November 1975

George Orwell's Socialism: The Good Society

Valerie J. Simms

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.coastal.edu/jops

Part of the Political Science Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://digitalcommons.coastal.edu/jops/vol3/iss1/5

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Politics at CCU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Political Science by an authorized editor of CCU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact commons@coastal.edu.
George Orwell’s Socialism: The Good Society

VALERIE J. SIMMS
Federal City College

At seventeen, Orwell was a socialist. As he said later, however, his youthful socialism was superficial and shared pride of place with a snobbish irritation at the ineptitude of servants.¹ In spite of the impassioned plea for socialism provoked by his trip to coal mining areas in the north of England and a consistently maintained intellectual commitment, it was not until after the Spanish Civil War that he came “at last really [to] believe in Socialism. . . .”² From that time he did not forsake the belief, though it was severely strained. One of his last essays explores the possibility of a Socialist United States of Europe.³ Through a period of approximately thirty years, Orwell regarded himself as a socialist.

Still, it is inescapably true that his socialism was unconventional in several ways. Many analysts find the mark of unconventionality in his stringent, even unsparing criticism of other socialists and his nostalgia for the “liberal” past, rather than in the character of his socialism itself. This approach to Orwell’s socialism accords with the prevailing disposition toward a psychological treatment of his work.⁴ If one turns to the content of his views, one finds unconventionality to be sure. Orwell’s orthodoxy even in the broadest terms has always been in doubt. But the depth and common sense of his socialism also come to light.

Orwell’s mode of analysis, or method, is distinctly heterodox. Marxist and non-Marxist socialist thought alike tend to emphasize questions of political economy. It is impossible here to attempt either a scholarly analysis of the varieties of socialist method or a history of the manner in which socialists have interpreted motive and event. It is possible to determine that Orwell was unconventional in his approach, given some common understanding of socialist method. The socialist analyst tends

³ CEJL, IV, 313-326.
primarily to direct his attentions toward social groups or classes and towards institutional arrangements, especially economic institutions. Orwell tends not to do this.\(^5\) This is not to suggest that he was unaware of or unconcerned with the economic systems of his day. He was concerned. He was intensely interested in the effect of unemployment, competition, poverty, class, and ‘money’ on human beings. His concern with the dehumanizing effects of a money economy is profound. Nonetheless, at critical moments, as I will try to show below, his manner of analysis reveals that his characteristic focus is on the individual rather than on the shaping economy and its roots. The mode most congenial to him is to analyze personal behavior. An individual’s reaction to society and its pressures, the nature of motive, the relevance of morality—these were his interests. The interaction of society and the individual concerned him, but his primary interest was directed at the single human being and not at the institutional complex.\(^6\)

His “liberalism,” his sense of society as composed irreducibly of individuals, is evident in all he writes. One cannot force the distinction; obviously, the determination of a characteristic focus is made in terms of emphasis. The emphasis in Orwell’s work is on the whole strongly individualistic. Perhaps the most significant of the many examples of what a more orthodox socialist might see to be an excessive individualism, is found in “Shooting An Elephant,” published in 1936. The story is set in Burma and is quasi-autobiographical. It describes the intense pressure brought to bear upon a young policeman by a Burmese crowd. The pressure—a psycho-social one—forces him into an act (shooting the elephant) which prudence tells him to avoid. As a study in the sociology of the crowd or of the phenomenon of social pressure and conformity, it is an excellent piece. “The people expected it of me and

---


\(^6\) George Atkins, George Orwell: A Literary Study (London: Calders & Boyars, 1955), p. 109. John Atkins disagrees with this assessment. He and others take Orwell’s failure as a novelist—that is, his incapacity to make individuals “live,” as an indication that his thought was excessively politicized. This seems to me to be incorrect, though the literary question is not at issue here. Atkins says that “as a twentieth-century writer he tends to be more interested in society than in individuals.” Nothing in Atkins’ choice of examples convinces me of this point, though making the determination of emphasis is obviously a matter of judgment and a point about which there will likely remain differences.
I had got to do it; I could feel their two thousand wills pressing me forward, irresistibly."  

Orwell has another purpose, however. He says that the incident gave him a “better glimpse than I had had before of the real nature of imperialism—the real motive for which despotic governments act.” The real motive is a need to maintain an acceptable image of self in the face of and ultimately in conformity to, the expectations of the subject peoples. “... every white man's life in the East was one long struggle not to be laughed at.” This story is not a youthful product, though it grows out of Orwell's early Burmese experience. It is a recollection written almost ten years after his return to England and after his trip to the Yorkshire and Lancashire mines and mining towns. His commitment to socialism at that time was firm and had been given vivid factual support by the trip to Wigan. It is of interest, therefore, that he saw the “real nature of imperialism” in a psycho-social frame, rather than in terms of political economy.

