, the account of Newspeak – clumsily incorporated into the main body of the text. It would be fair to say that the book's final version was at least one full redraft away from completion.⁶¹ In fact, the draft which was in the end published – the second – was typed up, despite his illness, and through necessity, by Orwell himself. He had tried hard to find a professional typist to do the work – the first draft was so heavily annotated with amendments and revisions that the job could only have been undertaken, if not by the author himself, by someone skilled at the work, and even then under supervision – but the labour shortage of the time (and the not irrelevant fact that Orwell was then living on a Hebridean island) meant that no-one suitable could be found. The physical exertion of typing the draft brought Orwell to a point of physical collapse from which he was not to recover. Had Orwell not been so ill, or had a professional stenographer been found, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* might well have turned out technically superior, if not politically more optimistic, than it did.

But is the reading of the book as a work despairing of socialism the only one open to us? Might it not have been that Orwell was mulling over matters more existential and personal, as it seemed that he had done in his earlier novels? For could not Winston Smith, who starts the narrative as a functionary of the oppressive apparatus, who grows critical of it and is then broken by it and reabsorbed into it, be a cipher for Orwell himself; who too had begun his intellectual journey as a critical functionary of an oppressive machine, had broken from it, and fought against it, but who had had his hopes – as outlined in 'The Lion and the Unicorn' – dashed, and who now found himself a relatively respected pillar of that very establishment – the left intelligentsia – that he so despised? Could not Orwell be reflecting on his own position as the now respected writer, and, since the publication of *Animal Farm*, one now free from the financial insecurity that had dogged him for nearly two decades: Orwell the BBC producer, literary editor of *Tribune*, and cor-

respondent for the London *Observer*? Smith is, of course – significantly for this reading – a writer. Might he not, under different circumstances, have been a creative writer, or, as Orwell had aspired to be, a poet even?

In the novel, Smith's downfall comes from the fact that he places his trust in O'Brien, whom he believes to be a sympathetic member of the inner-party apparatus; but O'Brien's confidence turns out to have been simply a trap. Could there not be another message here? For in the novel, of course, if there is hope, Smith tells us, it lies in the "proles". Could not Orwell, writing just after the mid-point of the post-Second World War Labour Government – and if 1945 had presaged a revolution of sorts, by the time Orwell was concluding *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, with the Government already beginning to renege, do we not here too have a "revolution betrayed"? – be saying to us: "Don't trust the elite, the apparatus, for change, for it will betray you. Look down, look to the 'proles' for your salvation"?⁶²

Nevertheless, all this must remain speculation: we can, of course, never know if *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was just another step in Orwell's thinking through of a moral and existential dilemma, or if it really was a definitive statement of political position, for, on 21 January 1950, barely six months after the book's publication, Orwell, now confined to a bed in University College Hospital, London, suffered a further, and this time fatal, haemorrhage of the lung. He was but 46 years old.⁶³

* * *

It strikes me that there are a number of different, if related, approaches to Orwell's thought to be avoided when it comes to formulating an account of his legacy.

The first is attempting to claim him for this or that political viewpoint. The fight to claim Orwell either for the right or for the left, or for this or that current within the right or the left, is a pointless exercise, one that soon degenerates into yes-he-was-no-he-wasn't: there is simply too much inconclusive and contradictory material in Orwell's writings for any side to claim him unambiguously as their own without either distorting his views or ignoring a good part of them. More productive rather is to look into the contradictions in his thinking; to ask ourselves why he thought what he did: where he was wrong and why, and where he was right and why.

Thus we need to resist the temptation to cherry-pick: to play up what is seen as positive in his thought and effectively relegate what is not liked to insignificance. This is the standard method for the revolutionary left (though it is, for obvious reasons, the method of choice for the cold-war and neo-liberal right as well). For the left, this means

effectively reducing Orwell to Spain (and frequently, which is worse, reducing Spain to Orwell). Here, everything Orwell did before Spain is seen as a kind of “preparation”, and everything after is either premised on his time in Spain, or has nothing to do with it. This approach displays itself in pristine form within, for example, the British Socialist Workers Party (who have over the years developed Stalinophobia into something of an art form) and its franchise international, but is also practised by the greater part of self-proclaimed Trotskyism and its offshoots.

As a mirror-image to this method is that which can only see bad in Orwell: to see, for example, Spain as an aberration, and to focus exclusively of the naked anti-socialism of *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. In its hardest form (coming from people I am trying desperately hard not to call “Stalinists”) Orwell is simply a no-good petty-bourgeois dilettante who simply reverted to type (and Spain here is simple grist to the mill).

None of these approaches will do; each requires a degree of intellectual dishonesty which would have rightly embarrassed Orwell. In all these approaches, any serious assessment of Orwell’s most mature and developed political statement is lost. I have cited ‘The Lion and the Unicorn’ at length, and commented on it in some detail, not only because it is central to Orwell’s thought, though it is, but precisely also because his concerns resonate so strongly with how the left has subsequently tried to come to grips with the configuration of British history and its consequences for political action.

