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America's View of George Orwell

John P. Rossi

It is now almost a third of a century since George Orwell's publication of *Animal Farm* made him famous in the United States. Outside of certain radical and literary circles Orwell was virtually unknown in America before 1946. He had written an occasional piece for journals like the *New Republic*, Dwight Macdonald's idiosyncratic *Politics*, plus a series of "London Letters" for Philip Rahv's radical magazine, *Partisan Review*. In the early 1930's *Harper's* had published some of his earlier works, novels like *A Clergyman's Daughter* and *Burmese Days*, and non-fiction pieces like *Down and Out in Paris and London*. They were largely ignored, unread, and unreviewed.

Orwell's initial failure to reach an American audience had many causes. First and foremost, he did not fit into any recognizable political category, right, left or center. Those American intellectuals who knew his work were uneasy with him. He was a self-proclaimed socialist who seemed to take a special pleasure in assaulting his fellow leftists, a foe of nationalism who wrote movingly and beautifully about English patriotism, the English countryside and English customs like tea drinking and pubs. Secondly, in the 1930's he had attacked communism as a form of totalitarianism just as evil as fascism or nazism. Most American leftists, still caught up in the naive belief of "no enemies on the left," felt uncomfortable before this indictment. Finally, most of Orwell's writing before 1946 was of the kind that would have limited appeal in the United States. His fiction and political writings dealt with topics that were of peculiar interest to the English and his essays on such disparate topics as humorous postcards, the public schools or English murder mysteries also fit within a framework that most Americans could not follow. *Animal Farm* changed all that.

Animal Farm was first published in August of 1946. It was an immediate critical and popular success. The initial reviews in the mass circulation magazines like *Time*, *Newsweek*, the *New Yorker*, the *New York Times Magazine*, and so on were all laudatory. Edmund Wilson, doyen of American intellectual reviewers, heaped praise on *Animal Farm*, comparing Orwell as a satirist to Voltaire and Swift. Edward Weeks in the *Atlantic* reviewed *Animal*

Farm very favorably but revealed considerable political naiveté by commenting that Orwell's fable showed a "clever hostility if one applies it to Soviet Russia." Whom else the analogy fit is difficult to imagine.

In the politically oriented journals *Animal Farm* got a lukewarm reception. Most of these journals were leftist and just beginning to move away from the sycophantic admiration for "our Soviet Ally." The first drafts of the cold war were beginning to blow through left-wing political circles in America and Orwell's work arrived in this country just as the American Left was struggling to formulate a new attitude toward Russia. The reception given *Animal Farm* in journals like the *New Republic* and the *Nation* reflected the political confusion then rampant in American leftist circles. Isaac Rosenfeld in the *Nation* bitterly attacked *Animal Farm*. He denied that Orwell's interpretation of revolution had any validity when applied to the Soviet Union. According to Rosenfeld, to attempt to apply Orwell's hostile view to Stalin's Russian regime only revealed the reactionary flavor of *Animal Farm*. Rosenfeld also argued that Orwell did not tell his audience anything about the Russian revolution it did not already know. He did not tell them where in America this had been made so clear, certainly not in the pages of the *Nation*, a journal which slavishly followed every contortion of the party line during the 1930's and early 1940's. Rosenfeld's hostile review was matched by George Soulé in the pages of the *New Republic*, then also a consistent apologist for Russian behavior. He found *Animal Farm* "dull" and the analogy to events in the Soviet Union since the revolution "creaking" and "clumsy." Soulé managed to confuse the rather obvious characters of the pigs, Snowball and Napoleon. He thought Napoleon was supposed to be Lenin, failing to discover Stalin in this successful pig who betrayed the revolution. Soulé also was angry at Orwell's portrait of Soviet education with vicious dogs being trained as the secret police. Nor could he see any parallel in Russian history for the slaughter of the horse, Boxer, who had labored so mightily to make the revolution a success. This is an astounding commentary on his blindness to Russian history in the 1930's, especially Stalin's purge of the old Bolsheviks, party faithful, and disillusioned masses who had devoted themselves entirely to making the revolution a success.

