# The Social and Political Thought of George Orwell

## A reassessment

Stephen Ingle

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# The Social and Political Thought of George Orwell

From the playing fields of Eton College to the slums of Wigan and the battlefields of the Spanish Civil War, George Orwell led a unique life that found expression in a prose style of uncompromising brilliance.

Stephen Ingle captures this range of social experience and political vision in this fascinating new study, showing that although Orwell is often read as a socialist, he is best understood as a moralist and imaginative writer. This new reading, supported by detailed and thorough analysis, enables the reader to explore key topics such as:

- the myths of working-class socialism
- socialism, family values and poverty
- the threat of totalitarianism
- patriotism and imperialism
- the nature of revolution
- power and the Intellectuals.

This is a stimulating new view of one of the most influential figures of the twentieth century.

This book will be of interest to students of political history, political theory and literature, as well as keen readers of George Orwell's writing.

**Stephen Ingle** is Professor at the Politics Department, University of Stirling. His main academic interests are in the relationship between politics and literature and in adversarial (two party) politics, especially in the UK.

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To the memory of one James Ingle and to the future health and happiness of another James Ingle.

# Acknowledgements

I have been teaching in the areas of politics and literature for a number of years and have been fascinated especially by the work of George Orwell. In the early 1990s I began work on a book on Orwell and thought at the time that my interest in him would be satisfied. However, *George Orwell: A Political Life*, published by Manchester University Press in 1993, left me feeling that I wanted to say more than the essentially hybrid format of that book had allowed me to say about his political ideas. In 2003, Orwell's centenary year, I was invited to give a number of papers on aspects of Orwell's thought and was disingenuous enough to imagine that these could easily be brought together to make a book. Routledge were good enough to express an interest in the project, and so I immediately began to work on my individual papers. But of course I discovered that a great deal more work had to be done on each, and gaps between them, too, had to be filled. I am very grateful to those at Routledge who expressed an interest in the original project and to those, especially Harriet Brinton, who bore with me when it became clear that the task would be more difficult than originally envisaged.

I would also like to express my gratitude to two friends, Claire Lightowler and Stanley Kleinberg, who read most of the original draft – in fact, in Stanley's case, all the original draft. Their comments were very helpful and caused me frequently to rethink my approach. I am not a good proofreader; in fact, if I were any younger I would have been classified as dyslexic. In those days, however, that option was not available – only indolence. It has been my great good fortune to have a friend who is a meticulous proofreader and I am most grateful for the help that John Stewart offered and gave. Finally, my wife has been enormously and unstintingly supportive of my work. This project would not have been possible to complete without her help. All of these people are partly responsible for the successful completion of what follows, but only I am responsible for its deficiencies.

Stephen Ingle, Stirling, May 2005

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# 1 In search of Orwell

That Trotskyite with the big feet.

(H. G. Wells)

'It's the pigs I remember most. Napoleon, Squealer – especially Squealer – and when I look round the Chamber, there they are.' So said a back-bencher in response to a survey on Labour MPs' reading habits.[1] He claimed that his politics had been decisively shaped by reading Orwell. For his own part, Orwell acknowledged the influence of other writers. The world would have been perceptively different, he said, if H. G. Wells, the hero of his youth, had not existed.[2] This is a substantial claim to make in respect of any individual, especially a writer, and yet it is a claim that might be advanced equally seriously on behalf of Orwell himself. There is no comparison between the amount that the two writers published, or indeed between the length of time over which both were writing. Wells established an international reputation comparatively early in his career, went on to write some seventy novels and short stories as well as two extremely widely read world histories and a celebrated textbook on biology, met and claimed to have influenced a number of world statesmen and worked productively into his eighties. Orwell, on the other hand, achieved fame only near the end of his life, died at the age of forty-six after several years of debilitating ill-health, had the ear of no politicians or statesmen and wrote only nine major works (two of which he subsequently sought to suppress) and a number of seminal long essays (one of which he sought to suppress). On the face of it, then, any claim that Orwell might have changed the world would appear to be fanciful. But only a little digging would allow a fuller, and different, picture to emerge.

