Coal Miners, Class Differences, and the Unpopularity of Isms

A Review Essay on George Orwell's *The Road to Wigan Pier*

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Last year was the eightieth anniversary of George Orwell's book *The Road to Wigan Pier*—a fascinating narrative of difficult working-class lives in the England of the 1930s, with applications to contemporary society and politics. In *The Road to Wigan Pier,* the well-known author of *Animal Farm* and *1984* has useful insights for Trump voters, anti-Trump voters, progressives, libertarians, and those who hope to better understand these groups.

Orwell divides his book into two halves. The first half is a riveting documentary on the immense challenges for those who worked in difficult occupations on the lower end of the economic spectrum. In particular, Orwell describes coal miners and the remarkably onerous conditions in which they worked. He "gives a first-hand account of the life of the working class population of Wigan and elsewhere. . . . It is a terrible record of evil conditions, foul housing, wretched pay,

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hopeless unemployment, and the villainies of the Means Test [England's welfare programs]" (Gallancz [1937] 1958, xi).[1]

The second half describes Orwell's admiration for socialism as well as his sense of the public's indifference toward socialism and its frequent disdain for socialists. Orwell was a committed socialist and an avid opponent of totalitarianism.[2] "Every line of serious work that I have written since 1936," he once explained, "has been written, directly or indirectly, against totalitarianism and for democratic socialism, as I understand it" (1963, 142).[3]

Orwell understood some of the tension between the two. Jennifer Roback observes that Orwell "believed that socialism led to totalitarianism; indeed that is the chief message of [*1984*]. But he also believed that capitalism led to breadlines and poverty . . . [and] strong tendencies toward monopoly and increased concentration" (1985, 127).[4] Michael Makovi depicts Orwell as a "Public Choice socialist" and describes *Animal Farm* and *1984* as "Public-Choice style investigations into which political systems furnished suitable incentive structures to prevent the abuse of power" (2015, 183).[5]

Yet it is interesting to note that Orwell, despite his ideological passion for socialism, "looks at Socialists as a whole and finds them (with a few exceptions) a stupid, offensive, and insincere lot" (Gallancz [1937] 1958, xiv).[6] His writing is so pointed that the Left Book Club, which commissioned *Wigan Pier,* expressed

1. In its raw depiction of working-class conditions, *The Road to Wigan Pier* is similar to *The Jungle* (1906), Upton Sinclair's exposé of the meat-packing industry. One key difference: Orwell's work is far more accurate. Lawrence Reed argues that Sinclair's novel "was intended as polemic . . . not a well-researched and dispassionate documentary." In contrast to Orwell's direct observations and immersion in the lives of those he wrote about, Sinclair relied on his "imagination and the hearsay of others" (2002). See also Kolko 1977, 98–103, on the regulation of the meat-packing industry. Gabriel Kolko cites the conventional narrative that centers on the importance of Sinclair's newspaper articles in 1904 and of the subsequent novel. But even Sinclair noted that the regulations came at the request of the packers, with their avid support and for their benefit (Kolko 1977, 103).

2. Orwell was also deeply opposed to imperialism. This opposition was informed by his distasteful work for the English government in Burma as a member of the Imperial Police. He wrote that this work "increased my natural hatred of authority and made me for the first time fully aware of the existence of the working classes" and "the nature of imperialism" (1963, 142).

3. As an example of his critiques of capitalism and his defense of socialism, see "Shopkeepers at War" in *The Lion and the Unicorn* (Orwell 1941).

4. Roback comments: "The problem with Orwell's economic analysis is that he accepted the interpretation of the Great Depression that was standard at his time. . . . But it would be asking a great deal of Orwell to expect him to anticipate [the] neoclassical critique" (1985, 131). More troubling, she states, are his "naïve" assumptions about how socialism works—that "planning an economy is a straight-forward extension of the exercise of planning a family shopping trip . . . [with] no notion of the price system as a coordination mechanism" (131). Interestingly, Orwell reviewed Friedrich Hayek's book *The Road to Serfdom* (1944). See Richman 2011 and Farrant 2015 for discussions and critiques of Orwell's review.