An example. In 1963 Perry Anderson wrote the essay ‘Origins of the Present Crisis’, in which he tried to account for British historical development in terms which resonate strikingly with Orwell. Anderson argued that, since the heart of the seventeenth-century English revolution was a conflict not between antagonistic social classes, “bourgeois” and “feudal”, but between different segments of the same rural and land-owning class, although from the standpoint of a “capitalist revolution” the English Revolution can be judged in its results to have been “supremely successful”, at the same time “it left almost the entire [pre-revolutionary] social structure intact”.⁶⁴ For Anderson, therefore, the modern English-British state acquired at birth something of a pre-modern, non-bourgeois character, the effects of which were to find their continuing expression in the distinctive economic and political make-up of British society. Anderson’s essay kick-started a debate on the left whose repercussions still reverberate; the idea that what is distinctive about British society is *backwardness* is an idea that has sat ill even within left circles. It can only surprise that Orwell’s clear anticipation of the central conception of Anderson’s argument (“the wrong family members in control”) is a fact so

infrequently commented on.

Among Anderson’s detractors, the most distinguished was of course E.P. Thompson.⁶⁵ Most important in the arguments Thompson deployed against Anderson’s thesis was that which suggested that for Anderson to characterise the English elite as in some way encumbered by the remains of feudal society was to be ensnared by superficial appearances over real content: rural and landholding this elite may have been (at least in good part) but this did not make it either pre- or non- capitalist. Indeed, one of the determinants of the seventeenth-century English revolution for Thompson was precisely the anterior process of *capitalist* development – of the production and exchange of commodities – not least of all in capitalist agriculture. So far so good. But the tone in which Thompson developed his counter-argument is a curious one. We saw that in Orwell’s account of the “English genius” English characteristics are not just seen as English but in themselves virtuous: there is an inescapable suggestion in Orwell that English exceptionalism is in some sense also English superiority. And this is an idea that resonates in Thompson too; indeed, the very sarcastic tone of his response indicates the degree to which his cultural nationalism had been piqued:

“‘And other countries,’ said Mr Podsnap remorsefully, ‘They do how?’ ‘They do’, returned Messrs Anderson and Nairn severely: ‘They do – we are sorry to be obliged to say it – in Every Respect Better. Their Bourgeois Revolutions have been more Mature. Their Class Struggles have been Sanguinary and Unequivocal. Their Intelligentsia has been Autonomous and Integrated Vertically. Their Morphology has been Typologically Concrete. Their Proletariat has been Hegemonic.’”⁶⁶

That these two sides in argument – Anderson subsequently pleaded guilty to a certain youthful “national nihilism”;⁶⁷ while a good deal of Thompson’s writings contain an ill-concealed and sometimes ugly proud Englishness – simply makes it more curious still that in Orwell we find anticipations of both outlooks. Unanswered questions, indeed.

Logically, of course, this line of thinking leads us to a broader conundrum: how does, or better, how should, the left orientate to national consciousness and national being, both in the English-British case, and generally? From Thompson and Anderson (and Nairn) we see two alternative approaches: a kind of politico-cultural nationalism, and national nihilism respectively (both present in Orwell). There is of course a third option, rather common on the British left: ignoring the question altogether. Nationalism is a “bourgeois” idea and national consciousness “false” consciousness. This is nothing more than simplistic economism, reminiscent of the child with

its eyes closed who thinks that because it cannot see it cannot be seen. Clearly, none of this is adequate. While it is certainly the case that undue pride in what makes Britain British misunderstands the very counter-revolutionary nature of the British national project, on the other hand it is equally the case that nobody ever built anything telling people to deny their own nationality.

While it is to Orwell's credit that he makes us think about these problems, we do not find solutions to them, at least not adequate ones, in his work. The difficulty is that in Orwell English-British nationalism is received uncritically, and if the British people want to be socialist *and* proud of the Britishness the latter has to be founded *against* the tradition of counter-revolution and empire, not with it.

No: if the British are to be proud of their Britishness, and the English of their Englishness, this pride must be focused on the positive and the concrete, not on reaction and oppression, nor on millennial sentimentality. Rather than on seventeenth-century counter-revolutionary restoration, on the Black Acts, on world-wide imperial plunder, "the national pride of the British" needs to focus itself on democratic and revolutionary currents: on the seventeenth-century Levellers and Diggers, on Tom Paine and British Jacobinism, on the mass Chartist movement, on revolutionary syndicalism, on Scottish Jacobinism and the United Scotsmen, on the Scotch Cattle and Rebecca in Wales, not uncritically, and without complacency, but with a positive spirit of the contribution of the British working class and popular movements for a better world.⁶⁸ Is it in this direction that Orwell wants to move in 1941, but he cannot yet see it?⁶⁹ I like to think so, but we can never really know.

