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# George Orwell: Socialism and Utopia

RICHARD WHITE

George Orwell is usually regarded as the prophet of false utopias. In *Animal Farm* and *1984*, he warns us of the future possibilities of totalitarianism, and he remains skeptical of every version of the ideal society that isn't ultimately connected to ordinary life as we know it. Less well-known is Orwell's profound commitment to socialism as the only proper basis for the society of the future. This article will show how much of Orwell's work is informed by liberty, equality, and fraternity, or the basic values of socialism. Orwell was always suspicious of revolutionary millenarianism; but at the same time, he believed in the possibility of progress towards an ideal community of the future, and he thought that such a utopia could only be socialist in character. Before considering Orwell's own views, however, I shall look at the possibility of "ethical socialism," its relationship to Marxism, and the authentic meaning of liberty, equality, and fraternity.

## I

In the third part of *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels skillfully situate their own theory of "scientific socialism," or communism, against the other varieties of socialism which existed in their day. They distinguish the three basic forms of "reactionary socialism," "bourgeois socialism," and "Utopian socialism" with all their variations, and in a brilliant tour de force they demonstrate how their socialist competitors are all reactionary to some extent (Marx and Engels 106–118). Marx and Engels also comment that "The theoretical conclusions of the Communists are in no way based on ideas or principles that have been invented, or discovered by this or that would-be reformer. They merely express, in general terms, actual relations springing from an existing class struggle, from a historical movement going on under our very eyes" (Marx and Engels 95). In other words—although this is to focus on only one polemical text—socialism is inevitable and all ethical considerations are strictly beside the point. Sometimes this position is referred to as "vulgar Marxism," and while it is misleading, it is also the case that scholars and revolutionaries have often interpreted Marx in this straightforward deterministic way.<sup>1</sup> Now, Marx rose above his socialist rivals, and for some time Marxism

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was perhaps the only version of socialism or communism to be taken seriously as a political philosophy. However, with the collapse of the Soviet communist system the historical necessity of socialism seems to have been discredited by history itself. At this point, though, it is possible to return to the tradition of ethical socialism that Marx himself rejected when he condemned his socialist rivals. It can be asked whether socialism is ethically necessary; and if it can be justified in terms of basic values—such as justice, freedom, or equality—that most people would be likely to affirm.

There are many writers who could be described as “ethical socialists,” including Robert Owen, Proudhon, Fourier, Bernstein, R.H. Tawney, and the novelist George Orwell, who is the specific focus of this paper.<sup>2</sup> In opposition to the adherents of vulgar Marxism, one thing they all have in common is their rejection of the historical inevitability of socialism. For Orwell and all the others, socialism is morally necessary since it is the most obvious manifestation of freedom, justice, and equality. However, socialism is not historically necessary—as Orwell puts it, the triumph of Hitler proved that nothing is historically inevitable—and this absence of necessity means that the success or failure of socialism must be more closely tied to the moral character and policies of those who support it (*The Road to Wigan Pier* 185). Marx believed that revolutionary violence was inevitable since those in power will never voluntarily relinquish their position, and he viewed the future communist society as the redemption of that nightmare of history that we have had hitherto. However, the ethical socialist remains suspicious of an absolute break between the present situation and the future ideal: using violence to end violence or to achieve freedom is problematic at best, and the experience of the Soviet Union suggests that the revolutionary society that is thereby created will remain inherently violent and opposed to individual freedom. Socialism which is achieved through democratic forms is much more likely to preserve the value of freedom than socialism which has to be violently imposed. Hence, instead of justifying the present in terms of the future, the ethical socialist, such as Orwell, focuses more on the basic decency of working people, or some other moral tradition that already exists, using this focus as an ethical bridge to socialism and the basis of future transformations.

Marx does not emphasize values, and he does not present himself as an ethical philosopher. He does not do so partly because he sees values as derivative of the status quo and partly because he remains deeply suspicious

of whatever values are presented as eternal and unchanging. Yet, there is a moral thrust that runs throughout his writings, not only in works such as *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, where he describes the different forms of alienation under capitalism, but also in his later writings. The following excerpt from *Capital* makes this clear:

Within the capitalist system all methods for raising the social productiveness of labour are brought about at the cost of the individual labourer; all means for the development of production transform themselves into means of domination over, and exploitation of, the producers; they mutilate the labourer into a fragment of a man, degrade him to the level of an appendage of a machine, destroy every remnant of charm in his work and turn it into a hated toil; they estrange him from the intellectual potentialities of the labour process. . . . (Ch. 25 s.4)

In fact, the values that Marx does adhere to are the same values that the ethical socialist makes explicit. These values can be summarized in terms of the revolutionary triad of liberty, equality, and fraternity, and it may be argued that they are the constitutive values of socialism itself. In his classic work, *In Defence of Politics*, Bernard Crick comments: "Liberty, equality and fraternity are the specifically socialist cluster of values—if one treats 'cooperation' and 'community' as closely related to 'fraternity.' Only equality is specifically socialist in itself; liberty and fraternity, however, take on a distinctively socialist form when the three are related to each other" (214). I would add that there is both a conceptual and a historical priority to liberty, equality, and fraternity in the reflective understanding of socialism, and it is this set of values that orients Orwell's own thinking on social justice. I will briefly clarify these values before examining how Orwell uses them in his work, both in his journalistic writings and in his published novels.