5. Makovi observes that in *Animal Farm* "socialism [is] really working quite successfully" before the pigs abuse their power. The capitalists congratulate the pigs when they "pervert socialism for their own benefit." Makovi concludes: "Orwell may have gotten only half the argument right, but [no other socialists] got it more right than he did. . . . [W]here other socialists were either starry-eyed dupes or bigoted apologists, Orwell was both critically observant and brutally honest" (2015, 198). In another article, Makovi (2016) contrasts Orwell's *Animal Farm* and *1984* with novels by Eugen Richter and Henry Hazlitt to highlight the differences between public-choice and Austrian critiques of socialism.

6. As such, *The Road to Wigan Pier* is a liberal's take on liberals and self-styled liberals. For a prominent contemporary example, see Frank 2016, and for a review of Frank's book see Schansberg 2017.

disappointment with his effort and felt a strong need to clarify the book to its members. The editors noted that the decision to publish the book should not be mistaken for full agreement with his conclusions (Gallancz [1937] 1958, ix)—a point on which publisher Victor Gallancz, writing for the editors, elaborated for a full page (x).

Gallancz said that he had more than one hundred minor critiques of the book ([1937] 1958, xii). But he deeply appreciated Orwell's narrative and respected his "highly provocative" argument. Gallancz wrote that it had been "a long time since I have read so *living* a book, or one so full of a burning indignation against poverty and oppression" (xi). The editors loved the first half of the book and were willing to tolerate the critiques, polemic, and bomb throwing in the second half. Or perhaps they quietly respected the second half of the book—for its efforts to make socialism more palatable to the masses. In any case, we can be thankful that they saw fit to publish Orwell's work.

It's important to note the context of the book. It was published as England was continuing to limp along after its Great Slump (its version of America's Great Depression). England did not endure as many policy errors as America under Franklin Roosevelt and his New Deal, so the times in England were not as bleak as they were in America. (For example, in the sixth year of FDR's policies, the official unemployment rate was still 19 percent.[7]) But England's recovery was still tepid, and times were tough.

Also, socialism was still ascendant as an ideology—and, to many, as an economic system. Gallancz pointed to the then apparent "successes" of the Soviet Union's economy with its "five-year plans" ([1937] 1958, xviii). With the "fall of communism," this optimism is difficult to imagine now. But even into the 1980s, there were those (including some who wrote economics textbooks) who imagined that the Soviet Union had a better economy than America.

One final observation before I dig into the substance of what Orwell wrote. He was good with a phrase and colorful in his descriptions, making the book a pleasure to read, even when one questions what he has written. For example, on the stench of one town, he said: "If at rare moments you stop smelling sulphur, it is because you have begun smelling gas" (Orwell [1937] 1958, 106).[8] According to chapter 1's description of the boardinghouse where he stayed, "the dust was so thick that it was like fur" (5); "in the morning, the room stank like a ferret's cage" (6); and the owner climbed "the stairs, carrying a full chamber-pot which he gripped with his thumb well over the rim" (12).

Orwell's Observations on "the Working Class"

In chapters 2 and 3, Orwell turns from his lodging to the coal miners. He notes the vital importance of coal (or, by extension, energy) in his time: "In the metabolism of the

7. For a valuable discussion of the Great Depression, unemployment, and New Deal policies, see Vedder and Galloway [1993] 1997.

8. Subsequent citations to the main text of *The Road to Wigan Pier* give page number only.

Western world, the coal miner is second in importance to the man who plows the soil" (21).

Orwell's description of work in the coal mines is sobering. We might have the impression that the scene is a "peaceful" and bucolic one—that is, if we visit when the mine is not in operation (21). And, really, few people want to think about such unpleasantries: "Probably a majority of people would even prefer not to hear about it [coal]. Yet it is the absolutely necessary counterpart of our world above . . . [not just] black stuff that arrives mysteriously from nowhere in particular, like manna except that you have to pay for it" (33–34).

The reality of the work is brutal. Orwell feels "a pang of envy for [the coal miners'] toughness . . . an almost superhuman job by the standards of an ordinary person . . . shifting monstrous quantities of coal" while kneeling (22). There are "[t]he heat . . . the coal dust . . . the unending rattle of the conveyor belt" (23), the elevator "cage" to get "400 yards under ground" (24). And then there are the "immense horizontal distances" (25), where one "walks stooping" to get there (26)—"travelling" that is not compensated (29).