To return to Thompson and Anderson. In 'Peculiarities' Thompson deployed a secondary argument, this time more theoretical, for he blamed Anderson's misjudgement of British history on a degree of anthropomorphisation of class:

"Class is not this or that part of the machine, but the way the machine works [...]. Class is a social and cultural formation (often finding institutional expression) which cannot be defined abstractly [...]. When we think of a class we are thinking of a very loosely defined body of people who share the same categories of interests, social experiences, traditions and value-system, who have a disposition to behave as a class [...]."⁷⁰

Again we find a strong anticipation of this idea in Orwell, when, in *Wigan Pier*, he emphasises that class comprises a person's "tastes, [...] habits, [...] manners, [...] imaginative background [...] [and] 'ideology'", a conception that Orwell clearly continues with in his early Second World War writings. The difficulty is a central one: what both Orwell and Thompson are pointing to is the

problem of the relation between class existence and class consciousness (or ideology). Both clearly see the vulgar-Marxist account of social being mediating social consciousness mechanically and without mediations as inadequate. Indeed, the strategy that Orwell proposes in *Wigan Pier* of an alliance between the working class and the more impoverished sections of the middle classes is based precisely on *overcoming* the disjuncture between social being and social consciousness, between those sections of the middle classes' class consciousness, which sets them apart from the working class, and their economic position, which they share in common. That consciousness can hold people back from seeing their "true" class instincts is a problematic that has been returned to within debates on the left time and time over, and poses the general question (which neither Orwell nor Thompson seemed theoretically equipped to answer) of how class consciousness really *is* determined. Again, we see in Orwell an anticipation of future difficulties on the left. That the left cannot see the necessity of engagement with the core ideas in Orwell's *political* thinking reflects poorly on the former.

* * *

I have tried to argue more or less that what we can see in Orwell's thought from the early 1930s up to the early stages of the Second World War is a continuous process of thinking and working out, in which each conclusion is based on the one before, each new position being added as a layer, so to speak, on the previous ones. In examining this process Orwell's fiction is just as important as his other work in helping us understand his thinking.⁷¹ This process of working out led him to the positions most clearly adumbrated in 'The Lion and the Unicorn': but it seems to me that this line of thought turned out to be a dead end, something he was growing conscious of at the end of his life.

The position that Orwell arrived at in 'The Lion and the Unicorn' – and it is worth stressing again that this essay marks the end point of a long and complicated intellectual process – was essentially that the working class and the poor were the repository of the positive values of Englishness that the upper classes, and the degenerate intelligentsia, had betrayed. The political project posed by this was the building of a political movement – either out of or against the existing left – which would draw together the working class and the "middle classes" on the basis of these values. This for Orwell had a clear revolutionary dynamic, since what this posed was the unseating of the "wrong family members". (Precisely what was to replace them however was never for him absolutely clear.)

Not only was this project not realised, it is

clear, I think, that is not realisable (and above I have argued why this should be). For Orwell, the logic of his position at the outset of the War meant that defeating fascism was impossible without revolution, but also that the struggle against fascism would itself inevitably lead to revolution. He was wrong on both counts, and he was wrong because of his misjudgements over English-British history, and what the values of English decency he so admired really represented. How conscious he really was of this is simply unknowable: the favourable reading I have suggested of his later work suggests that he *was* conscious of it, and was rethinking;⁷² the unfavourable reading generally favoured on the left and the right really has him giving up. But we can never really know.

So if Orwell is worth talking about it is principally because of the mature political position he had reached by 1941; and I argue that it is worth talking about this for the questions Orwell raises are still unanswered on the left today. The great strength of Orwell's thinking in this period is his exceptional sensitivity to Englishness; but this sensitivity, unmediated, was also its own weakness. Whether through fault of his own, or the failure of the then existing left, Orwell had not been able to accumulate the theoretical apparatus to interrogate the phenomena he was so sensitive to.

For appearances, as we know, can be deceptive. It is said that the philosopher Wittgenstein once asked of a colleague how it could be that people thought that the Earth went around the sun, rather than seeing that it was the Earth that was revolving. The answer came back, as one would expect: "Because that is how it looks." "Yes", said Wittgenstein, "But how would it look if it looked as if the Earth was revolving?"

Appearances can indeed be deceptive, but not necessarily because they are false: the deception can lie not in the appearance, but in our perception of it. "All science would be superfluous if the form of appearance of things directly coincided with their essence."⁷³ Orwell was, of course, no Marxist; and believing – falsely – that the English have a "horror of abstract thought", he transposed that horror onto himself. Isaac Deutscher perceptively outlined what this effectively meant:

"[...] Orwell had never been a Marxist [...]. From instinct rather than consciousness he had been a staunch rationalist. The distinction between the Marxist and the rationalist is of some importance. Contrary to an opinion widespread in Anglo-Saxon countries, Marxism is not at all rationalist in its philosophy: it does not assume that human beings, are, as a rule, guided by rational motives and that they can be argued into socialism by reason. Marx himself begins *Das Kapital* with the elaborate philosophical and historical enquiry into [...] "fetishistic" modes of thought and behaviour. [...] But the authentic

Marxist may claim to be mentally better prepared than the rationalist for the manifestations of irrationality in human affairs. He may feel upset or mortified by them, but he need not feel shaken in his *Weltanschauung*, while the rationalist is lost and helpless when the irrationality of the human existence suddenly stares him in the face. If he clings to his rationalism, reality eludes him. If he pursues reality and tries to grasp it, he must part with his rationalism."⁷⁴