Orwell's books have earned twice as much as all the writers on Secker and Warburg's entire list (including Gide, Kafka, Mann and

Colette), says Jeffrey Meyers.[3] Three of his works – *Keep the Aspidistra Flying, Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty Four* – have been made into popular films. Much of Orwell's enduring reputation was the consequence of his anti-totalitarian, and specifically anti-Stalinist, polemics. When he originally took this stance it was by no means popular or expedient. From the Spanish Civil War onwards, Orwell had difficulty getting some of his more partisan writing published. *Animal Farm* was a case in point: because the book was so clearly aimed at Stalin and his regime, and because until 1945 the USSR was such an important ally in the war against Hitler, it was difficult to rouse publishers' interest on either side of the Atlantic. When the Western allies broke with their former brothers-in-arms, this graphic fable of Soviet brutality suddenly became very apposite and T. S. Eliot's earlier judgement regarding its political inappropriateness was turned on its head.[4] The publication a few years later of *Nineteen Eighty Four* could scarcely have been better timed. *Nineteen Eighty Four* was recently described as 'the canonical text' of anti-communism, 'the key imaginative manifesto of the Cold War'.[5] The book, together with *Animal Farm*, was translated into more than sixty languages, the two selling more than forty million copies between them. *Nineteen Eighty Four* received the supreme populist accolade, abridgement for the *Readers' Digest*. In a survey of university-bound students in Britain and the United States, *Nineteen Eighty Four* was amongst the most 'personally significant books'.[6] In 1983 a Harris Poll discovered that no fewer than 27 per cent of Americans claimed to have read *Nineteen Eighty Four* – wishful thinking perhaps, but at least indicative of the book's reputation with the American public. In the first six months of 1984 itself, 301,000 copies of *Nineteen Eighty Four* were sold in Britain alone, together with 132,000 copies of *Animal Farm*. In the USA in the same year the novel was selling 50,000 copies a day. But some twenty years after the passing of that totemic year and twelve years after the end of the Cold War, the centenary of Orwell's birth brought a number of biographies, a small and generally distinguished cluster of hagiographies,[7] new editions of all his major works, television profiles and international conferences. The following year the US National Council of Teachers sponsored a nationwide reading and discussion project on *Nineteen Eighty Four*.

No doubting, then, the extent of Orwell's influence on the English-speaking world and the significance of his contribution to Western morale in the Cold War. No doubting either the extent to which his critical stance *vis-à-vis* the Soviet Union was taken out of context: Orwell was trying to save the world for socialism as he understood it,

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and not for Western capitalism or for right-wing individualism. The enthusiastic adoption of *Nineteen Eighty Four* by the right-wing John Birch society[8] would have infuriated Orwell beyond measure, though his many opponents on the Left might have felt vindicated. Even worse for Orwell's *amour propre* perhaps would have been Rupert Murdoch's claim, in a lecture to the Centre for Independent Studies, that, in the struggle between free markets and totalitarianism, it was News International that had kept alive Orwell's 'crystal spirit'.[9]

Orwell's popularity did not disappear with time, even after the collapse of the Berlin Wall. More than half a century after they were written, Orwell's books are still much in demand. In fact in 2005 London's Royal Opera House put on a production of Lorin Mazel's opera *Nineteen Eighty Four*, whose themes, according to the composer, were 'seemingly ever more relevant'. Why is his social and political thought still so influential? What is the nature of Orwell's influence? This book constitutes an attempt to address these questions by means of a detailed analysis of Orwell's social and political thought. Where to begin? The obvious starting point must surely be a consideration of some of the main products of the 'Orwell industry', the key commentaries on and biographies of Orwell that have emerged since his death. Our focus is on Orwell's social and political thought, and so we will not be much concerned with the details of his life, except where they bear directly upon his thought. In reviewing some of the key commentaries and biographies, not only will we extract important insights into our subject, but we will introduce the main themes to be explored in the body of this study. The continuing popularity of a writer dismissed by some as simply one of the most martial of the Cold Warriors implies that there must be something more to Orwell than the good fortune of being the right person in the right place at the right time with the right message for the Right.