When the miners come up from the pit, their faces are "so pale . . . due to the foul air," even though it "will wear off presently" (36). Orwell is fascinated by the blue scars on their faces: "The coal dust . . . enters every cut . . . forms a blue stain like tattooing, which in fact it is. Some of the older men have their foreheads veined like Roquefort cheese from this cause" (36). Without full "pithead" baths, they could not possibly get clean. He estimates that these baths are available to only one-third of the miners. "Probably a large majority of miners are completely black from the waist down for at least six days a week. It is almost impossible for them to wash all over in their own homes" (37).

In chapter 4, Orwell turns to housing. It is "by any ordinary standard not fit for human habitation" (51). And yet "there are no others to be had . . . [because of a] housing shortage" (52). Of course, based on what we know from Econ 101, this doesn't make any sense, unless there is profound monopoly power (of the sort that could be found only through government power) or government price controls. But Orwell doesn't provide any evidence of government intervention. Instead, the more likely explanation is that the housing was lousy but what consumers could afford.

From there, Orwell expresses ambivalence about "Corporation" (government-run) housing—what we would call "public housing."[9] Corporation houses are "better than the slums they replace . . . [the] condemned house[s]," but more expensive—ten shillings rather than the six to seven shillings of the former rent (68).

In chapter 5, Orwell turns his sights on "the Means test"—what we would call "welfare programs" for the poor. In this analysis, Orwell is a prophet ahead of his time—at least by American standards. He is disturbed by the system's cold calculations

9. It is ironic to see a government effort labeled "corporate." Orwell also notes that the Corporation houses had "restrictions" (71).

and bureaucracy. The American Left was not bothered by these aspects of welfare policy until the 1980s (Funiciello 1994).

Orwell is also concerned about the impact of welfare incentives on work (76–77, 81–82) and family formation. He says that welfare programs "discourage people from marrying" (80) and "break up families" (79). For a short time, Charles Murray was seen as a gadfly in the 1980s for making this same case in *Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 1950–1980* (1984). But soon his work on welfare policy became mainstream. Led by liberals and conservatives, motivated by scholars such as Murray and Marvin Olasky (1994), Bill Clinton and a Republican Congress "changed welfare as we know it" in 1996—to a set of state-based systems with somewhat more emphasis on work, time limits on benefits, and discernment into the causes of poverty.[10]

Orwell on Class Differences

Orwell covers two important topics in the second half of the book. The first is his lengthy discussion of class and pseudoclass differences in England of the 1930s. As an example, let me give you a full dose of his description of the boardinghouse and its owners, the Brookers:

> On the day when there was a full chamber-pot under the breakfast table I decided to leave. The place was beginning to depress me. It was not only the dirt, the smells, and the vile food, but the feeling of stagnant meaningless decay, of having got down into some subterranean place where people go creeping round and round, just like blackbeetles, in an endless muddle of slovened jobs and mean grievances. The most dreadful thing about people like the Brookers is the way they say the same things over and over again. It gives you the feeling that they are not real people at all, but a kind of ghost for ever rehearsing the same futile rigmarole. In the end, Mrs. Brooker's self-pitying talk—always the same complaints, over and over, and always ending with the tremulous whine of "It does seem 'ard, don't it now?"—revolted me even more than her habit of wiping her mouth with bits of newspaper. (17)

But in a manner reminiscent of those who encourage today's liberals and Democrat partisans to empathize with Trump voters (whatever they think of their lives and beliefs), Orwell continues by warning us not to ignore or despise "[these] people": "It is no use saying that people like the Brookers are just disgusting and trying to put them

10. Orwell takes other pokes along the way—at unions (83), at government training and make-work programs (83–84), and at gambling through the "Football Pools" (85, 89). He also claims that "a luxury is nowadays almost always cheaper than a necessity," and so many people are "underfed but literally everyone in England has access to a radio" (89–90). It is difficult to make heads or tails of these two claims: how the market could provide luxuries for the same price as common goods or, outside of a government radio initiative or price controls on food, why so many people would have radios but not food.