I earlier emphasised that one great feature of Orwell's character was its uncompromising honesty: where Orwell thought he was right he would stick to his guns come what may. This is rationalism to the fore. But this quality can have its downside: an unwarranted stubbornness can lead to a refusal to succumb to the intrusions of reality. It is again to Orwell's credit that he did not fall into this trap: he was unfailingly, and refreshingly, non-dogmatic as a thinker (indeed, if anything irritated him most it was precisely dogmatic thinking on the left). But here, when we focus on his strengths, we see his weakness. His own "horror of abstract thought" meant that he was unable to penetrate beneath the surface appearances of the phenomena to which he was so receptive, to interrogate theoretically the essence of things (indeed, it is a fair bet that the very suggestion of the necessity of such a procedure would have sent him into a paroxysm of virtuous outrage).

He was a man normal and sensible enough to aspire to a world in which people could be nice to each other, and intelligent enough to realise – and, importantly, honest enough to say clearly – that blood, possibly a good deal of blood, would have to be spilt to get there. But his conclusions led him to the "English genius", and the salient irony is that that the closest he ever got to it was in a POUM trench in Aragón. And the reason for this is that the very configuration of his (self-imposed) *Weltanschauung* (a word, characteristically, that he hated) meant that he was consistently able to pose the right questions, and consistently incapable of answering them.

But perhaps we ought not be too hard on him; for we too, so far, have proved ourselves not much better in this regard either.

Notes

1. 'The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte', *Surveys from Exile* (Harmondsworth, 1973), p.147.
2. *The Fontana History of Germany 1780-1918* (London, 1997), p.xiii.
3. The relationship between "England" and "Britain" here is not a simple one. For the moment, let it suffice to observe that in the configuration of *British* national sensibilities it is axiomatic that they are really *English*. It is for this reason that

the Welsh and the Scottish, insofar as they are not English, can never be truly *British*. The proof of this particular pudding can be seen most sharply amongst the “settler-British”: the Unionists of the north of Ireland, for example, or the Gibraltarians or the Malvinas Islanders.

4. The Independent Labour Party was founded in 1893, and played a central role in the formation of the Labour Representation Committee in 1900, and then the Labour Party itself in 1906. Following the experience of the second Labour government of 1929-31, in 1932 the ILP disaffiliated from the Party.

5. Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters: Interviews with New Left Review* (London, 1979), p.388.

6. *The Road to Wigan Pier* (Harmondsworth, 1978), pp.126, 129-30. (Unfortunately, because of circumstances, it has not always been possible to cite Orwell with reference to standard print editions of his works: frequently I have had to make use of on-line editions, and occasionally to citations in other works.)

7. <<http://whitewolf.newcastle.edu.au/words/authors/O/OrwellGeorge/prose/BurmeseDays/chapter2.html>>.

8. And it corrupts both the oppressor and the oppressed. When Flory remarks in the novel that: “How can you make out that we are in this country for any purpose except to steal? It’s so simple. The official holds the Burman down while the businessman goes through his pockets” (*Burmese Days*, <<http://whitewolf.newcastle.edu.au/words/authors/O/OrwellGeorge/prose/BurmeseDays/chapter3.html>>) he is arguing not with a British defender of Empire, but a *Burmese* one, Dr Veraswami. Orwell describes their relationship like this:

“This argument, vaguely political in nature, took place as often as the two men met. It was a topsy-turvy affair, for the Englishman was bitterly anti-English and the Indian fanatically loyal. Dr Veraswami had a passionate admiration for the English, which a thousand snubs from Englishmen had not shaken. He would maintain with positive eagerness that he, as an Indian, belonged to an inferior and degenerate race. His faith in British justice was so great that even when, at the jail, he had to superintend a flogging or a hanging, and would come home with his black face faded grey and dose himself with whisky, his zeal did not falter. Flory’s seditious opinions shocked him, but they also gave him a certain shuddering pleasure, such as a pious believer will take in hearing the Lord’s Prayer repeated backwards.” (Ibid.)

And in an little-known article written for the Parisian journal *Le Progrès Civique* in 1929 – the closest thing we have to a contemporary account of his crisis of conscience – Orwell commented: “It should be remembered that the Burmese are simple

peasants, busy working on their land. they have not yet reached the intellectual level necessary for nationalistic activity. Their village is their world, and inasmuch as they are left to till their fields, they don’t care too much whether their rulers are black or white ... [...] They ... find themselves placed under the protection of a despotism which offers them protection [...] Their relation to the British Empire is that of slave to master. Is the master good or bad? That is not the point: enough to state that his authority is despotic and [...] self-interested.” (Cited in Bernard Crick, *George Orwell: A Life* (Harmondsworth, 1992), pp.174-5 (unbracketed ellipses in original).

One of the results of this relationship is the sepoys like Veraswami; better for Orwell for the Burmese were they to be simply left alone to find their own way to “civilisation”.

9. <http://orwell.ru/library/articles/elephant/english/e_eleph.htm>.

10. *Orwell* (London, 1971), pp.18-9.

11. *Down and Out in Paris and London* (Harmondsworth, 1978), pp.112-3.