In other places, Orwell does demonstrate a keen appreciation of the economic bases of imperialism. “Not Counting Niggers” of 1939 discusses the relative prosperity of the British worker in terms of the exploitation of the vast imperial proletariat. If the question of the significance of economic arrangements in social and political analysis were put to him directly, he would no doubt acknowledge that those arrangements were of great importance. That notwithstanding, he is led by the focus of his interest to cast most discussions of the nature of imperialism in wholly psychological terms. This approach is in stark contrast to a conventional socialist analysis of imperialism as the inevitable final stage of decadent monopoly capitalism.

In another piece, entitled “Marrekech” (1939), Orwell conveys his understanding of the attitude white men have toward brown and black men. Unhappily, white men do not see, literally do not see, men of another color. They form part of the inanimate landscape. The dehumanization of this selective inattention makes possible the gross brutality of colonial empires. In fact, “all colonial empires are in reality founded upon that fact. The people have brown faces—besides, there are so many of them! Are they really the same flesh as yourself? Do they even have names?” In this short passage, one can see both Orwell's eye for a truth and, more to the point in the present context, his insistence

7 CEJL, I, 239.
8 CEJL, I, 236.
9 CEJL, I, 239.
10 CEJL, I, 394-398.
11 CEJL, I, 388.
upon the psychology of the human actor as the root of the analysis. Colonial empires he asserts "are in reality founded upon" this anesthetized sensitivity, not, say upon the inexorable movement of concentrated capital toward raw materials and new markets. Again, he likely would not deny the pertinence of the latter kind of analysis, though he might take exception to the use of "inexorable." But he does not make this analysis and that fact is interesting.

In at least one place, Orwell puts his case even more directly. "As I Please" of February, 1944 deals with two books on 'Jewish' topics. In the course of it, he remarks that the Dreyfus case "for instance, is not easily translated into economic terms." And more generally a study of anti-semitism "ought not to be vitiated in advance by an assumption that those causes are wholly economic." The tenor of the remark is clear; he is urging a look at other than economic causes.

Finally, Orwell's method of handling aspects of economic systems when he does deal with them is unmistakably idiosyncratic for a man of the left. In 1939 he maintained flatly that: "It is obvious that any economic system would work equitably if men could be trusted to behave themselves . . . ." He reiterates this stance more than once in his work. In that same year, in an essay on Dickens, he claims that Dickens had not the "vision to see that private property is an obstructive nuisance. . . ." This is a fascinating bit of Orwell. It's clearly not a tory remark, but, on the other hand, even allowing for the possibility of irony, its an odd position on property for a socialist to assume. Few continental Marxists would be so expansive as to see private property as merely a "nuisance."

These examples could be proliferated almost without end. Orwell's socialist commitments were moral commitments. As a method of analysis 'scientific' socialism appeared to have held no special attraction for him. It can be argued, then, that Orwell's socialism is unconventional so far as method goes. He mistrusted the aridity of much socialist analysis. It seemed to ignore the human beings for whom the analysis was being made. Granting that Orwell's method of analysis was individualistic and unconventional, what was the nature of his allegiance to so-

---

12 CEJL, III, 91.
13 CEJL, III, 90. Also see for an interesting comment on Orwell's consideration of the question, T. R. Fyvel, "Wingate, Orwell and the 'Jewish Question'" Commentary (February, 1951).
14 CEJL, I, 384.
15 CEJL, I, 428.
16 On this judgment Sir Richard Rees' fine short study, George Orwell: Fugitive from the Camp of Victory (Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1959), provides the most useful information about Orwell's personal reactions and commitments. Rees notes that "when he is discussing the present (fascism, unemployment, inequality) ... the criticism is primarily moral." (p. 56).
GEORGE ORWELL’S SOCIALISM: THE GOOD SOCIETY

socialism? Orwell defined what he meant by socialism in several places over a period of years. He also carefully distinguished his position from related ones on many occasions. Orwell was concerned, to turn to the latter point first, to dissociate himself from two popular and, he believed, wrongheaded conceptions of socialism.