out of mind. For they exist in tens and hundreds of thousands; they are one of the characteristic by-products of the modern world. You cannot disregard them if you accept the civilization that produced them. . . . It is a kind of duty to see and smell such places now and again, especially smell them, lest you should forget that they exist; though perhaps it is better not to stay there too long" (17). So, learn about them, but don't get too close for too long. Orwell encourages his readers to empathize as best they can—and this is from someone who has made supreme efforts to do so himself.[11] To his immense credit, he immersed himself in lower-class living, washing dishes in a Parisian hotel and living in poorhouses in Paris and London. According to T. R. Fyvel, the people Orwell met in these places "were the shabby-genteel class which Orwell, unlike many of his friends, knew from the inside, and this enabled him to write so clearly about them" (1963, 242).[12]

But in *Wigan Pier* Orwell warns that it is exceedingly difficult to transcend class differences and that there are probably significant limits to the effort:[13] "Is it ever possible to be really intimate with the working class? . . . I do not think it is possible. . . . I have seen just enough of the working class to avoid idealizing them, but I do know that you can learn a great deal in a working-class home, if only you can get there. The essential point is that your middle-class ideals and prejudices are tested by contact with others which are not necessarily better but are certainly different" (115). Or later: "It is so easy to be on equal terms with social outcasts. But unfortunately you do not solve the class problem by making friends with tramps. At most you get rid of some of your own class-prejudice by doing so. . . . But when you come to the normal working class, the position is totally different. There is no short cut into their midst. . . . It is not [necessarily] a question of dislike or distaste, only of difference, but it is enough to make real intimacy impossible" (154–56).

Marvin Olasky (1994) and Peter Cove (2016) make the same point about effective efforts to help the poor. Such efforts require time, effort, and (true) compassion, not just sentimentality and money. Helping the poor is so challenging that casual efforts, virtue signaling, and the shedding of guilt by spending taxpayer money are more popular strategies than making the difficult investments of time and energy required for even the start of a helpful approach.

And how should we even define "class"? The easiest empirical proxy is income. The next easiest empirical proxy—and the easiest to approximate visually—is wealth (or,

11. See Haidt (2013) on the importance and difficulty of practicing empathy in politics.

12. In his first book, *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933), Orwell describes his lodging in terms that are similar to those used in the first half of *The Road to Wigan Pier*. But *Down and Out* is more playful in its tone and not nearly as pathetic in its substance.

13. The main character Rubashov in Arthur Koestler's novel *Darkness at Noon* (2006) wrestles with this dilemma: "Revolutionaries should not think through other people's minds. Or, perhaps they should? Or even ought to? How can one change the world if one identifies oneself with everybody? How else can one change it? He who understands and forgives—where would he find motive to act?" (23).

at least, evident wealth). But "class" stands in for education, a variety of social-cultural norms, and a general approach to life (Murray 2012).

Orwell provides some estimates of income in contemporary England. But then he quickly moves to professions of the "upper-middle class": "not to any extent commercial, but mainly military, official and professional" (123). Orwell asks himself: "Which class do I belong to? Economically I belong to the working class, but it is almost impossible for me to think of myself as anything but a member of the bourgeoisie" (225).[14]

In our day, profession, education, and income also intersect in a Venn diagram of what might constitute "class." And so, for example, the middle-income sociology professor is upper-middle class or even upper class by virtue of education and profession. Those within some of the intersections of the Venn "live, so to speak, at two levels simultaneously," as Orwell puts it (123). Moving toward the outer edges of those intersections, we see people "struggling to live genteel lives on what are virtually working-class incomes . . . forced into close and, in a sense, intimate contact with the working class" (124). But this intimate contact is not as common today—with the breakdown of family, transient work and career, and a greatly diminished sense of neighborliness. On class differences, Orwell comments, "Of course, everyone knows that class-prejudice exists, but at the same time everyone claims that he, in some mysterious way, is exempt from it. Snobbishness is one of those vices which we can discern in everyone else but never in ourselves. . . . We all rail against class-distinctions, but very few people seriously want to abolish them. Here you come upon the important fact that every revolutionary opinion draws part of its strength from a secret conviction that nothing can be changed" (157–58).