12. Interestingly, there is a small sub-theme in the middle of the book, which reinforces the general message. As Dorothy surfaces from her down and out life, she takes a job as a school teacher in a small private school, where she is confronted by bored and demoralised charges. She revolutionises the curriculum, replacing drilling and learning by rote with exciting and different projects. The children are overjoyed by this, and respond accordingly; but the parents, appalled at these far from traditional methods, complain. Economic needs being what they are, Dorothy is forced to abandon her new methods and revert to traditional type, inflicting as much torment on herself in the process as on her pupils.

13. Regardless of Orwell’s much-repeated observation in *Down and Out* of the relief, almost liberation, of absolute poverty, that once you sink as low as it is possible to sink there is no longer any fear of sinking further. In *Aspidistra* we learn that this liberation from fear also requires the death of creativity; it is, in another sense, giving up. Perhaps Orwell is learning that moral turpitude is worse than material deprivation, or, perhaps, that fulfilment of the latter does not necessarily lead to avoidance of the former: as we shall see, once Comstock re-enters the world he has rejected, it is *precisely* “relief” that he feels.

14. It would be irresponsible in a review of Orwell’s politics the length of this one to say nothing of his attitude towards women, even if here it can only be in passing. Orwell was married twice: his first marriage, to Eileen O’Shaughnessy, was not idyllic (which ever is?) but it was, be all accounts, an equal partnership, in which Eileen could give as good as she got both domestically and intellectually; his second, to Sonia Brownell, was made on his deathbed, and was as such short-lived

(it is good, incidentally, to see that the record in relation to Sonia, who has been on the receiving end of a vilification verging on the vicious, has been if not put straight then at least straighter by Hilary Spurling's *The Girl from the Fiction Department: A Portrait of Sonia Orwell* (Harmondsworth, 2002)). But in general, it seems as if women were fonder of Orwell than Orwell was of them. He once opined that Conrad had to be a good writer because women disliked reading him so. In his fiction, if Orwell could be unkind to his male characters, to his female ones he could be unkind still, to a degree that suggests a certain misogyny. In part, this attitude can be explained (if not justified) by Orwell's generation, in part by his class background, and in part by his experiences in the kind of "public" (i.e. private) schools in which that curious male *esprit de corps* is inculcated into, if not beaten into, the male offspring of the better off.

15. <http://orwell.ru/library/novels/Keep_the_Aspidistra_Flying/english/ektaf_2>.

16. This dilemma is reflected in a late (1947) essay, 'Why I Write': "In a peaceful age I might have written ornate or merely descriptive books, and might have remained almost unaware of my political loyalties. As it is I have been forced into becoming a sort of pamphleteer." <http://orwell.ru/library/essays/wiw/english/e_wiw>.

17. *The Road to Wigan Pier* (Harmondsworth, 1978), p.204.

18. *Ibid.*, p.107.

19. *Ibid.*, pp.118-9.

20. *Ibid.*, p.137.

21. *Ibid.*, pp.136-7.

22. *Ibid.*, p.152.

23. *Ibid.*, p.104.

24. *George Orwell: A Life*, p.288.

25. The POUM (Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista – Unified Marxist Workers Party) was formed in September 1935 when the then main Spanish Trotskyist organisation fused with a dissident group from the Spanish Communist Party. For an historical analysis of the POUM, see Andy Durgan's 'The Spanish Trotskyists and the Foundation of the POUM' at <<http://www.marxists.org/history/etol/document/poum/>>.

26. *Orwell*, p.56.

27. Cited in *George Orwell: A Life*, p.323.

28. *Homage to Catalonia* (Harmondsworth, 1989), p.93.

29. *Ibid.*, p.104.

30. Of the ILP contingent in Spain, which in any case only amounted to some 25 volunteers (there had been more who had wanted to go once the ILP had decided to send volunteers to Spain in November 1936 but the party decided to send only unmarried men; and immediately after the departure of this contingent, the British Government declared such activity illegal, and the ILP declined to organise further delegations) plus

Orwell, Bob Smillie, grandson of the pioneer Scottish socialist Robert Smillie, who had been in Barcelona working as one of the ILP representatives, and a Welsh ILPer, Bob Williams, who was living in Spain and who was married to a Spaniard, all, as far as it can be determined, escaped, except Smillie, who died under interrogation after his arrest. The ILP men, along with an Australian and an American, formed the POUM's English-speaking contingent as part of the *centuria* commanded by Georges Kopp. It was Kopp's release which Orwell tried his hardest to secure in the there days he spent sleeping rough in Barcelona.