He went to extraordinary lengths in *The Road to Wigan Pier* and elsewhere to ally himself with the common man’s notion of socialism and was witheringly critical of the bookish, middle-class version. To the ordinary man, whose “... conception of Socialism is quite different from that of the book-trained Socialist higher-up. ... Socialism does not mean much more than better wages and shorter hours and nobody bossing you about.” To this kind of man the “... pea-and-thimble trick with those three mysterious entities, thesis, antithesis, and synthesis ...” holds not the slightest interest. Orwell maintains that often the common man “is a truer Socialist than the orthodox Marxist because he does remember what the other so often forgets, that Socialism means justice and common decency.” 17 Later in the same book he states the “truer” socialism somewhat differently. The “ideal of Socialism ... [is] justice and liberty. Justice and liberty! *Those* are the words that have got to ring like a bugle across the world.” 18 It is not coincidental that one hears echoes in this statement of Orwell’s discussions of 19th century America and, more broadly, of the liberal tradition.19 He regarded

---

17 Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, pp. 154-155. While his sympathy rested with the ordinary man’s view that socialism was “better wages and shorter hours and nobody bossing you about,” his own conception of socialism was more sophisticated and thorough-going. See the quotations from “The Lion and the Unicorn” below. Orwell did stop short of thinking through the whole problem of what the very existence of the wage-relationship meant in a supposedly socialist system. But perhaps the point is not a central one. George Lichtheim maintains that “the dispute between liberals and socialists on this topic [the control of production solely by demand] is quite unrelated to what one thinks of the wage relationship. Even if all capitalist property is confiscated by the state, this does not remove the wage relation, since people will have to go on working and be paid in accordance with their performance,” *A Short History of Socialism* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1970), p. 315.

18 *Ibid.*, pp. 189-190. One critic put Orwell’s disaffiliation from Marxistphilosophizing well when he said that “to understand his brand of socialism—and indeed his attitude to politics and society in general—it is necessary to compare him with Oscar Wilde of *The Soul of Man Under Socialism* and D. H. Lawrence of *Democracy* and not to go hunting in the labyrinths of Marxist dialectics.” Nicholas Walter, *Anarchy* (October, 1961), p. 255. While one might disagree with Walter’s suggested comparisons (Orwell reviewed Wilde’s book and found a good deal to criticize, though he wrote sympathetically, CEJL, IV, 426-428), the recommendation not to look toward Marxist dialectics for the source of Orwell’s socialism is certainly correct. See also Edward Crankshaw, “Orwell and Communism” in *The World of George Orwell*, edited by Miriam Gross (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971), pp. 117-127.

19 Orwell’s writing on the “liberal virtues” has been undervalued in commentary on his work. The central discussion appears in essays on Melville (1930), on Henry Miller (1940), on Twain (1943), and on a minor 19th century American
America in that period as a country hard to starve in, easy to be dignified in—free for both writer and common man. In that time and place one could “hit the boss in the eye” and move on; in true socialism there is to be no one “bossing you about.” True socialism, in other words, will preserve for the future the liberal virtues of the past. As Lionel Trilling so excellently put it:

Like Cobbett, he [Orwell] does not dream of a new kind of man, he is content with the old kind, and what moves him is the desire that this old kind of man should have freedom, bacon, and proper work.20

“Freedom, bacon, and proper work”—a far cry, Orwell would agree, from the pretentious slogans of orthodox socialism and the “Marxists chewing polysyllables.”21 Although Orwell frequently put his view of the “truer Socialism” in terms of the beliefs of the ordinary man, there is no doubt that he fully identified himself with those beliefs and with that kind of man. Though he was himself an intellectual and of bourgeois class origins, bookish socialists and bourgeois revolutionaries both gave him “the creeps.” They did so because he believed that somewhere in the intricacies of neo-Hegelian logic, they lost sight altogether of the primary aims of socialism—justice and liberty. He accused them also of gross ignorance of the facts of proletarian and lower-middle class existence and of irresponsibility, but these criticisms were subsidiary to the major charge.22

In addition to disavowing orthodox, bookish socialism, he also separated himself from a second popular conception of socialism. For reasons which lie deep in his view of moral action, he urged his readers not to confuse socialism with the various Utopianisms floating around.

---

21 Orwell, The Road to Wigan Pier, p. 190.
22 CEJL, I, 216 and I, 335. Orwell’s unceasing criticism of intellectuals and their response to the political questions of the ‘thirties’ and ‘forties’ has itself come to be criticized as excessive, neurotic, self-interested, etc. In an article largely devoted to a comparison of Orwell with Samuel Johnson, John Wain acknowledges that he had often joined in criticism of Orwell on this score. He goes on to say, however, that from the vantage point of the late 1960’s, he has come to see the issue differently and now substantially agrees with Orwell. Intellectuals in Britain did in fact deserve Orwell’s vigorous criticism. “… during the 1940’s, Orwell found it necessary to keep banging away at certain points that dominant ‘progressive’ opinion simply would not face. …” John Wain, “Orwell and the Intelligentsia,” Encounter (December, 1968), pp. 7-8.
In the middle of the war (December, 1943) he treated in a short article the “revival of pessimism,” the disbelief in an improved future. The real answer to those who are disillusioned and believe socialism is a pipe dream “is to dissociate Socialism from Utopianism.” He acknowledges the accusation that some socialists believe that society after socialism will be completely perfect and that progress is inevitable. If this were the true socialist belief the neo-pessimists would have a point, but the belief is a straw man.