First of all, liberty. In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels argue that the bourgeois liberal version of freedom is secondary and derived (98–99). The freedom to vote, the freedom to get a job, and the freedom to worship are all significant aspects of individual liberty; but for Marx and Engels, underlying all of these particular liberties is the positive conception

of freedom as autonomy or self-determination. True freedom is not just the negative liberty from interference that liberals uphold, but, rather, it means being in charge of one's own life and being in a position to fulfill one's highest potential as a human being. Hence, I am not free if I am uneducated or unable to afford health care, or if I am forced to work long hours just in order to live. I may be entitled to vote, or buy things, or even to refuse my labor, but these particular liberties are meaningless and beside the point if I am simply not in a position to cultivate my own human powers because of poverty or prejudice, the lack of education, or some other social handicap.

The liberal notion of equality is affirmed by Kant and other moral philosophers who recognize the moral equivalence of all human beings: Every human being is worthy of respect, and we should not treat others just as a means to our own ends. Once again, however, the socialist understanding of equality involves both a deepening and a clarification of this insight. The point is that true equality requires equal consideration of needs and interests: no one's basic needs are any more or less important than anyone else's, and no one's interests should be taken more or less seriously than those of other people. It can be argued that in a state of nature human beings are basically equal. Obviously, some are stronger than others and some have special talents, but everyone is mortal and even the strongest and most talented person is vulnerable when he or she is asleep. Following this line of thought, the great inequalities that exist between human beings in our society are not the consequence of natural inequalities that are somehow unavoidable, but the result of social conventions. The question then becomes whether any of these social inequalities can be justified in terms of the common good or some other acceptable measure. The goal of socialism is to remove the unjustifiable inequalities, including the vast inequalities of wealth that typically exist in a capitalist society, and to create a world in which it would be possible for everyone to have the best life that it is possible for human beings to have.

Finally, fraternity (or sorority) is the positive value of community, and it involves the sense of belonging to a society that accepts and affirms each person as a full participant in projects and practices that provide meaning insofar as they transcend the individual life. Marx argues that under capitalism the stress on individual advancement and survival has reduced society to a mere collection of individuals who are all absorbed in their own selfish projects—they can only relate indifferently to each other or with hostility as

competitors. Once again, Crick comments: “In many ways the classical ideal of free citizenship is not so much superseded by Marx in his critique of capitalist society, as assumed by him.” And he adds, “In his early *Critique of Hegel* . . . [Marx] wrote that ‘the essence of man is the true community of men’ and that ‘men, not as abstractions but as real, living, particular individuals are this community. As they are, so it is too’” (207). Hence the negative and atomistic qualities of modern life drive the socialist desire to instill an authentic sense of community that would enhance individual existence by giving us a sense of belonging to something that is real and greater than we are—or the fulfillment of our “species being.”

Now, it must be allowed that from the socialist perspective, liberty, equality, and fraternity are not completely separable values that can be ranked from the most to the least important. Among socialists at least, there is recognition of the interplay between these different values and the way in which they involve and connect with each other. As Orwell points out, for as long as there are gross inequalities in society people will never feel a sense of solidarity or of belonging to the same social project—for equality is the condition for fraternity or community with others.<sup>3</sup> Hence the importance of apprehending these values in relation to each other and cultivating each of them in a way that best harmonizes with the other two. Or, since freedom without equality makes no sense and fraternity without liberty is seriously flawed, it may be the case that what we are concerned with here is just *one* value and the creative tension between its different aspects.

With all of this in mind, I will now move directly to George Orwell. This article focuses on the ethical grounding of Orwell’s work (the appeal to “moral decency” that is everywhere explicit or implied) as well as Orwell’s recognition of the unavoidable connection between writing and politics—as he puts it, “The opinion that art should have nothing to do with politics is itself a political attitude” (*Essays* 1083). Both of these perspectives come together in the ideal of ethical socialism. It is possible to understand Orwell’s writings, both his fiction and non-fiction, through the framework of the socialist values that orient his perspective on the world; and in this way, it is also possible to grasp the relationships among philosophy, literature, and politics that are evidenced by his work. In what follows, I argue that Orwell’s depiction of modern life remains illuminating, and it continues to serve as an argument for the moral necessity of socialism.