## 1

Sir Bernard Crick, Orwell's first and, according to Julian Symons, definitive biographer, agreed to undertake that task because he wished to acknowledge, to celebrate, Orwell's success in achieving his goal of making political writing into an art. Sir Bernard would have warmed to the kind of political writing that Orwell wished to make into an art: what Orwell called democratic socialism. Indeed, Crick called Orwell a supreme political writer 'both for what he said and how he said it'.[10] However, the biography shows clearly that Crick was primarily interested in what Orwell had to say rather than in how he said it. Had he

chosen, Crick could have concentrated more on Orwell's works as literature, but his interest was principally biographical and his exploration of Orwell's life was undertaken to enrich our understanding of his politics. Crick set himself the task of coming as close as he could to understanding Orwell through observing his life closely. Acknowledging the shortcomings, as he saw them, of psychological analysis – 'none of us can enter into another person's mind'[11] – he set out systematically to gather and corroborate the available evidence. Unlike a number of biographers who followed him, for example Michael Shelden, who left no stone wittingly unturned,[12] Crick was not much concerned with what Samuel Johnson called 'domestic privacies', primarily because he had concluded that Orwell had no great secrets to hide and that, anyway, they would not have impacted greatly on what Orwell had to say.[13] This strategy seems to amount to fighting with one's arm tied behind one's back. We cannot know that Orwell had no secrets that might have affected his work without first carefully looking. Abstemiousness can be a virtue when we choose not to include some secrets merely because they are titillating, but it can also turn out to be a vice if we decide not to include some secrets that might have provided a clue to some action or event because they might impugn the integrity of the subject. An a priori decision not even to consider such things, however, can surely only be regarded as a vice in a biographer. Crick was quite clear in his own mind that the most important thing about Orwell was his supreme ability to render the spirit of democratic socialism as art, but he gave more attention to the socialism than the art. Crick has argued that Orwell scholars who see their subject as, for example, a Christian socialist, or as a Trotskyite, are actually finding in Orwell chiefly a reflection of their own political preferences, whereas Crick assures us that as a matter of fact, when all is said and done, Orwell was a plain Tribunite socialist. *Quod erat demonstrandum?* Even so, we should not give up the attempt to categorise Orwell's social and political thought as objectively as we can, and in any case I do not believe that Orwell was a Tribunite socialist, and I shall try later to show why. Crick's main contribution to Orwell scholarship was to provide a carefully crafted portrait of the man, skilfully set within the background of the main events and ideas of his times.

Sir Bernard was by no means the first of Orwell's biographers. Orwell himself sought to prevent the writing of a biography (an odd thing for a man with no 'secrets', a man whose own writing was so patently autobiographical), but he was not successful, for a number appeared. Lionel Trilling included a perceptive chapter on Orwell in

his 1955 book *The Opposing Self*, and he entitled it significantly 'George Orwell and the Politics of Truth'.[14] Orwell, like Cobbett, to whom he is often compared, did not dream of new kinds of men but contented himself with 'the old kind' of man, and passionately wanted for these men 'freedom, bacon and proper work'. Trilling declared that Orwell *was* what he wrote: he acted out his beliefs in the world and so could be considered, in short, a virtuous man. This theme of virtue became a leitmotiv for many who wrote about Orwell, including Crick himself; we shall return to it. For Trilling, Orwell's virtue as a writer lay in his not being a genius, in his 'fronting the world with nothing else than [his] simple, direct, undeceived intelligence'. Although this analysis is consistent with Trilling's picture of the man and the writer being one and the same, it is not of itself convincing. In 1989 a personal, annotated copy of *Down and Out in Paris and London*, which Orwell had sent to an old flame, Brenda Salkeld, came to light. Michael Shelden read the annotations with care and his conclusions throw a different light on the relationship between the man and his work. 'It is the moment in Orwell's career when we can see the split. As Eric Blair he is saying "George Orwell said this, but I as Eric Blair felt this." He had seized upon a way of *creating* himself as Orwell, of hiding Blair almost perfectly for the rest of his life.'[15] Eventually 'Orwell' came to represent what Rodden called a 'persona of such style and simplicity ... the Common Man arguing plain Common Sense'.[16] From 1930 onwards, then, Blair (Orwell-the-man) had begun to create a fictional character, Orwell-the-writer, a device which, as Raymond Williams put it, enabled him to get inside the experiences he was writing about. 'Orwell' was to remain Orwell's finest literary achievement, one that as it blossomed would transform his prose style and allow his politics to develop. (I had the pleasure of spending a weekend in the house of Orwell's nephew Henry Dakin some years ago. It was as clear as could be that the George Orwell I knew from his writings and the Eric Blair he knew as an uncle were quite different men. My man was Trilling's 'Orwell of the undeceived intelligence', a literary contrivance that enabled its creator to champion the values of ordinary people.) In response to Trilling, then, to say that Orwell *was* what he wrote, whilst not entirely wrong, is to miss a trick. Nevertheless, Trilling's picture of Orwell as common-sensible, forthright, virtuous and truthful has been influential.