The answer, which ought to be uttered more loudly than it usually is, is that Socialism is not perfectionist, perhaps not even hedonistic. Socialists don’t claim to be able to make the world perfect: they claim to be able to make it better.23

And “any thinking Socialist” will understand this. Obviously Orwell was aware that the straw man did have some proponents; he wanted to disavow their stance and lessen their influence. Just as “any thinking man” will see real socialism ultimately to be justice and liberty, so he will see that one must be content with improvement toward those goals, knowing all the while that though progress is real, human society can never be perfect. Disillusionment comes only from having had illusions. Today’s idealists with illusions (usually intellectuals) often become tomorrow’s pessimists, defeatists, and reactionaries. Orwell maintained that by guarding against the former, one guarded against the latter.24

Idiosyncratic in method, critical of intellectual and bourgeois socialists, wary of Utopianism—what was the positive content of Orwell’s socialism? It received its first substantial expression in The Road to Wigan Pier. He went north, he says, to see mass unemployment at its worst and to see workers at “close quarters.”

This was necessary to me as part of my approach to Socialism, for before you can be sure whether you are genuinely in favor of Socialism, you have got to decide whether things at present are tolerable or not tolerable, and you have got to take up a definite attitude on the terribly difficult issue of class.25

23 CEJL, III, 264.
24 While I believe that he errs in linking Orwell’s name to the general tendency of British intellectuals to become disillusioned after their experience with political activism in the 1930’s, Samuel’s discussion does show convincingly how idealism so rapidly turns into withdrawal and even reaction. Stuart Samuels, “English Intellectuals and Politics in the 1930’s” in On Intellectuals, edited by Philip Rieff (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1969), pp. 196-247.
25 Orwell, The Road to Wigan Pier, p. 106.
On the first point, whether the present situation is tolerable or not, Orwell is clear and firm. It is not. Poverty, unemployment, and hideous industrialization breed shame, passivity, loss of self-respect, and fatalism. It is intolerable and it confirms Orwell in his socialism. Socialism is a "way out" and "elementary common sense." 26

Socialism is essentially an urban creed. It grew up more or less concurrently with industrialism, it has always had its roots in the town proletariat and the town intellectual, and it is doubtful whether it could ever have arisen in any but an industrial society. Granted industrialism, the idea of Socialism presents itself naturally, because private ownership is only tolerable when every individual (or family or other unit) is at least moderately self-supporting. . . . Industrialism, once it rises about a fairly low level, must lead to some form of collectivism. Not necessarily to Socialism, of course. . . . 27

Industrialization produces the horrible gray towns, but it also provides the technical opportunity to employ and feed and house everyone adequately. The civilization of the machine age is neither good or bad in itself. It is both opportunity and threat. In the same way, while the "advances of machine-technique must lead ultimately to some form of collectivism, . . . that form need not necessarily be equalitarian, that is, it need not be Socialism." 28 But it may be, if that collectivism can be "humanized," if the essentials of socialism—justice and liberty—are not forgotten.

On the second point, that of class, Orwell produces some of his most spirited writing. In fact, class is the subject of The Road to Wigan Pier. 29 Orwell summarizes much of his discussion as follows:

The principal fact that will have emerged, I think, is that though the English class-system has outlived its usefulness, it has outlived it and shows no signs of dying. It greatly confuses the issue to

26 Ibid., p. 149.
27 Ibid., pp. 164-165.
28 Ibid., p. 189.
29 The view that Orwell did not understand the concept (or reality) of class is a quite commonly held one. Stephen Spender, for example, accepts that judgment without pausing to question its validity. "... it is illuminating to learn from Raymond Williams that Orwell had no real grasp of the class struggle in England, had never made a profound analysis of the situation, had invented a new, in the long run untenable, English myth, and so on." "The Truth About Orwell," New York Review of Books (November 16, 1972), p. 6. Raymond Williams, Orwell, Modern Masters Series (New York: Viking Press, 1971), did certainly disagree with Orwell's analysis; that in itself does not constitute a refutation.
assume, as the orthodox Marxist so often does. . . ., that social status is determined solely by income. Economically, no doubt, there are only two classes, the rich and the poor, but socially there is a whole hierarchy of classes, and the manners and traditions learned by each class in childhood are not only very different but—this is the essential point—generally persist from birth to death. 30