The negative views could not offset the growing success and popularity of *Animal Farm*. The Book of the Month Club

announced that it had picked Orwell's fable as its selection for August 1946 thus guaranteeing Orwell a large audience. The growing success of *Animal Farm*—eventually it sold over 500,000 copies in the United States—revived interest in Orwell's earlier work. Beginning in 1946 with a collection of his essays, *Dickens, Dali, and Others*, Orwell's early writings began to appear regularly in the United States. Eventually, by 1958 everything of any consequence that he had written was published to growing critical, and often popular, acclaim.

The key to Orwell's success in America, after his relative obscurity, was a matter of timing. Not only was *Animal Farm* a clever story which could be understood and appreciated on two levels, as a children's tale of how success corrupts or as a highly imaginative indictment of the failures and betrayals of the Russian Revolution, but it also appeared at a crucial time in the relationship between the Soviet Union and the West. *Animal Farm* was published just as the cold war began. In fact, it came out less than six months after Winston Churchill's famous "iron curtain" speech at Fulton, Missouri, first brought home the reality of new tensions with Russia to the American public. America was just beginning to discover that the Soviet Union was not the noble, disinterested ally of World War II. In 1946 this realization made its first deep impression on the American mind. This realization made Orwell's brand of "tough" realism very appealing. Possessing impeccable leftist credentials he could not be dismissed as just another reactionary warmonger. After the success of *Animal Farm* Orwell found outlets for his essays which now began to appear regularly in major American journals like the *New Yorker* and the *New York Times Magazine*. His writing won him a larger following in the United States than in England possibly because of America's growing awareness of its international responsibilities and its deepening absorption into the cold war. Orwell's growing American reputation was enhanced in June 1949 by the publication of his grim anti-utopian novel *1984*.

As with *Animal Farm*, *1984* was chosen by the Book of the Month Club as one of its selections. It was also condensed in the *Reader's Digest* for its September 1949 issue, a sure sign that Orwell had established himself as a popular author. This time there were no negative reactions or reviews as had been the case in England where Isaac Deutscher had labeled *1984* nothing more than an ideological "superweapon of the Cold War." The closest thing to a

negative review came from Diana Trilling in the pages of *Nation*. Trilling was profoundly impressed by *1984*, but she was put off by the way Orwell played upon the reader's emotions and by the relentless quality of its tone. Still she called Orwell a rarity, a man who places his own brand of realism above the use of political partisanship. After the Berlin blockade, the Communist coup in Czechoslovakia, the growing awareness of Russian espionage and the imminent fall of China, Orwell's political views and predictions no longer seemed extreme or unrealistic. *1984* proved a runaway best-seller, over the next twenty-five years selling eleven million copies, a figure by the way, matching *Animal Farm*. Both novels were made into films in the cold war-haunted 1950's: *Animal Farm* as a clever and powerful cartoon; *1984* as a somber film that failed to capture the terrible atmosphere of Orwell's grim future.

Following his death in January 1950 interest in Orwell's writings remained steady throughout the rest of the decade. In fact, a close examination of the writing about Orwell personally or his publications reveals an interesting example of the way a writer's reputation undergoes ups and downs. Between Orwell's death in 1950 and 1956 over thirty articles or reviews dealing with him appeared in the popular American journals. These varied from brief notes in *Time* or *Newsweek* to longer appreciations of his work in major popular journals such as the *Saturday Review of Literature*, *Harper's*, and *Atlantic*. Only one could be considered negative, a review in the *Nation* of the American publication of *Homage to Catalonia* in 1952. After the mid-1950's interest in Orwell and his work declines sharply. Between 1957 and 1965 the total of the articles and reviews about Orwell drops to six, with four of them jammed in the period 1957-59. They are all favorable. Between 1965 and 1974 interest in his work undergoes a steady, if slow, revival hastened partly by the publication of his four-volume *Collected Letters and Journalism* in 1968. The total of articles and reviews now rises to thirty-two still favorable but no longer exclusively so. An attempt was made in those years to come to grips with Orwell while avoiding mythologizing him. He came to be looked on, not just as a Cold Warrior with a conscience, but as a serious, if flawed novelist, and a journalist of superb qualities.