Kopp was one of the truly heroic figures to emerge from the history of the Spanish war, and merits further mention. A Belgian socialist, and a former army officer, he had organised the procurement of arms from Belgium from the outbreak of the war. After the signing of the Non-Intervention Pact, he was forced to leave Belgium (he was sentenced to 15 years in prison in his absence) and turned up in Spain, where, again for reasons more of convenience than of political commitment, he joined the POUM militia rather than the International Brigade, quickly rising, because of his military experience, to be head of a POUM *centuria* (a unit of around 80 men). When Orwell, Eileen, McNair and Cottman left for France they believed Kopp to be dead; they were wrong. After seventeen months in a cell, Kopp was unexpectedly released; but, once a big man, now seven stones lighter than he was on his arrest. After making his way to Britain, and establishing contact with Orwell and with the ILP, he was looked after nursed back to health by Eileen's brother (who was a doctor) and sister-in-law. When the Second World War broke out, Kopp went to France and joined the French army. In June 1940 he was wounded and captured, but managed to escape and joined the Resistance. In Marseilles he worked for British Naval Intelligence before being evacuated in September 1943, the Gestapo hot on his tail. He was to spend his last years as a hill farmer in Scotland after marrying the sister of Orwell's own sister-in-law (thus becoming something of a distant relative). His health ruined, he died in 1951 at the age of 49. (For an overview of the foreign contingents of the POUM, see Andy Durgan's 'International Volunteers in the POUM Militias' on the Fundación Andreu Nin website (<<http://www.fundanin.org/durgan1.htm>>); for more on Kopp, see Don Bateman, 'Georges Kopp and the POUM Militia', *Revolutionary History*, 1991, vol.4, nos.1-2.)

31. It is interesting to note here that Orwell, even in this, his most "internationalist" period politically speaking, could still not resist a nostalgic paeon to England ("his" England). This is how he describes his return from Spain: "And

then England – southern England, probably the sleekest landscape in the world. [...]. The industrial towns were far away, a smudge of smoke and misery hidden by the curve of the earth's surface. Down here it was still the England I had known in my childhood: the railway-cuttings smothered in wild flowers, the deep meadows where the great shining horses browse and meditate, the slow-moving streams bordered by willows, the green bosoms of the elms, the larkspurs in the cottage gardens; and then the huge peaceful wilderness of outer London, the barges on the miry river, the familiar streets, the posters telling of cricket matches and Royal weddings, the men in bowler hats, the pigeons in Trafalgar Square, the red buses, the blue policemen [...].” Ibid., pp.186-7.

32. Cited in *George Orwell: A Life*, pp.364-5.

33. ‘My Country Right or Left’, <http://orwell.ru/library/articles/My_Country/e/e_mcrol.htm>.

34. Review of Malcolm Muggeridge’s *The Thirties*, cited in Williams, *Orwell*, p.64.

35. *Coming Up for Air*, <http://orwell.ru/library/novels/Coming_up_for_Air/e/0200031.txt>.

36. Ibid.

37. Nevertheless, we should note that there is some evidence that on his arrival back from Spain Orwell tried to evade the problem: that he wanted to carry on ‘wandering’. According to Crick (*George Orwell: A Life*, 354-7) we learn that he was seriously considering taking a newspaper job in India. This particular project – and Orwell was sufficiently serious about taking it on that there were communications between his prospective employer and the British security services as to his suitability (some of his work was already banned in India) – was cut short by his illness.

38. ‘Not Counting Niggers’ <http://orwell.ru/library/articles/niggers/e/e_ncn.htm>.

39. Crick cites Eileen, who was somewhat more sceptical (or less naïve), writing to her sister-in-law: “Eric [i.e. Orwell], who retains an extraordinary political sympathy in spite of everything, wants to hear what he calls the voice of the people. He thinks this might stop a war, but I’m sure the voice would only say it didn’t want a war but of course would have to fight it [...].” (*George Orwell: A Life*, p.372.)

40. ‘My Country Right or Left’, <http://orwell.ru/library/articles/My_Country/e/e_mcrol.htm>.

41. The essay was Orwell’s contribution to the project of a series of pamphlets to be printed under the title of “Searchlight Books” set up by himself, his friend Tosco Fyvel, Fred Warburg and the exiled German historian Sebastian Haffner. The aim of the project was publicly stated like his: “We cannot defeat Germany unless we have first freed ourselves from our own weaknesses. It is the aim of Searchlight Books to do all in their power to criticise and kill what is rotten in Western Civilisation and supply constructive ideas for the difficult period ahead of us.” (*George Orwell: A Life*,

p.402.)

42. ‘The Lion And The Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius’, <<http://orwell.ru/library/essays/lion/index.htm>>.

43. *The Enchanted Glass: Britain and Its Monarchy* (London, 1988), p.164.

44. Itself really a myth whose persistence, given that universal “adult” (i.e. over 21) suffrage was not achieved in Britain until 1949 surprises.

45. “The underpinning of British conquest consisted, above all, of naval power. Land armies were traditionally small (by continental standards) and often dispersed across the globe in a variety of minor conflicts. Hence, though the sum total of such military action was great it made little impact on metropolitan society. [...] The dominant empire could send its pirates anywhere, yet remain immune from militarism at home; its bourgeoisie would fight six wars at once without questioning its deeply civil ideology, or doubting that wealth was a merit awarded from God.” Tom Nairn, ‘Britain’s Living Legacy, in Stuart Hall and Martin Jacques (eds.), *The Politics of Thatcherism* (London, 1983), p.282.