How should the socialist deal with this "hierarchy of classes?" What is he to do with the anomalies—with an Orwell who is relatively poor, middle-class in manner and habit, and sympathetic to the working class; with "the office workers and black-coated employees of all kinds—whose traditions are less definitely middle-class but who would certainly not thank you if you called them proletarians?" These latter and others like them are being "robbed and bullied" by the same system which oppresses the worker but they do not know it. Orwell's conclusion is that "the Socialist movement has got to capture the exploited middle-class before it is too late. . . ." 31

. . . the essential point here is that all people with small, insecure incomes are in the same boat and ought to be fighting on the same side. . . . There can be no cooperation between classes whose real interests are opposed. The capitalist cannot cooperate with the proletarian. . . . But it is always possible to cooperate so long as it is upon a basis of common interests. The people who have got to act together are all those who cringe to the boss and all those who shudder when they think of the rent. 32

The central characters of three of Orwell's early novels (i.e. excluding Burmese Days) form part of the "exploited middle-class:" Dorothy, the harassed and overworked clergyman's daughter; Gordon Comstock, the poverty-stricken would-be poet; and George Bowling, the nostalgic insurance salesman. For Orwell authentic socialism provides a future for poet, writer, and common man, not merely for the "navvy and the factory-hand." True socialism, for Orwell, is the post-industrial collectivized version of liberal 19th century America. This heterodox view of class has, most likely, roots in Orwell's psychological life history. He spent considerable energy trying to bridge the gulf between him and those above. But whether the view has psychological roots or not, it

30 Orwell. The Road to Wigan Pier, p. 197.
31 Ibid., pp. 198-199.
32 Ibid., p. 200.
remains the most important and, perhaps most original, contribution made by Orwell to the contemporary discussion of socialism.\textsuperscript{33}

One of the many confusions surrounding Orwell's writing is considerably clarified if this position on class is kept in mind. Many commentators have remarked what they saw to be a shift in Orwell's political position between, say, 1936 and the appearance of "The Lion and The Unicorn" in 1941. Even before his Spanish experience, he evinced suspicion of a Popular Front which "might draw the Socialist into alliance with his very worst enemies."\textsuperscript{34} At the same time he believed such an alliance against Fascism might be chanced if the essentials of Socialism were kept well in mind. After Spain his suspicions of Popular Front alliances increased because it seemed "probable that it must always end by one partner swallowing the other."\textsuperscript{35} Fascism provoked this "temporary alliance" between the bourgeois and the worker but it was a dangerous proposition. In "Spilling the Spanish Beans" he reiterated this position in essentially the same terms, though his language grew more vivid and angry. His disgust for the (fraudulent) "liberal' bourgeois" was intense.

\ldots in the face of such a blatant reactionary as Franco, you get for a while a situation in which the worker and the bourgeois, in reality deadly enemies, are fighting side by side. This uneasy alliance is known as the Popular Front. \ldots It is a combination with about as much vitality, and about as much right to exist, as a pig with two heads or some other Barnum and Bailey monstrosity.\textsuperscript{36}

After the revolutionary Anarchists lost control and the Government reasserted itself, "the bourgeoisie came out of hiding and the old division

\textsuperscript{33} There are, it seems, few discussions of the political implications of class in Britain outside of the Marxist framework. For those who find the 'class-struggle' vocabulary unsuitable, likely alternative analyses are rarely forthcoming. Max Beer's classic study, \textit{A History of British Socialism} (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1953), for example, indexes only one discussion of class and that is "Marx on." When R. H. S. Crossman turns his attention to the problem of revisionism in the Labour Party and the famous "clause four controversy," the question of class never arises, even though the phrase "workers by hand or by brain" obviously raises the point. "The Clause Four Controversy (1960)," in \textit{The Politics of Socialism} (New York: Atheneum, 1965), pp. 213-123. More recently, Anthony Sampson, \textit{The New Anatomy of Britain} (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1971) has contrived to produce over six hundred pages on British society and politics with barely a mention of class, as it affects politics. His long discussion of public schools, the 'aristocracy,' the 'Oxbridge monopoly,' etc. wholly avoids any theoretical questions. Paul Johnson, writing in \textit{New Statesman}, describes "What is a Socialist" without once touching the notion of 'class-struggle.' (September 29, 1972), pp. 421-422. For this reason, Orwell's analysis bears close attention.

\textsuperscript{34} Orwell, \textit{The Road to Wigan Pier}, p. 194.

\textsuperscript{35} George Orwell, \textit{Homage to Catalonia}, p. 56.

\textsuperscript{36} CEJL, I, 271.
of society into rich and poor reappeared. . . .” In 1938 in a review of Fenner Brockway’s *Workers Front*, he once again takes out after the “unholy alliance between the robbers and the robbed.”