In 1961 Richard Rees, formerly editor of *The Adelphi* for whom Orwell frequently wrote, and a long-time friend, wrote a biography poignantly entitled *George Orwell: Fugitive from the Camp of Victory*.[17] Rees also wrote a biography of Simone Weil, for whom much

the same title would have been appropriate, and he argued about Orwell, as he would about Weil, that a concern for justice and an understanding of the balance of society made him ready to add his weight to the lighter scale, to change sides. Rees offered as an example Orwell's championing of the industrial working-class, especially the unemployed, but he could have chosen Orwell's joining the Partido Obrero de Unification Marxista (POUM) militia when fighting in the Spanish Civil War. Although he scarcely knew enough about the situation for this to have been an entirely conscious decision, there seems to have been something quite natural about his siding with the party that would be treacherously attacked by its former allies and then generally demonised. As we shall see, when Orwell returned to Britain he declared that his championing of POUM's cause, which earned him the distrust and enmity of a number of former friends, was prompted not so much by the belief that POUM was right as that it was unfairly treated. This fire for justice was fanned by a general disregard for his personal safety. Orwell's attitude towards his own health seems to represent a disdain for the sensible and comfortable in favour of the dangerous and uncomfortable in pursuit of his mission. His decision to live on Jura towards the end of his life is a specific example. Here was a man who was tubercular and who had been told that he needed easy access to a good hospital and the benefit of a dry climate, so he made for one of the most inaccessible parts of the Inner Hebrides, to live in what Rees described as 'the most uninhabitable house in the British Isles'.[18] Orwell wrote to his friends in London that the journey was quite easy really, though they would have to walk the last eight soggy miles. But he completed *Nineteen Eighty Four* there.

Rees found it difficult to account for Orwell's fame. As we have seen, he was hardly prolific. His lack of an informed knowledge of philosophical and psychological issues limited the scope of his writing; and his style, Rees suggested, was nothing like as brilliant as Joyce's. For Rees, then, Orwell's cult status could be explained only by his personal appeal, 'the man he was'. Plausible though this might have sounded in 1961, it can hardly account for his continuing popularity half a century later. Neither, as we stressed, can the timeliness of his anti-totalitarian political stance. Nevertheless, Rees did try to elaborate on the kind of man he took Orwell to be: he reminded us of Orwell's description of Dickens in his celebrated essay as a man who was 'generously angry . . . a nineteenth century liberal, a free intelligence, a type hated with equal hatred by all those smelly little orthodoxies which are now contending for our souls'.[19] Orwell could have been describing himself, said Rees. There is something in what