## II

Orwell was not a doctrinaire socialist: He was disdainful of socialist jargon or “bubbling about dialectical materialism,” and he seemed to associate socialist theory with the alienated middle-class (*Wigan Pier* 197). Instead, he viewed socialism as common sense and the expression of basic moral decency, and he wrote in a preface to *Animal Farm*, “I became pro-Socialist more out of disgust with the way the poorer section of the industrial workers were oppressed and neglected than out of any theoretical admiration for a planned society” (*Essays* 1211). Even if he was not as privileged as some of his school friends, Orwell had a decent upbringing and joined the British colonial police in Burma at the age of 19. However, he came to realize the intolerable nature of his position as a foreign oppressor in an occupied land, and from that point on, he devoted himself to the fight against injustice and oppression of every kind:

I was conscious of an immense weight of guilt that I had got to expiate. I suppose that sounds exaggerated; but if you do for five years a job that you thoroughly disapprove of, you will probably feel the same. I had reduced everything to the simple theory that the oppressed are always right and the oppressors are always wrong; a mistaken theory, but the natural result of being one of the oppressors yourself. I felt that I had got to escape not merely from imperialism but from every form of man's dominion over man. I wanted to submerge myself, to get right down among the oppressed, to be one of them and on their side against the tyrants. (*Wigan Pier* 185)

Through his experience of being down and out in Paris and London, his investigation of poverty in the north of England, and his involvement in the Spanish Civil War, Orwell came to have a much deeper understanding of the total nature of society, an understanding which his privileged origins had previously denied him. He made it his life project to liberate himself from all of the prejudices and received ideas that he had inherited with his upbringing.<sup>4</sup> He was not always successful, but he became an independent thinker who maintained a critical distance from all the great movements of

the age, including imperialism, nationalism, fascism, and communism. In his occasional essays, his novels, and his social commentaries, he developed arguments for socialism and a set of positive proposals for transforming the nature of English society along socialist lines. It is unclear, however, whether Orwell had a comprehensive “philosophy of socialism.” Later writers may criticize Orwell for his shallow understanding of capitalism, and there is a strain of anti-intellectualism in his work that seems to be correlated with his admiration of the working classes.<sup>5</sup> However, Orwell’s professed goal is not to theorize socialism but to humanize it by appealing to the most basic and self-evident values, and he found these values among the working poor:

In a working-class home—I am not thinking at the moment of the unemployed, but of comparatively prosperous homes—you breathe a warm, decent, deeply human atmosphere which it is not so easy to find elsewhere. I should say that a manual worker, if he is in steady work and drawing good wages . . . has a better chance of being happy than an “educated” man. His home life seems to fall more naturally into a sane and comely shape.

Orwell continues in a more sentimental vein:

Especially on winter evenings after tea, when the fire glows in the open range and dances mirrored in the steel fender, when Father, in shirt-sleeves, sits in the rocking chair at one side of the fire reading the racing finals, and Mother sits on the other with her sewing, and the children are happy with a pennorth of mint humbugs, and the dog lolls roasting himself on the rag mat—it is a good place to be in, provided that you can be not only in it but sufficiently of it to be taken for granted. (*Wigan Pier* 104)

This is, to say the least, a rather romantic picture, and in what follows the commonsense objections to Orwell’s work will be considered. First, however, I will reconstruct the main lines of Orwell’s ethical socialism through the perspective of liberty, equality, and fraternity which he affirms in all his



major writings; I will then consider the strategies Orwell uses to convince his readers of the moral necessity of socialism. My concerns are more philosophical than biographical, and I do not intend to provide an intellectual portrait of Orwell's development towards socialism.<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, it would be impossible to ignore Orwell's own explanation that, "Every line of serious work that I have written since 1936 has been written, directly or indirectly, against totalitarianism and for democratic socialism, as I understand it" (*Essays* 1083). Like other ethical socialists, Orwell's thinking is itself a response to the immediate and undeniable values of liberty, equality, and fraternity; and the strength of his own writing is further confirmation of the reality of these values. In what follows, I will review texts and events systematically rather than chronologically; and given the limitation of space, I will not cover *all* of Orwell's work. Obviously, Orwell's thought developed gradually over time, but the themes of liberty, equality and fraternity seem to crystallize in most of his writings, and they illuminate his total project as an author.

I begin with fraternity. In the Spanish Civil War, Orwell experienced a very deep sense of community with his leftist comrades in the Workers' Party of Marxist Unity (POUM). He describes a halcyon time with no suits and ties or other signs of class distinction, with tipping in restaurants respectfully forbidden, and with many factories, shops, and other businesses collectivized. It was a revolutionary moment of solidarity unaffected by rank or national origin, which ended only when Stalin's agents hijacked the left and the members of the POUM were arrested as fascist collaborators. "Up here in Aragon," he wrote in *Homage to Catalonia*:

one was among tens of thousands of people, mainly though not entirely of working-class origin, all living at the same level and mingling on terms of equality. In theory it was perfect equality, and even in practice it was not far from it. There is a sense in which it would be true to say that one was experiencing a foretaste of Socialism, by which I mean that the prevailing mental atmosphere was that of Socialism. Many of the normal motives of civilized life—snobbishness, money-grubbing, fear of the boss, etc.—had simply ceased to exist. The ordinary class-division of society had disappeared to an

extent that is almost unthinkable in the money-tainted air of England; there was no one there except the peasants and ourselves, and no one owned anyone else as his master. (104)