It appears to some that after these years of consistent and often fervent opposition to the Popular Front idea, his writing in 1941 and after exhibits a different or even contradictory position. He asserts in 1941 that “the patriotism of the middle classes is a thing to be made use of,” and that “patriotism is usually stronger than class-hatred. . . .” “The Lion and The Unicorn” develops the notions of England as an “emotional unity” and as a “family.” A goodly number of critics have charged Orwell with inconsistency at best and being a turncoat at worst. Obviously there is a noticeable change in tone in the writing: the bitterness of 1936-1940 is muted. There is no change in position, however.

Recall that in *The Road to Wigan Pier* of 1937 Orwell was, as we have seen: (1) resisting a Popular Front and (2) linking workers and lower-middle and middle classes together and calling for socialists to “capture the exploited middle-class.” He saw no contradiction in maintaining those two positions simultaneously. That is so because he includes the office worker and other non-proletarians in the group of those who are being “robbed and bullied,” and those who “cringe to the boss” and “shudder when they think of the rent.” The critical class line is between secure rich and insecure others, between the robbers and the robbed. A Popular Front was undesirable because the liberal bourgeoisie included within its ranks large number of robbers. The exploited and patriotic middle-class was perfect ground for recruits to a socialism of the ordinary man. The English socialist revolt was, in Orwell’s eyes, a revolt of ordinary people against the “ruling” or “moneyed” class, that is—of the robbed against the robbers. His comments throughout the period 1936—his death in 1950 are perfectly consistent on this point. What obscures the consistency is Orwell’s analysis of the division of class between rich and others rather than between workers and others. The

37 CEJL, I, 305.  
38 CEJL, I, 305.  
39 CEJL, II, 50.  
40 CEJL, II, 64.  
41 CEJL, II, 67-68.  
42 The notion that Orwell made an alteration in position after 1940 gained popularity through the 1940’s and became a widely accepted platitude after the publication of *Animal Farm* in 1945. For example, Henry Pelling in a short, standard text on *Modern Britain: 1885-1955* throws off the assertion that Orwell was a part of the movement of literature “to the right” in the 1940’s. (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1966), p. 183. What the meaning of this alleged movement on Orwell’s part is, is infrequently treated.  
43 Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, p. 199.
group standing alone against the socialist movement is, if everyone knew their own interest, the small and functionless group of "robbers" at the top.

As time went on—from 1936 (his Wigan Pier experience) to Spain and then to the outbreak of the world war—his socialism became more detailed in content and more firmly believed in. *Homage to Catalonia* of 1938 is a restrained but deeply felt testimony to his belief in the possibility of socialism. For the first time in Orwell's experience human solidarity seemed more than a mockery of the word "comrade." It was a word which had previously made him sick. Spain (particularly the city of Barcelona during the period that it was effectively controlled by the Anarchists) redeemed Orwell's nostalgia for America. About Whitman he had said: "The democracy, equality, and comradeship that he is always talking about are not remote ideals, but something that existed in front of his eyes." In Barcelona he found, existing in front of his eyes, "a state of affairs worth fighting for." In December, 1936

Waiters and shop-walkers looked you in the face and treated you as an equal. Servile and even ceremonial forms of speech had temporarily disappeared. Nobody said 'Senor' or 'Don' or even 'Usted'; everyone called everyone else 'Comrade' and 'Thou'. . . . Together with all this there was something of the evil atmosphere of war. The town had a gaunt untidy look, roads and buildings were in poor repair. . . . Even at this period the bread-queues were often hundreds of yards long. Yet so far as one could judge the people were contented and hopeful. There was no unemployment, and the price of living was still extremely low; you saw very few conspicuously destitute people, and no beggars except the gypsies. Above all, there was a belief in the revolution and the future, a feeling of having suddenly emerged into an era of equality and freedom.

The "free human beings" Orwell had found in the literature of 19th century America appeared in the streets of Barcelona.

Of course, Orwell also found terror, manipulation, and physical brutality in Spain. These aspects of his Spanish experience were to play a significant role in his later writing. But as Orwell evaluated his response: "The whole experience has left me with not less but more belief in the decency of human beings." He had seen, to his profound joy,

---

44 CEJL, I, 223.
45 CEJL, I, 499.
that the quality of life of the American era did not rest necessarily on the accident of an empty, preindustrial continent with a weak state and a disestablished church, but could be secured in Europe in his time. Spain is a pivotal experience for Orwell, in both positive and negative terms.