46. “The reason for the extraordinarily formative influence of this period is that in it the exhausted quiescence of the class struggle coincided with the maximum florescence of British society in the world outside. [...] In this unique conjuncture, the British economic revolution was carried outwards successfully while a social counter-revolution triumphed at its heart.” Tom Nairn, ‘The Fateful Meridian’, *New Left Review* 60 (March-April 1970), p.5.

47. Orwell’s position on Indian independence was a curious one given his own personal history. In a fine essay (‘Not Counting Niggers’) written in 1939 (significantly before the outbreak of war) Orwell could write: ‘It is not in Hitler’s power, for instance, to make a penny an hour a normal industrial wage; it is perfectly normal in India, and we are at great pains to keep it so. [...] What meaning would there be, even if it were successful, in bringing down Hitler’s system in order to stabilise something that is far bigger and in its different way just as bad?’ Yet even here he could not bring himself to call for independence, merely “to right imperial injustice”. (<http://orwell.ru/library/articles/niggers/e/e_ncn.htm>) And in ‘the Lion and the Unicorn’, as we have seen, he was to call for “the power to secede”, but only when “the war is over”; while in 1949 he could write: “Gandhi [...] did not understand the nature of totalitarianism and saw everything in terms of his own struggle against the British government. [...] It is difficult to see how Gandhi’s methods could be applied in a country where opponents of the regime disappear in the middle of the night and are never heard of again. [...] Is there a Gandhi in Russia at this moment? And if there is, what is he accomplishing?” (‘Reflections on Gandhi’, <http://orwell.ru/library/essays/reflections_on_gandhi/index.htm>.)

/orwell.ru/library/reviews/gandhi/e/e_gandhi.htm>.) It is not easy to escape the suspicion that for Orwell “to right imperial injustice” would be the task not of the Indians but of the English; once, of course, the “right” family members had been put back in control.

48. As evidenced by the January 1943 ‘Letter from London’ he contributed to the trotskyoid United States journal *Partisan Review*: “Well, that crisis is over and the forces of reaction have won hands down. Churchill is firm in the saddle again, Cripps has flung away his chances, no other left-wing leader or movement has appeared, and what is more important, it is hard to see how any revolutionary situation can recur till the western end of the war is finished.” (Cited in Claus B. Storgaard, ‘George Orwell: socialist, anarkist eller hvad...?’, <<http://members.tripod.com/wintermute10/cbs.htm>>.)

49. Cited in *George Orwell: A Life*, p.450.

50. Preface to the Ukrainian edition of *Animal Farm*, <http://orwell.ru/library/novels/Animal_Farm/english/epfc_go>.

51. *Animal Farm*, <http://orwell.ru/library/novels/Animal_Farm/english/eaf_go>.

52. A point emphasised by Paul Flowers: see <<http://archives.econ.utah.edu/archives/marxism/2002w48/msg00112.htm>>.

53. ‘Arthur Koestler’, <http://orwell.ru/library/reviews/koestler/e/e_ak.htm>.

54. Of course, commercial success is no automatic signal of artistic merit; often quite the opposite: “A work a great literary merit is usually too rich in its texture and too subtle in thought and form to lend itself to adventitious exploitation.” (Isaac Deutscher, “1984” – The Mysticism of Cruelty’, *Marxism, Wars and Revolutions: Essays from Four Decades* (London, 1984), p.60.) Indeed the phenomenal success of the book since its publication – many people around the world will only know of Orwell because of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* – has precisely been a consequence of political context: “The cold-war has created a ‘social demand’ for such an ideological weapon, just as it creates the demand for physical super-weapons.” (Ibid., p.60.) On this matter, Raymond Williams too makes an important point: to have had the effect that it had, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* “had to be written by an ex-socialist. It also had to be someone who shared the general discouragement of the generation: an ex-socialist who had become an enthusiast for capitalism would not have had the same effect”. (*Politics and Letters*, p.390.) It is difficult here to resist a comparison with one of Orwell’s recent chroniclers, Christopher Hitchens (*Why Orwell Matters* [New York, 2002]), doyen of the “neo-cons”, of whom a very similar point could be made. A figure of solid “non-Stalinist” left vintage, his recent conversion to the role of cheerleader for United States imperialism’s recent adventure in Iraq has the considerable weight and

effect that it does precisely for these reasons: that it comes from an ex-socialist, who too can be seen to share the “general discouragement” of his generation.

55. *George Orwell: A Life*, pp.565-6.

56. Ibid., p.56.

57. *Politics and Letters*, pp.390, 390-1.

58. ‘The Mysticism of Cruelty’, p.66.

59. Ibid., p.70.

60. *George Orwell: A Life*, p.305.

61. An additional reason to question Crick’s ridiculously exaggerated comparison of the book with Hobbes’ *Leviathan* (*George Orwell: A Life*, pp.25, 570); in fact, in the postscript to this, the third, edition, Crick withdraws: *ibid.*, pp.603-4).

62. Crick notes that even by early 1947 Orwell was bitterly criticising the government: concretely for not having immediately abolished the House of Lords, the public schools and the honours system (*George Orwell: A Life*, p.519).