Rees says, though the concern with equality that marks out the socialist was more central than the concern with individual liberty that marked out the liberal. However, there was nothing generous about Orwell's anger, even though he might have placed on record his inability to hate Hitler.[20] His criticism of his opponents, especially on the Left, was often vicious. A request from the *New Left Review* seeking authors' responses to the Spanish Civil War drew this unpublished reply from Orwell: 'By the way, tell your pansy friend Spender that I am preserving specimens of his war-heroics and that when the time comes when he squirms for shame at having written it . . . I shall rub it in good and hard.'[21] Later Orwell met and formed a friendship with Spender, who asked how Orwell could have attacked him without knowing him. Orwell responded that he had not 'exactly' attacked him but might perhaps have used the phrase 'parlour Bolsheviks' (in fact fashionable pansies), and that knowing someone made it difficult to criticise them. He seems nevertheless to have managed in Cyril Connolly's case without too much difficulty: his criticism of his friend's novel *The Rock Pool* was devastating.[22] Orwell said he wanted to retain the right to be intellectually brutal,[23] though his frequent criticisms of the 'nancy poets' would score more highly for brutality than intellect. No critique of Orwell himself, from a representative of any of the smelly orthodoxies he detested, was more splenetic or vindictive than his own critique of W. H. Auden – that 'sort of gutless Kipling' – and especially of his poem 'Spain'.[24]

So, Orwell was not a generously angry man. On the other hand, the opprobrium that settled on his reputation after it was disclosed that Orwell had provided a list of 'fellow travelling' public figures to the security services seems largely unearned. A headline in *The Guardian* during his centenary wondered whether he hadn't been a government stooge.[25] More damning was the charge that Orwell had supplied the list to his old friend Celia Kirwan to secure what might be called romantic favours. As a matter of fact, at the time he compiled the list Orwell was too ill even to receive visitors, let alone plan unlikely amorous adventures.[26] The purpose of the list had been to identify those whom it would not have been appropriate to consider for pro-British propaganda purposes, and it contained, along with Chaplin, Michael Redrave, E. H. Carr and the Labour backbencher Tom Driberg, the name of Hugh McDiarmid, the stridently anti-English Scottish Nationalist. None of these made any secret of their sympathies and they were well known to the security services. Nevertheless, Orwell gave the matter a lot of thought and made no bones about providing the information. All things considered, it is not surprising

that Richard Rees called Orwell a good hater. In more general terms, however, Rees confirmed the view of Orwell as truthful and virtuous, and added that his chief concern both as a writer and a man was with moral values.

An acquaintance who knew Orwell for a long period of time was fellow Etonian Christopher Hollis. A Catholic convert, Hollis was the Conservative MP for Devizes from 1945 to 1955, and he wrote *A Study of George Orwell* on his retirement from Parliament. Hollis' approach to his subject provides an excellent example of Crick's point, that those who write about Orwell actually write about themselves; it was Kingsley Amis who noted that Hollis could not resist drawing Orwell very much in his own image. Hollis' Orwell, then, is at heart a Conservative and a Catholic fellow-traveller, of whom he concluded: 'Orwell never doubted that man was fundamentally a moral being and that this world was a testing place.'[27] His Orwell was a subconscious Christian with a deep sympathy for the conservative ideals of tradition and organicism.

Another important biography appeared in the following decade, with an evocative title, George Woodcock's *The Crystal Spirit*.[28] Woodcock and Orwell had remained on good terms despite the former's pacifism, which made them ideological opponents during the war. Woodcock regarded Orwell as a far more complex character than he liked to present himself: Woodcock describes him as 'in his own way a man of the left',[29] an 'ambivalent anarchist',[30] a radical individualist (*à la* Hazlitt)[31] and a Swiftian Tory dissenter.[32] Indeed, in his essay on Swift, as Woodcock shows, Orwell displayed a Tocquevillian fear of public opinion. 'When human beings are governed by "thou shalt not", the individual can practice a certain amount of eccentricity: when they are supposedly governed by "love" or "reason" he is under continuous pressure to make him behave and think in exactly the same way as everyone else.'[33] No wonder, then, that conservatives, anarchists, Trotskyites, socialists and liberals found encouragement in his work; but as Woodcock shrewdly observed, they must all be missing something. Woodcock's Orwell, then, was essentially a complex figure whose politics reflected a series of 'highly idiosyncratic' reactions to the experiences of life[34] but who lacked any ideological frame by which he might readily be identified. This is only part of the story, because we know that Orwell, more than most of us, actively *chose* the experiences to which he responded 'idiosyncratically'. Perhaps his years in Burma were a terrible mistake (though in retrospect even this is open to doubt), but he chose to enlist. He chose to go down to the 'bedrock of Western civilisation' on his return from Burma, chose to go to the

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