This experience, though short-lived, gave Orwell the sense that a genuine community of equals was still possible and certainly desirable. In a later essay, he came to wonder whether it wasn't the revolution itself that had created this "emotionally widening experience." For it was not a normal time, but "a time when generous feelings and gestures were easier than they ordinarily are" (*Essays* 438–439). In *The Road to Wigan Pier*, Orwell had described the same solidarity that seemed to exist in many working class families facing hardship and the dole.

The key to Orwell's thinking about fraternity, however, can be found in his sustained discussion of patriotism, which he viewed as the strongest form of community that existed in his time. In "The Lion and the Unicorn," written during World War II, Orwell describes the resurgent patriotism of the English people as the German bombers were flying overhead and threatening their whole way of life as well as their individual lives. This patriotism involved the achievement of a sense of community by people who understood that they all shared a common fate, and Orwell reflects, optimistically, how this feeling could become the motive force for bringing England to socialism. Orwell is always careful to distinguish patriotism from the aggressive forms of nationalism; and his wide-ranging essays on English themes—Boys' Weeklies, seaside postcards, and "a nice cup of tea"—may be seen as attempts to elaborate aspects of an English cultural identity that runs deeper than class hatred. According to Orwell, patriotism involves "devotion to a particular place and a particular way of life which one believes to be the best in the world but which one has no wish to force upon other people." By contrast, nationalism is inseparable from the desire for power, and the goal of the nationalist is to "secure more power and prestige, *not* for himself, but for the nation or other unit in which he has chosen to sink his individuality" (*Essays* 866).

This distinction helps us to understand how patriotism can be a virtue since it inspires loyalty, courage, and a willingness to sacrifice private desires for the sake of the common good. On the other hand, it is in practice difficult to distinguish between (good) patriotism and (bad) nationalism, and historically the one has frequently developed into the other: Under the threat

of Napoleon, for example, a British national identity emerged that developed into an overweening national pride which itself became the ground for imperialism later in the century. Again, Orwell seems to overvalue the patriotic impulse when he comments, without irony, "It is exactly the people whose hearts have *never* leapt at the sight of a Union Jack who will flinch from revolution when the moment comes" (*Essays* 286). Such claims, however, are balanced by his contention that "Patriotism has nothing to do with Conservatism," since it also involves devotion to something that is continually changing" (*Essays* 342). The point here is not to celebrate jingoism, or Englishness, but to emphasize that the need for community is the most basic and important thing, and that those who already have a strong sense of group belonging will more easily transfer this allegiance to the authentic community of socialism. Similarly, it would be difficult to stimulate a desire for world revolution since it is such an abstract ideal. Yet, according to Orwell, socialism can be grafted onto an existing national identity. Socialism and patriotism are not necessarily at odds with each other, and by emphasizing the need for local identities and a sense of personal belonging, Orwell did more than anyone else to move socialism away from an empty universalism that would have little appeal to ordinary people. Orwell is by no means naïve about the possibility of creating and maintaining an authentic form of community. His experience in Spain made him realize that one can never ignore the intruding reality of politics and the possibility of betrayal. Later, in the novel *1984*, there is a similar place of refuge in the "Golden Country" where Winston and Julia are able to make love in peace (103). Once again, the idyll is short-lived: Winston and Julia are arrested, and Orwell is able to show how the best possibilities of human nature are undermined by the overwhelming power of the political order that surrounds us.

Orwell's reflections on equality go back to his experience in Burma as a colonial official, twenty years old and in charge of several thousand people. Looking back on it, it all seems so obviously wrong. However, as Orwell notes, imperialism is only the most blatant form of inequality, and he specifically compares colonialism to economic inequality as two versions of the same form of injustice: "Foreign oppression is a much more obvious, understandable evil than economic oppression," he writes. "Thus in England we tamely admit to being robbed in order to keep half a million worthless idlers in luxury, but we would fight to the last man sooner than be ruled by