In his fine essay, "Freedom of the Press," which was to serve as the introduction to *Animal Farm*, but was ultimately

dropped, Orwell wrote: "It is the liberals who fear liberty and the intellectuals who want to do dirt on the intellect." This quality of attacking your friends and exposing the weaknesses of your allies was an Orwellian trait. It gave added impact to what he wrote since it lent a note of honesty and disinterestedness to what he had to say. It was also precisely the quality that came to endear Orwell to alienated American leftist intellectuals in the postwar years. American intellectuals, for the most part, had been naive about the menace of communism both before and during the war and had been among the leading apologists for Russian actions during the last stages of World War II. Disillusion set in rapidly. As Conor Cruse O'Brien has noted, Orwell shook the confidence of the Left "perhaps permanently, making them ashamed of their clichés, and made them more scrupulous in their political enthusiasm." Nowhere was this truer than in the United States.

Those who jumped on Orwell's bandwagon read like a "Who's Who" of the American liberal establishment. Edmund Wilson, Lionel Trilling, Philip Rahv, Irving Howe, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., and Max Lerner are just some of the names. These men were all distinguished by their probity and their determination to find a viable political position for American progressives, something that would serve to distinguish the Left in the United States from the taint of "fellow traveling." What they found appealing in Orwell was his realism, his common sense, his obvious decency, and the clarity of his thinking. Many were disillusioned, or potentially disillusioned, socialists and the man who had discovered the flaws of socialism ten to fifteen years before had a dramatic appeal to them. In truth they also found Orwell's ability to spot a fraud endearing. He was a great hater and saved his special venom for his fellow socialists, men and women, he once wrote, "who take their cookery from Paris and their opinions from Moscow," "all that dreary tribe of high minded women and sandal wearers and bearded fruit juice drinkers who come flocking towards the smell of progress like bluebottles to a dead cat."

The American leftist intellectual, angry with the course of events since the end of World War II and the Russian betrayal of peace during the cold war, found comfort in Orwell's assessment. As they sought a new political direction Orwell became one of their guides. At the same time his attacks on communism and his exposures of Soviet totalitarianism won Orwell a considerable following among American conservatives. There is, at times, a

Tory quality to Orwell's thinking, a respect for individualism and a nostalgia for the past, that conservatives found sympathetic. Orwell had written that "all revolutions are failures, but they are not all the same failure," a view shared by American conservatives who were looking for intellectual support for contemporary Western society. Moreover, as Malcolm Muggeridge noted, the bourgeoisie in the West "is always looking for someone who combines impeccable intelligentsia credentials with a passion, secret or avowed . . . for maintaining the status quo." Orwell provided that.

In the late 1940's, early 1950's, Orwell became virtually a saint for the American Right. The Luce press in particular canonized Orwell. *1984* not only was reviewed favorably by *Time* but also a special editorial in *Life* called the American public's attention to it. *1984*, they argued, pointed up the dangers confronting the free world with special impact because "it comes from a leftwinger who is cautioning his fellow intellectuals of the left to beware lest their desire to help the common man wind up in trapping him in hopeless misery." The publication of each new Orwell work in the United States during the 1950's elicited greater praise from the Luce organization. For example, the collection of his essays, *Such, Such Were the Joys* in 1953 was heralded in *Time* for the way it showed that much of Orwell's energy in the 1940's "was devoted to carrying on a guerilla campaign against woolheaded fellow travellers who were poisoning English intellectual life." Before his death Orwell had tried without much success to counter this enshrinement as a conservative hero. He published a letter in *Life* and the *New York Times Magazine* in which he reiterated his loyalty to the Labour party and to the concept of socialism. To those who saw *1984* as an attack on socialism he countered that it was really designed to show up the perversions of communism and fascism. Orwell's letter had little impact on American conservative views of his work. He remained a hero to them.

Following his death in January 1950 Orwell's reputation went through a period where he was as overpraised in the United States as he had been neglected in the past. Each new publication of his works, a process that lasted through the decade, was greeted with enthusiasm in both the popular and the political journals. Just a month after he died, James Stern, an Irish-born novelist, wrote an assessment of Orwell's published work in the *New Republic* that was typical of critical evaluations of the 1950's. Future critics, said

Stern, may very well describe Orwell “as the most important English writer to have lived his whole life during the first half of the twentieth century.” He then concluded in a vein that was to be repeated over and over again in American journals: “England never produced a novelist more honest, more courageous, more concerned with the common man—and with common sense.” This constitutes a virtual anointing.