63. The timing of Orwell’s death was especially tragic. At the end he was receiving the then revolutionary new treatment for tuberculosis, Streptomycin, and it was having a dramatically positive effect on his condition. But the drug’s side-effects, as sometimes happened, were so severe that its administration had to be suspended. Had Orwell lived just another year the technical expertise would have been in place to counter these side-effects. With this in mind, therefore, we can probably say with some certainty that it was the physical effort of typing up that second draft of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* that in the end killed him.

64. Perry Anderson, ‘Origins of the Present Crisis’, *New Left Review* 23 (January-February 1964), pp.28-30. Anderson’s basic thesis was supported, with modifications, by his erstwhile collaborator, Tom Nairn.

65. ‘The Peculiarities of the English’, originally *Socialist Register*, 1965, reprinted in E.P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (London, 1978).

66. ‘Peculiarities of the English’, p.37. Mr Podsnap is a character in Dickens’ *Our Mutual Friend*, an exemplar of British philistinism. Dickens has the original Podsnap opine: “We Englishmen are Very Proud of our Constitution, Sir. It was Bestowed Upon Us By Providence. No Other Country is so Favoured as This Country.” For Thompson, Anderson and Nairn are just inverted Podsnaps.

67. See the (1992) Foreword to the collection of his writings *English Questions* (London, 1992), pp.4-5.

68. There is a precedent for this within the Russian revolutionary movement. A certain Vladimir Lenin, in a short article written at the end of 1914 (i.e. when Russia was already participating in a war which the Bolsheviks opposed) not normally of the left’s “quote list”, commented:

“Is a sense of national pride alien to us, Great-Russian class-conscious proletarians? Certainly

not! We love our language and our country, and we are doing our very utmost to raise her toiling masses (i.e., nine-tenths of her population) to the level of a democratic and socialist consciousness. To us it is most painful to see and feel the outrages, the oppression and the humiliation our fair country suffers at the hands of the tsar's butchers, the nobles and the capitalists. [...] We are full of national pride because the Great-Russian nation, too, has created a revolutionary class, because it, too, has proved capable of providing mankind with great models of the struggle for freedom and socialism, and not only with great pogroms, rows of gallows, dungeons, great famines and great servility to priests, tsars, landowners and capitalists." ('On the National Pride of the Great Russians', *Collected Works*, vol.21, pp.103-4.)

69. In January 1946, Orwell wrote an article, 'What is Socialism?', for the *Manchester Evening News*, in which he wrote: "If one studied the genealogy of the ideas for which writers like Koestler and Silone stand, one would find it leading back through Utopian dreamers like William Morris and the mystical democrats like Walt Whitman, through Rousseau, through the English Diggers, through the peasant revolts of the Middle Ages [...]. The pamphlets of Gerrard Winstanley, the Digger from Wigan, whose experiment in primitive Communism was crushed by Cromwell, are in some way strangely close to Left Wing literature. The 'earthly paradise' has never been realised, but as an idea it never seems to perish [...]. Underneath it lies the belief that human nature is fairly decent to start with, and is capable of indefinite development. This belief has been the main driving force of the

Socialist movement [...]" (Cited in *George Orwell: A Life*, p.507.) All we can say is that this conception of "human nature" is completely incompatible with the bleak pessimism of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*; at the very least we can say that the latter idea was not the only one in his mind at this time (even if it is also true that we cannot say much more than this.)

70. 'Peculiarities of the English', p.85; a clear recapitulation of the argument of his classic *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth, 1968), pp.9-10, 213.

71. An important point made by Raymond Williams: "Orwell's writing in the '30s can be conventionally divided into the 'documentary' and 'factual' work on the one hand, and the 'fictional' and 'imaginative' work on the other. [...] Yet nothing is clearer, as we look into the work as a whole, that this conventional division is secondary. [...] Literature used not to be divided in these external ways. The rigid distinction between 'documentary' and 'imaginative' writing is a product of the nineteenth century, and most widely distributed in our own time. Its basis is a naïve definition of the 'real world', and then a naïve separation of it from the observation and imagination of men." (*Orwell*, p.41.)

72. And perhaps it is significant that he left specific instructions from his death-bed that he did not favour the future republication of, amongst other works, 'The Lion and the Unicorn' (and its 1944 recapitulation, 'The British People').

73. Karl Marx, *Capital* vol.3 (Harmondsworth, 1981), p.956.

74. 'The Mysticism of Cruelty', pp.67-8.

DISSIDENT MARXISM

PAST VOICES FOR PRESENT TIMES

by David Renton

The past years have witnessed the birth of a new politics – anti-capitalist, libertarian and anti-war. Its advocates reject the single-issue politics of the 1980s and 1990s, preferring to see the system as a totality, a world ripe for revolutionary change. But where do today's dissidents come from? David Renton argues that the roots of today's anti-capitalist movement can be found in the life and work of an earlier generation of socialist revolutionaries who shared a commitment to socialism from below: the Soviet poet Mayakovsky, the Marxist philosopher Karl Korsch, historians Edward Thompson and Dona Torr, Georges Henein, Paul Baran, Paul Sweezy, Walter Rodney, Samir Amin and others. He explores their lives and thinking, and asks if the new anti-capitalist movement may give birth to another such left-wing generation.

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