Chinamen; similarly, people who live on unearned dividends without a single qualm of conscience see clearly enough that it is wrong to go and lord it in a foreign country where you are not wanted" (*Wigan Pier* 126). Orwell knew that most of the economic inequality that exists in modern society can never be justified, and he sought to show how our attitudes are shaped by prejudice and a desperate attempt to rationalize the validity of the economic status quo. Think about beggars, for example. People complain that beggars don't work. "But what is work?" Orwell asks (*Wigan Pier* 154). A navy works by manual labor and an accountant works by adding up figures. A beggar works by standing outside in all weather and assailing people with requests for money. We might insist that the beggar's "work" is useless; but since when do we really care whether work is useful or not? Under capitalism, there are many useless occupations such as advertising, stock-trading, or selling real estate, but we tend to approve of all of them because we feel that successful money-making is what justifies work and makes it into a good thing. By this standard, the beggar is a failure. Notice, however, that this does not justify the inequalities of wealth except in a circular way: money is the reward for making money just as poverty is the punishment for not making money, but nothing is thereby shown about whether these arrangements are just. Finally, in his frequent comments on the English educational system, and especially in the memoir of his own schooldays, "Such, Such Were the Joys," Orwell reflects at some length on the differential status of schools in England and how inequality in educational opportunity can benefit or ruin a child for life. For years, he struggled against the snobbery and class prejudice that had been inculcated into him at his first private school. His decision to live as a tramp for some time or to work as a dishwasher suggests an attempt at self-overcoming. However, it was not a desire for penance or self-mortification. It expressed the need for a lived connection with the dispossessed, or those who are usually scorned as beneath consideration; and this need allowed him to experience the common sense of humanity that underlies all surface distinctions—or the basic reality of equality.

Orwell had a definite vision of what a socialist England would look like, and throughout his writings he clarifies and illuminates socialist values with concrete proposals such as the following six-point program from "The Lion and the Unicorn" that would allow English people to define their war aims and bring about the transformation of England into a socialist state:

~UTOPIAN STUDIES 19.1~

- I. Nationalization of land, mines, railways, banks and major industries.
- II. 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.
- III. Reform of the educational system along democratic lines.
- IV. Immediate Dominion status for India, with power to secede when the war is over.
- V. Formation of an Imperial General Council, in which the coloured peoples are to be represented.
- VI. Declaration of formal alliance with China, Abyssinia and all other victims of the Fascist powers. (*Essays* 334)

This six-point program is a provisional manifesto written against the background of war, but it shows how Orwell conjoins the different forms of inequality and oppression to work out a socialist common front. Even at this time, and in opposition to most other leftist intellectuals, Orwell was strongly opposed to Stalinism and any conflation of equality with collectivism and party rule. The two ideas are not equivalent, and in "The Lion and the Unicorn," his goal is to humanize socialism by showing how the continuing tradition of English democracy makes the imposition of a foreign model of communism both undesirable and unnecessary. He is at pains to point out that nationalization or ownership of the means of production achieves nothing if the workers remain subject to a ruling cadre who make all the important decisions in the name of "the State." Obviously, inequality can take more than one form, and it is by no means limited to the inequality of wealth. Orwell comments elsewhere, "In the minds of active revolutionaries, at any rate the ones who 'got there,' the longing for a just society has always been fatally mixed up with the intention to secure power for themselves" (*Essays* 926). This tendency must be resisted: the goal of socialism is to give people control over their working conditions, their government, and their lives. Anything less would be a betrayal.

Writing in the 1930s and 1940s, Orwell was obviously aware of the direct threat to personal freedom being posed by both fascism and Stalinism as the two totalitarian movements of the age. The nightmare of *1984* imagines the complete triumph and fulfillment of totalitarianism in a society in which there is neither liberty nor equality nor fraternity; *Animal Farm* depicts the betrayal of liberty in the name of “equality” and the false fraternity of collectivism that Stalin was able to impose. However, Orwell realized the extent to which capitalism was also destructive of individual liberty. The poor are not free, and they certainly don’t have the same power of self-determination that is available to the wealthy. In the absence of any real choices in life, the typical response is one of despair. In *The Road to Wigan Pier*, Orwell uses the full scope of his literary imagination to describe the plight of an ordinary slum-woman whom he glimpses briefly from the train. It is a compassionate and compelling portrait, but it is at one with his extended documentary account insofar as it successfully articulates the sense in which poverty is a life sentence that can hardly be endured:

At the back of one of the houses a young woman was kneeling on the stones, poking a stick up the leaden waste-pipe which ran from the sink inside and which I suppose was blocked. I had time to see everything about her—her sacking apron, her clumsy clogs, her arms reddened by the cold. She looked up as the train passed, and I was almost near enough to catch her eye. She had a round pale face, the usual exhausted face of the slum girl who is twenty-five and looks forty, thanks to miscarriages and drudgery; and it wore, for the second in which I saw it, the most desolate, hopeless expression I have ever seen. It struck me then that we are mistaken when we say “It isn’t the same for them as it would be for us,” and that people bred in the slums can imagine nothing but the slums. For what I saw in her face was not the ignorant suffering of an animal. She knew well enough what was happening to her—understood as well as I did how dreadful a destiny it was to be kneeling there in the bitter cold, on the slimy stones of a slum backyard, poking a stick up a

foul drainpipe. (16)

Such passages depend upon the novelist's eye for detail, and one could say that this ability hardly constitutes an "argument" for socialism. However, Orwell is not an academic philosopher. He wants to make us aware of injustice and misery, and the portrait that he describes here is much more effective and compelling than any statistical study or philosophical analysis could be. Of course, the passage involves an appeal to compassion, but this appeal is appropriate since the concern for justice does not issue from a theoretical reflection on what is just but from the immediate experience of undeserved suffering.