Orwell's presentation of socialism in *The Road to Wigan Pier* is relatively untechnical; he focuses on life in northern mining towns and is led thereby to a plea for justice and liberty. The Spanish experience threw him into the vortex of European revolutionary politics and civil war and the experience served as the foundation of his later writings on truth, language, and politics. His discussion of socialism in *Homage to Catalonia* is still, however, couched in fervent humanist and equalitarian terms. Very little that is technical, concrete or programmatic is supplied. Not until 1940, when he wrote "The Lion and The Unicorn," do we find a comprehensive, detailed consideration of a socialist program. His fundamental commitments are unchanged—he reaffirms the ultimate aim of socialism: "a world-state of free and equal human beings"—but to those commitments he adds a clearer definition and a program.

Socialism, [he says] is usually defined as 'common ownership of the means of production.' Crudely: the state, representing the whole nation, owns everything, and everyone is a state employee. . . . However, it has become clear in the last few years that 'common ownership of the means of production' is not in itself a sufficient definition of Socialism. One must also add the following: approximate equality of incomes (it need be no more than approximate), political democracy, and abolition of all hereditary privilege, especially in education.48

Following this general definition he proceeded to an even more specific six-point program for English socialists to implement. He proposed:

1. Nationalization of land, mines, railways, banks and major industries.
2. Limitation of incomes, on such a scale that the highest tax-free income in Britain does not exceed the lowest by more than ten to one.
3. Reform of the educational system along democratic lines.
4. Immediate Dominion status for India, with power to secede when the war is over.

48 CEJL, II, 79-80.
5. Formation of an Imperial General Council, in which the coloured peoples are to be represented.

6. Declaration of formal alliance with China, Abyssinia and all other victims of the Fascist powers.\(^{49}\)

He went on to explore each of the proposals in some detail. The sum of the effects of these proposals, which he believed to be fully realizable, he frankly saw as turning "England into a Socialist democracy." He is critical of Labor leaders who were content to draw salaries and swap jobs with the Tories. No workable socialist program had appeared because no one "genuinely wanted any major change to happen."\(^{50}\) Labor's "timid reformism" and the Marxist's "nineteenth century spectacles" were both unsuited to the production of real change. Orwell thought winning the war depended on putting the mass of the British people behind a war effort which promised them a better future. John Mander's assertion that "Orwell does not really want any change" is wholly misguided.\(^{51}\)

Orwell returned to a fairly detailed presentation of a socialist program in "The English People," written in 1944. He clarifies his comments on incomes and democracy in education, adds a discussion of the class-bound features of the English language, and urges less centralization. While he acknowledged and, in fact, was one of the first to see, the utility of the movement toward collective institutions and a centrally organized economy, he was quick to alert his readers to the danger involved.\(^{52}\) The danger was that in a system of centralized planning "the State' may come to mean no more than a self-elected political party, and oligarchy and privilege can return, based on power rather than on money."\(^{53}\) It was clear to Orwell that "the changeover to a centralized economy . . . does not of itself guarantee greater equality between man and man."\(^{54}\) Or, to put it differently, "collectivism is not inherently democratic." In fact, if socialism is to mean nothing more than "... centralized control, it merely paves the way for a new form of oligarchy."\(^{55}\) A planned and centralized society is always liable to such a development.\(^{56}\) To say this is \textit{not the same thing} as saying, what Orwell never said, that collectivism was inherently undemocratic.

\(^{49}\) CEJL, II, 96.

\(^{50}\) CEJL, II, 93.


\(^{52}\) CEJL, III, 32-34.

\(^{53}\) CEJL, II, 80.

\(^{54}\) CEJL, III, 33.

\(^{55}\) CEJL, III, 128.

\(^{56}\) CEJL, IV, 163.
It is undeniable that Orwell's own temperament would have been happier in the pre-collectivist world, but, as he said numberless times, machines are here to stay and given a certain level of industrialization, collective institutions follow. He believed that it is precisely the industrial economy which makes technically possible adequate material conditions for the average man. If one is not blessed with an empty continent, one must turn to the productivity of the machine age and its organizing institutions.

He is equally clear on the second point. In April, 1940 he said, "there is little question now of averting a collectivist society. The only question is whether it is to be founded on willing cooperation or the machine-gun." 57 The 'managerial society' was as familiar a concept to Orwell as to James Burnham; he wrote about it earlier and at least-as well. But he did not share what he supposed to be Burnham's insistence on the totalitarian form as the inevitable form of that society. It was Orwell's liberalism which led him to avoid taking that route. His position needs to be precisely put.