Orwell talks about being a wannabe reactionary as a young man. "I was both a snob and a revolutionary" (140).[15] "We retained, basically, the snobbish outlook of our class, we took it for granted that we should continue to draw our dividends or tumble into soft jobs" (139). He says that he grew more aware of this tension over time but noticed that others were satisfied with platitudes: "Many people, however, imagine that they can abolish class-distinctions without making any uncomfortable change in their own habits and 'ideology'" (162).

Orwell is also brutally frank about his problems with the working class. He starts with a phrase that was popular in his youth: "The lower classes smell" (127). This is a repulsive physical feeling—and thus more difficult to overcome (128). "They are dirtier" and less likely to have bathrooms (130). He has a "hope that in 100 years, they

14. Orwell's early education—in an upper-class boarding "prep" school, which he was able to attend only at a deeply discounted tuition rate—contributed to the tension he experienced.

15. Gallancz refers to Orwell as "at one and the same time, an extreme intellectual and a violent anti-intellectual" ([1937] 1958, xvi). David Brooks describes modern "bobos" as "an elite that has been raised to oppose elites. They are affluent yet opposed to materialism" (2000, 41). Anti-anti-Trumpers are a contemporary political example: those who are not fans of Trump but see avid opposition to Trump voters as lacking in empathy.

will be almost as clean as the Japanese" (130)! Then he shares a funny story about an occasion on which he was in a position to share a quart of beer with a bunch of herdsmen: he thought he would vomit due to their uncleanliness but didn't want to offend them. "You see here how the middle-class squeamishness works both ways" (131). Later, "it was rubbing shoulders with tramps that cured me of it" (131).

These descriptions are reminiscent of what Michael Harrington discusses in his classic book on poverty, *The Other America* (1962). Harrington argues that the poor are "maimed in body and spirit" (11). Regarding a story about poor African Americans, he concludes: "The story is funny enough, but at bottom it is made of the same stuff as Amos 'n' Andy: the laughing, childlike, pleasure-loving Negro who must be patronized and taken care of like a child. . . . [T]he incident is ultimately one more tragedy within the structure of the ghetto" (70–71). And commenting on family structure in the African American community, he argues that "as a result of this, to take but one consequence of the fact, hundreds of thousands, and perhaps millions, of children in the other America never know stability and 'normal' affection" (16).

When one gets involved with people out of pity, compassion, and so on, it's easy to question and even criticize their choices. But doing so can lead to difficult and uncomfortable conundrums: When is compassion superseded by condescension or even condemnation? When are differences a matter of preference and opinion versus some objective norm? And if you and I differ—and I am convinced that your decision is "wrong"—at what point is it ethical for me to condemn your choices or even bring government policy into the fray?[16]

Orwell notes that "he is still responding to the training of his childhood, when he was taught to hate, fear, and despise the working class" (136). Perhaps given our lack of proximity these days, there's not much "training" of this sort. Instead, we have apathy and utter unfamiliarity. But one might suspect that fear of the unknown and less opportunity to interact with those different from us get us to a similar outcome.

Orwell on the Failure of Socialists to Sell Socialism

The second primary topic in part 2 of *The Road to Wigan Pier* is Orwell's frustration with socialism's failure to spread in the popular imagination—and thus socialists' failure to make their case effectively. This is also relevant to a common political malady today.

With the U.S. presidential election of 2016, it became patently obvious that most voters are not all that ideological. The Democrats offered a decidedly illiberal candidate—for instance, with her approach to foreign policy, crony capitalism, "free speech," the "sharing economy," and so on. The Republicans chose a decidedly unconservative candidate—at least by any conventional social or economic definition of conservatism.

16. Orwell explores this issue from a few angles. He points to "the squalor of these people's houses" and "the number of children" (60). He also notes the role of paternalism in foreign affairs: "[S]een from the outside, the British rule in India appears—indeed, it *is*—benevolent and necessary . . . [but it is also] an unjustifiable tyranny" (144). And he observes the role of paternalism and condescension in nationalism and regionalism (111–12).

Public-choice economists describe voters as rationally ignorant and apathetic. It's rare for voters to get educated and take action in the political realm because doing so leads to light investments in a complicated arena. The political approaches taken are somewhere between lackluster and incoherent. Ironically, this limited thought process too often results in rabid partisanship and a strange sort of hubris. The most impressive cases of the latter involve those who have applied coherent ideas to a particular policy or a narrow set of policies—say, in support of a position on abortion or international trade restrictions.