It is important to keep in mind that alongside such powerful scenes, Orwell also describes in a more prosaic way how unemployment or the threat of unemployment, industrial pollution, bad food, and atrocious housing conditions all serve to undermine the personal sovereignty and self-respect of individual workers and their families. His discussion is full of relevant facts: the weekly household budgets of families he stayed with, the different levels of unemployment assistance, and the real rates of unemployment in the north. After going down the pit himself, he gives us an account of the typical miner's working conditions and the importance of coal for the modern economy which underlines the significance of the miner's work and the injustice of his low wages. Orwell describes working-class homes in documentary detail down to the number of rooms and their square footage; the number of beds in the house and the number of occupants; the amount of rent paid and the character of the landlord. This level of detail is all calculated to make its appeal to basic "common sense." However, at the same time, he realizes the inadequacy of these impersonal facts, and his book, just as with his whole oeuvre, has to oscillate between this efficient documentary reportage and the more imaginative expression of human misery and despair which includes the image of the slum woman:

Words are such feeble things. What is the use of a brief phrase like "roof leaks" or "four beds for eight people"? It is the kind of thing your eye slides over, registering nothing. And yet what a wealth of misery it can cover! Take the question of overcrowding, for instance. Quite often you have eight or even ten people living



in a three-roomed house. One of these rooms is a living-room, and as it probably measures about a dozen feet square and contains, besides the kitchen range and the sink, a table, some chairs, and a dresser, there is no room in it for a bed. So there are eight or ten people sleeping in two small rooms, probably in at most four beds. If some of these people are adults and have to go to work, so much the worse. (50)

Orwell protests the squalor of these living conditions which are certainly not “chosen” by those who have to endure them. Indeed, he makes it clear that the workers and their families are not free or in charge of their own lives, but are, instead, completely and immediately subject to the laws of economic necessity: “The frightful doom of a decent working man suddenly thrown on the streets after a life time of steady work, his agonized struggles against economic laws which he does not understand, the disintegration of families, the corroding sense of shame—all of this was outside the range of my experience” (131).

Orwell’s account of the lower classes can also be compared with his depiction of the bourgeoisie. In his earlier novels, including *A Clergyman’s Daughter*, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, and *Coming Up for Air*, Orwell explores the dead-end quality of English middle-class life and how the continual threat of poverty, and the desire to get ahead or keep up appearances, leads to lives, as Thoreau once put it, lived in quiet desperation. Gordon Comstock, the would-be poet in *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, is equally insightful and scathing about a society that he detests, where no one is free because all are slaves to the god of money: “What he realized,” Orwell writes:

and more clearly as time went on, was that money-worship has been elevated into a religion. Perhaps it is the only real religion—the only really felt religion—that is left to us. Money is what God used to be. Good and evil have no meaning any longer except failure and success. Hence the profoundly significant phrase, to make good. The Decalogue has been reduced to two commandments. One for the employers—the elect, the money priesthood



as it were—"Thou shalt make money"; the other for the employed—the slaves and the underlings—"Thou shalt not lose thy job."  
(43)

Comstock holds out for as long as he can against the money system, but in spite of his self-chosen poverty—and this is clearly Orwell's ironic point—all of his attitudes and his dealings with others are infected by the money god he is trying to resist. Orwell's novels are preoccupied with class division and the bourgeoisie's fear of the underclasses. In *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* and *A Clergyman's Daughter*, the lead characters become destitute and actually fall into the social abyss they have always dreaded. However, it is clear from Orwell's account of their abjection, as well as his compassion for the proles in *1984*, that such degradation may actually be preferable to the inauthentic and alienated life of the bourgeoisie or the mindless party member. Indeed, one striking passage from *1984* suggests that Orwell remained convinced of the basic moral goodness of the working class and the possibility of authentic forms of human encounter that were not mediated and hence distorted by ideological forms. As Winston Smith observes,

What mattered were individual relationships, and a completely helpless gesture, an embrace, a tear, a word spoken to a dying man, could have value in itself. The proles, it suddenly occurred to him, had remained in this condition. They were not loyal to a party or a country or an ideal, they were loyal to one another. For the first time in his life he did not despise the proles or think of them merely as an inert force which would one day spring to life and regenerate the world. The proles had stayed human. They had not become hardened inside. They had held on to the primitive emotions which he himself had to learn by conscious effort. (136)

In the novel, this observation is presented as an important moment of insight for Winston Smith as he recalls the trauma of his mother's disappearance. Perhaps, she was not especially intelligent or unusual, he reflects, but "she had possessed a kind of nobility, a kind of purity, simply because the standards

that she obeyed were private ones. Her feelings were her own, and could not be altered from outside" (136). Such self-possession may be a core aspect of freedom; even so, it could still be argued that nobody is really free in this society, except in the sense that those who are truly dispossessed may be ready for anything since they have nothing left to lose.