He thought it perfectly possible that modern collectivism should, in the event, become totalitarian. The probabilities between the totalitarian form and the "humaner, freer" form were delicately balanced. Serious students might well differ in their estimates. He denied, however (1) that collectivism is inherently democratic and (2) that it is inherently undemocratic. The first position is Utopian and the second is fatalistic. His position here is that both of the beliefs above are metaphysically rooted. They flow not from a sober assessment of the political realities, but from world-views against which evidence is irrelevant. The pessimism which Orwell saw in the second position deserves separate study. For now it is enough to say that Orwell's sense of the world was neither Utopian, nor fatalistic, but rather—liberal. "The danger that is involved—[is] not, indeed, in a centralized economy as such, but in going forward into a collectivist age without remembering that the price of liberty is eternal vigilance." 58

Ultimately, therefore, he came to regard socialist concentration—collectivism—as a necessary but not sufficient condition of the kind of democratic socialism toward which he wished to see England move. 59 Like some of his contemporaries (Simone Weil is an example), he felt equality of condition to be a mockery if it means equal powerlessness

57 CEJL, II, 16.
58 CEJL, III, 255. As Jenni Calder very wisely says, "Orwell is directing his attack against those who persisted in the belief that Russia was the home of socialism. He was convinced that this belief had a crippling effect on the socialist movement in Britain." Chronicles of Conscience, p. 244.
59 CEJL, IV, 18.
in the face of new managerial elites. It is a mockery not far different from the mockery of capitalism's "freedom" to compete in an unfair race, to lose, and to suffer the consequences. He believed that in those nations in which "liberalism has struck its deepest roots . . . though a collectivized economy is bound to come, those countries will know how to evolve a form of Socialism which is not totalitarian. . . ." He thought that the belief might be a "pious hope," but it did not affront his sense of the realities before him. Orwell's fire through the 1930's and 1940's was turned toward securing the liberal virtues which made this possibility a live one. The "fallacy of the moment" was totalitarianism, not capitalism, for capitalism was dying. The socialist left was totalitarianism's only fashionable advocate. For that reason English socialism felt the force of Orwell's annoyingly lucid prose.

T. A. Birrell's comment that "Orwell belongs, in fact, to the end of the Protestant liberal tradition, rather than to any form of modern Socialism" appears wrong on both counts. Orwell did not see the liberal tradition as "ending," and his form of socialism, while unconventional on many points, is certainly a "form of modern Socialism." His six-point program (above) is undeniably modern and socialistic. Furthermore, the score of assertions about Orwell's reactionary politics are conspicuously off the mark. One who could say, with J. E. Miller, that "the ultimate source of Orwell's curiously blotchy, but essentially reactionary complexion is to be found in that fundamental contradiction in his make-up . . . which comes down to the coupling of a certain objectivity about the real world with a horrible nostalgia for the past" just has not read what Orwell has written. Whatever the "contradiction in his make-up," Orwell's public position was not "essentially reactionary" in any commonly accepted meaning of the words. For example, an assumption shared by reactionary or tory advocates is that the social order requires hierarchy or "degree." Nowhere in the entire body of his writing can Orwell be found to have supported this assumption. On the contrary, social and political equality is the cornerstone of Orwell's

---

60 See, for example, her Seventy Letters (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), pp. 32-39 on factory organization.
61 CEJL, II, 137.
63 J. E. Miller, "George Orwell and Our Time," Million, No. 2, 1945, p. 54.
64 See Samuel Beer, British Politics in a Collectivist Age, Vintage Books (New York: Random House, 1969), p. 94. It must be admitted that Orwell gave too little thought to the problems involved in the management of a complex, centrally run economy. He did see the danger to liberty, but apparently believed that vigorous dedication to the protection of individual liberties would be the appropriate response. He was also aware of the tendency to oligarchy in large institutions, What is missing from his account is a consideration of the very nature of planning with regard to the need for hierarchy.
political thought. A comment which is characteristic of Orwell's very concrete sense of the meaning of inequality is one such as that made in an essay on "hop-picking:" "Although the farmers have the hop-pickers in a cleft-stick, and always will until there is a picker's union." Orwell's career was directed toward publicizing and arguing against the various "cleft-sticks" the common man was threatened by.

What makes understanding and assessing Orwell's idiosyncratic brand of socialism so difficult is its very idiosyncracy. He was never orthodox and refused to fit into categories developed for 'regular' socialists. That defect, such as it is, is also Orwell's greatest strength. As Frank Getlein put it,

to define Orwell's position in the real world, or the political world, requires a phrase like 'democratic socialism,' the one he uses himself. The phrase is inadequate; according to Orwell, any political position, certainly any active political position, brings with it a set of binders and those he never wore.

Many have noted that "he was one of the few men who traveled to the far Left without an unconditional surrender to dogma. . . ." Perhaps that is why Orwell is read today while many 'regulars' are largely forgotten.

---

65 CEJL, I, 63.
66 Frank Getlein, "Review of 'Such, Such Were the Days'," Commonweal (March 20, 1953), 606.