In contrast, there are a handful of folks who have thought things out relatively well and have come to embrace a coherent ideology. In broad terms, these people fall into two categories. The first group has high regard for freedom and economic markets and pessimism about regulation and political markets. The second group is pessimistic about markets and individual choices and has high regard for the state's actions. Members of the former group are libertarians; members of the latter are "progressives" or statists.

Those who have invested enough to reach these conclusions often have difficulty in understanding why others don't think the same as they do—why laypeople don't see the "obvious" problems and solutions that these advocates envision. And they are frequently disappointed that laypeople spend so little time thinking about such things.

Orwell experiences a similar reaction. Given the contemporary problems he observed, he remarks casually that "everyone who uses his brain knows that Socialism, as a world-system and wholeheartedly applied, is a way out. It would at least ensure our getting enough to eat even if it deprived us of everything else." But "Socialism is not establishing itself[;] . . . [it is] visibly going back . . . with so much in its favor—the idea of Socialism is less widely accepted than it was ten years ago" (171).

Why? "This must be due chiefly to mistaken methods of propaganda" (171), or socialism "has about it something inherently distasteful" (172), or both. Orwell puts himself in the position of devil's advocate to empathize with why people are not impressed by socialism and socialists.[17]

The presidential election of 2016 shows the continued struggle for Democrats: discomfort with "guns and religion"; distaste for NASCAR and country music; disdain for pro wrestling and reality TV. Hillary Clinton's slip about "the basket of deplorables" (perhaps the key moment in the campaign) underlined the condescension and lack of empathy noted by Orwell. Howard Husock points out how Orwell outlines "the awkward dilemma of the contemporary Left. That is, how to advocate on behalf of a working class that you find deplorable?" (2016).[18]

17. Along the same lines as Jonathan Haidt (2013), Orwell is doing something that is difficult for many self-styled liberals—at least of the modern, American sort. Koestler's novel describes a similar problem: "The cause of the Party's defectiveness must be found. All our principles were right, but our results were wrong . . . we should have been loved by the people. But they hate us. . . . We brought you truth, and in our mouth it sounded like a lie. We brought you freedom, and it looks in our hands like a whip" (59).

18. This is one of the inherent contradictions within progressivism (Leonard 2016; Schansberg 2016). Koestler enunciates the contradiction beautifully in his book's climax (2006, 160–63, 170–72).

While engaged in this exercise, Orwell notes that socialism "is a theory confined entirely to the middle class" (173) and is plagued by a "prevalence of cranks" (174).[19] The example he gives is hilarious, even to a contemporary mind:

> For instance, I have here a prospectus from another summer school which states its terms per week and then asks me to say "whether my diet is ordinary or vegetarian." They take it for granted, you see, that it is necessary to ask this question. This kind of thing is by itself sufficient to alienate plenty of decent people. And their instinct is perfectly sound, for the food-crank is by definition a person willing to cut himself off from human society in hopes of adding five years on to the life of his carcass; that is, a person out of touch with common humanity. (174–75)

Orwell's observations on "cranks" seem to apply nicely to today's "progressives" and the Libertarian Party. In his context, "[o]ne sometimes gets the impression that the mere words 'Socialism' and 'Communism' draw towards them with magnetic force every fruit-juice drinker, nudist, sandal-wearer, sex-maniac, Quaker, 'Nature Cure' quack, pacifist, and feminist in England" (174). Libertarians get James Weeks dancing at a key moment during the national convention, an assortment of single-issue folks (who are always somewhere between focused and obsessed), and those who "get it" but can't explain it well and come off as "interesting."

Continuing his critique, Orwell cites "the ugly fact that most middle-class Socialists, while theoretically pining for a classless society, cling like glue to their miserable fragments of social prestige" (175). He also notes the rarity of laypeople having any sort of coherent sense of political economy (176–78). As a result, "it is only the 'educated' [orthodox] man . . . who knows how to be a bigot. . . . The creed is never found in its pure form in a genuine proletarian" (178).