There are several questions that remain unanswered: To what extent did Orwell continue to believe that what he experienced in Spain could be translated to other parts of the world, including England? Or was it just the euphoria that comes from the possibility of revolutionary change? Did Orwell's idealism finally succumb to a more cynical realism in his last novels, *Animal Farm* and *1984* (which suggest that everything, including the working class, is either corrupt or corruptible)? And to what extent did his hope for a socialist future actually derive from his nostalgia for a time, before World War I, when life was less complicated? These questions must remain unresolved in this article. However, the emphasis on liberty, equality, and fraternity has now been established as a focal point for Orwell's activity as an author.

### III

Orwell's account of socialism and his underlying reflections on liberty, equality, and fraternity remain compelling. He obviously cared about the workers and the tramps that he knew and with whom he sometimes lived, and his discussions have none of the contempt for the lower classes that one can sometimes glimpse in other socialist writers—including Marx, with his disdain for the *lumpenproletariat*.<sup>7</sup> So, in opposition to many other socialists and utopians of his time, including H. G. Wells, Orwell does not want to "escape" into a future of automation and technological perfection, where all our work will be done for us and all our needs will be taken care of by machines.<sup>8</sup> For such a future is in no sense an affirmation of ordinary people and their lives; and it does not involve the fulfillment of humanity but only its end (in the terminal sense), given the importance of work as a primary form of self-determination and self-respect. "Skip forward two hundred years into the Utopian future," he comments, "and the scene is totally different":

In that age when there is no manual labour and everyone is "educated," it is hardly likely that Father will be a rough man with enlarged hands who likes to sit in shirt-sleeves and says

“Ah wur coomin’ oop street.” And there won’t be a coal fire in the grate, only some kind of invisible heater. The furniture will be made of rubber, glass, and steel. If there are still such things as evening papers there will certainly be no racing news in them, for gambling will be meaningless in a world where there is no poverty and the horse will have vanished from the face of the earth. Dogs, too, will have been suppressed on the grounds of hygiene. (*Wigan Pier* 105)

He also writes: “Mechanize the world as fully as it might be mechanized, and whichever way you turn there will be some machine cutting you off from the chance of working—that is, of living” (*Wigan Pier* 173). Clearly, Orwell’s socialism concerns human beings as they are now and not as they should be at some future point of development. His thoughts about the future are not “utopian” in any excessive or impossible sense.

Yet, Orwell’s account has its limitations. In the name of plain speaking, he criticizes the theoretical vocabulary of Marxism, but in so doing he also misses the point of Marx’s critique, a critique which studiously avoids ordinary bourgeois categories and forms of thinking in order to escape the horizons of bourgeois understanding.<sup>9</sup> Marx himself would have considered Orwell another “bourgeois socialist,” for while Orwell favors the redistribution of wealth he says nothing about the commodity form of capitalism that has to be surpassed if a true socialist order is ever to be achieved. In the first volume of *Capital*, Marx discusses the nature of the commodity, and more specifically “commodity fetishism” which characterizes capitalist society. It is a significant, though intellectually challenging, analysis which deserves to be taken seriously. However, Orwell refuses complexity; and in his desire to strengthen the Socialist movement against the enemy of Fascism, he often ridicules philosophical perspectives as irrelevant: “As for the philosophic side of Marxism,” he comments, “the pea and thimble trick with those three mysterious entities, thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, I have never met a working man who had the faintest interest in it” (*Wigan Pier* 155). Since he is so mistrustful of theory, Orwell misses some of the insights of socialist theory. He would probably respond that the supporters of Marxism put too much trust in a grand theory of society and frequently become imprisoned by their own

theoretical dogmatism. But *this* response is to assume, naively, that philosophy has nothing to do with “real life.” Orwell’s insistence on plain speaking and his appeal to common sense are themselves a kind of mystification insofar as they imply that the world is not a complicated place and ideological distortion is never an issue.