And so "the ordinary decent person, who is in sympathy with the essential aims of Socialism, is given the impression that there is no room for his kind in any Socialist party that means business" (182). Again, we see this sort of thing among purists in the Libertarian Party. So there is a place for purity—but at what expense?

What motivates the entire enterprise for the ardent socialist? Orwell observes: "Sometimes I look at a Socialist—the intellectual, tract-writing type of Socialist, with his pullover, his fuzzy hair, and his Marxian quotation—and wonder what the devil his motive really is. It is often difficult to believe that it is a love of anybody, especially of the working class, from whom he is of all people the furthest removed. The underlying motive of many Socialists, I believe, is simply a hypertrophied sense of order" (178–79). What an ironic observation! Orwell argues that it's not love of others but a personal

19. Koestler observes something similar in describing the Communist Party in Russia: "The Party's warm, breathing body appeared to him to be covered with sores. . . . When and where in history had there ever been such defective saints? Whenever had a good cause been worse represented?" (2006, 58).

desire for order that drives the socialist. This understanding connects nicely to the fundamentalism one finds among ideologues, even "liberals"—a shift from orderly thinking to believing in government's ability to instill order and in the desirability of such an end.[20] Then Orwell throws another haymaker:

> Poverty and, what is more, the habits of mind created by poverty, are something to be abolished from above, by violence if necessary; perhaps even preferably by violence. Hence his [George Bernard Shaw's] worship of "great" men and appetite for dictatorships. . . . [R]evolution does not mean a movement of the masses with which they hope to associate themselves; it means a set of reforms which "we," the clever ones, are going to impose upon "them," the Lower Orders. . . . Though seldom giving much evidence of affection for the exploited, he is perfectly capable of displaying hatred—a sort of queer, theoretical, in vacua hatred—against the exploiters. Hence the grand old Socialist sport of denouncing the bourgeoisie. It is strange how easily almost any Socialist writer can lash himself into frenzies of rage against the class to which, by birth or by adoption, he himself invariably belongs. (179–80)

One final problem for socialism's popularity: its supposed success is driven by artificial, government-induced mechanization—with "five-year plans" in search of progress, organization, and efficiency (188–94, 201). For one thing, it's not at all clear that government can accomplish these goals. But Orwell points to another angle: if the government is successful, the things replaced will be anachronisms. Socialism is unattractive to the extent that people perceive it as cold and sterile "progress."[21] Capitalism and libertarianism have the same problem when people recognize it: the good news for consumers and "markets" (of technological advance and increased competition) is also bad news for producers (firms and workers).

The bottom line here for Orwell:

> We have reached a stage when the very word "Socialism" calls up, on the one hand, a picture of aeroplanes, tractors, and huge glittering factories of glass and concrete; on the other, a picture of vegetarians with wilting beards, of Bolshevik commissars (half gangster, half gramophone), of earnest ladies in sandals, shock-headed Marxists chewing polysyllables, escaped Quakers, birth-control fanatics, and Labour Party backstairs-crawlers. Socialism, at least in this island, does not smell any longer of revolution and the overthrow

20. On the former, see chapter 2 on the "maniac" in Chesterton [1908] 2009.

21. In his essay "Why Socialists Don't Believe in Fun" (1968), Orwell points to a related problem: utopias (socialist or otherwise) are exceedingly difficult to describe in a manner that makes them sound enjoyable.

> of tyrants; it smells of crankishness, machine-worship, and the stupid cult of Russia. (216)

Orwell is a good read for those interested in politics—particularly for those who can't understand why people don't embrace their views. In our days of political hostility, cultural sensitivity, and faux tolerance, we need more empathy and humility—and Orwell can help readers increase both by a notch.

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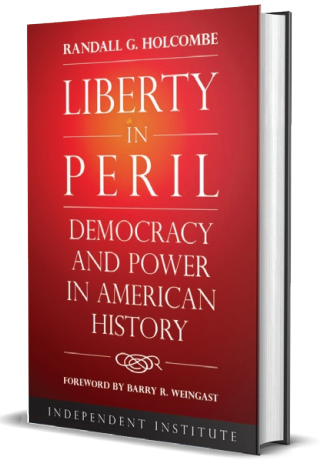

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