Orwell’s impatience and disdain for theory make him uncritical in other respects. For example, his affection and respect for the lower classes is sometimes sentimental or romantic, as he concedes in the passage quoted earlier that “the oppressed are always right.” Orwell qualifies this particular claim to some extent, but there remains an opposition that runs through all his writings between the authentic working class and the alienated bourgeoisie, who are frequently characterized as effete and unnatural. However, does Orwell appreciate the extent to which capitalism may have already undermined the moral resilience and well-being of the lower classes? And is there any reason to suppose that the latter ever existed apart from Orwell’s need to overvalue whatever was opposed to his own more privileged origins? Consider the idyll of Edwardian village life described in *Coming Up for Air* in opposition to the new middle-class realities that are scathingly described in this novel. This opposition may be nothing more than bourgeois self-hatred. Orwell’s account of socialism also dwells on specifically English conditions. That does not entail a limitation since he wrote about what he knew best. However, given his resistance to broader theoretical concerns, it becomes harder to extend his insights to the modern world which is increasingly subject to global economic flows, and certainly nothing like the England of the 1930s. Finally, there is reason enough to believe that Orwell would have found it difficult to reconcile his own variety of socialism with contemporary currents including feminism, multiculturalism, and gay rights.<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, the ethical perspective on socialism, which involves the promotion of liberty, equality, and fraternity, is hardly beside the point. It shapes our understanding of what society should be like, and it creates expectations which may or may not be fulfilled. Obviously, conditions have changed since the 1930s and 1940s, but Orwell’s strategy remains effective since it appeals to basic values which are impossible to deny without repudiating what it means to be “fully human,” as this term is usually understood. As Orwell writes in his essay, “What is Socialism”: “A Socialist is not obliged to believe that human society can actually be made perfect, but almost any

Socialist does believe that it could be a great deal better than it is at present, and that most of the evil that men do results from the warping effects of injustice and inequality. The basis of Socialism is humanism" (*Essays* 1005). Much still needs to be done, but we have come a long way, for at this point in time the burden of proof is no longer on those who affirm the values of liberty, equality, and fraternity but on those who claim that such things are irrelevant or impossible.

I have described the general possibility of ethical socialism as an ongoing tradition of thought, and I have used the specific example of George Orwell as one of the most effective supporters of this position. In the spirit of Marx, Orwell offered a detailed analysis of modern social conditions although he despised philosophical or political jargon and considered plain speaking a virtue. He thought that socialists should drop all their confusing talk about "class consciousness," "bourgeois ideology," and "proletarian solidarity." "All that is needed," he argues, "is to hammer two facts home into the public consciousness. One, that the interests of all exploited people are the same; the other, that Socialism is compatible with common decency" (*Wigan Pier* 203). Orwell proposed a concrete program for social reform with definite steps to be taken, but his discussion was grounded in the immediate lived reality of individual suffering and his compassionate response to lives wasted because of the injustice of existing social conditions. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Orwell refused to valorize the socialist future as some kind of techno-utopia where machines will do everything, or where the "clever ones" will impose socialism from above. Instead, he dwells on the decency of the ordinary working person even while that was being threatened; and by establishing the idea of an authentic working-class tradition, he projects the possibility of an authentic future that can emerge from this basic ground.

Today, George Orwell is justly remembered as the novelist who introduced the nightmarish society of thought police which required slavish obedience to Big Brother, promulgated newspeak, and manipulated the record of the past to control the present. However, Orwell's achievement as the prophet of such a disaster should not eclipse his profound commitment to socialism as the only ethical basis for the society of the future.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Marx says that the economic basis of society conditions its political

and intellectual life processes, but this statement does not preclude the possibility that the conditioned aspects of social life could also have some effect on the economic sphere. In the 1888 Preface to *The Communist Manifesto*, Engels puts the point as follows, “that in every historical epoch, the prevailing mode of economic production and exchange, and the social organization necessarily following from it, form the basis upon which is built up, and from which alone can be explained, the political and intellectual history of that epoch.” I do not believe this statement means that Marx is a determinist (see Wood 111–117 for a more detailed discussion); the important point is that many of Marx’s readers have interpreted him in this way, and something like “vulgar Marxism,” or complete economic determinism, was a preferred reading of Marx throughout much of the first half of the twentieth century.

<sup>2</sup> See Owen, Proudhon, Fourier, Bernstein, and Tawney for significant works of democratic socialism. On the idea of a “tradition” of ethical socialism, see Dennis and Halsey, who include a chapter on George Orwell, “The Last Socialist in Europe.”

<sup>3</sup> On this point especially, see Orwell, “The Lion and the Unicorn.” Also, see Claeys for a good discussion of Orwell’s essay.

<sup>4</sup> On this point, see Hitchens 8–10.

<sup>5</sup> For a critique of Orwell on capitalism, see Williams 77–81. For his relationship to the working class, see Ingle.

<sup>6</sup> There are several recent biographies of Orwell. Probably the best on Orwell’s political development is still Crick.

<sup>7</sup> For example, in *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx describes the *lumpenproletariat* (translated here as “dangerous class” although “riff-raff” might do just as well) as “the social scum, that passively rotting mass thrown off by the lowest layers of old society. . .” (92).

<sup>8</sup> See H.G. Wells, *When the Sleeper Awakes*, *A Modern Utopia*, and *The Shape of Things to Come*.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, the argument in Part One of Marx’s *The German Ideology*.

<sup>10</sup> For a fair analysis of Orwell’s relation to feminism, see Hitchens, Chapter 6: “Orwell and the Feminists; Difficulties with Girls.”

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