Orwell’s books sold well, especially *Animal Farm* and *1984*, and his popularity grew. The prevalent view of him was consistently positive. Orwell was portrayed as the last honest man, and the words “common sense” and “decency” were constantly associated with him. This is easily understandable if overdone. In a decade that prided itself on its rejection of ideology Orwell’s nondoctrinaire brand of socialism, which stressed honesty and fairness, was very appealing. Also, to a generation of intellectuals searching for their roots Orwell was a powerful antidote to their anxiety. It is interesting to note that the mythologizing of Orwell never went as far in England as it did in America. There was a large left-wing audience in England that did not appreciate Orwell’s strictures on their beliefs. Moreover, the cold war mentality that came to prevail in the United States in the early 1950’s did not mature in as extreme a form as in England. Orwell had his English admirers, Muggeridge, V. S. Pritchett, etc., but their view of him was more balanced and more realistic than many of their American compatriots.

Occasionally, there was a dissent from this lionizing of Orwell in America. Probably the most significant was a bilious review of the American edition of *Homage to Catalonia* by Herbert Matthews in the *Nation*. While calling *Homage to Catalonia* an honest, vivid, personal account of Orwell’s experiences in the Spanish civil war, Matthews felt that it only deserved two cheers. Orwell, he argued, was politically ignorant before the civil war and he remained politically ignorant afterward. He was right about the counterrevolutionary nature of communism but he reached this correct assessment for the wrong reasons. He never really understood the issues at stake in Spain because of the nature of his own political alignment. Spain disillusioned Orwell and in the process poisoned his mind for the rest of his life about the frailties of the Left. It made him overly suspicious of the Left and simplistic in his understanding of its problems. Matthews’s review did little to harm Orwell’s American reputation. In fact,

some of his arguments were so silly as to strengthen Orwell's hold over the thinking of the American Left. To accuse Orwell of political ignorance in 1936 is ludicrous. Before he went to Spain in December 1936 Orwell had already completed the *Road to Wigan Pier* with its long section outlining his views about socialism and politics in general. He had written *Burmese Days* with its indictment of imperialism a couple of years before. Both works showed mature insight into the political realities of the issues of the 1930's. There is also evidence that Orwell had read and studied Marx and the various Marxian commentators before this time. While not yet a committed socialist (Spain completed that process) Orwell had already formulated most of his major political views by 1936.

Matthews's review was just about the last negative comment on Orwell to appear in the United States for quite a while. There was a minor flap in 1955 when the cartoon version of *Animal Farm* appeared. Spencer Brown in the February 1955 issue of *Commentary* published a short essay, "Strange Doings at 'Animal Farm' " in which he noted how critics in the major papers and journals had managed to review *Animal Farm* without referring to its analogy to the Russian Revolution. Brown was angered by the way the pigs were portrayed in the advertising for the film as McCarthy types or Southern senators but not as Stalinist figures. This was corrected, however, in later reviews and advertising and the film did fairly well both critically and at the box office.

Probably the most balanced assessment of Orwell's work in the 1950's came from the pen of Dwight Macdonald, a fellow disillusioned leftist, who like Orwell did not fit into any easily recognizable category. Writing in the *New Yorker* in March 1959, Macdonald analyzed the publication of two books of some importance for contemporary socialism: Leon Trotsky's *Diary* and Orwell's *Road to Wigan Pier*. Both books initially appeared in the mid-1930's and both came from the pens of highly individualistic thinkers. Enormously impressed by Orwell's account, Macdonald called it "the best sociological reporting I know." What particularly impressed him was the nonideological nature of *Road to Wigan Pier* as compared to the doctrinaire quality that ran through every page of Trotsky's *Diary*. A first-class controversialist himself, Macdonald was impressed by Orwell's standards: he was harder on himself and his own side than he was on his enemies, a trait by the way which Macdonald shares with Orwell. Mac-

donald also contrasted Orwell's feeling for people with Trotsky's perception of everything through the distorting mirror of class. Orwell never romanticized the poor and Macdonald enjoyed Orwell's openly stated determination to judge poverty by his own clearly spelled out standards.

Macdonald was not blind to Orwell's limitations. For one thing, Orwell was too quick with predictions about the collapse of the British middle class or assertions that the British standard of living depended on the possession of an empire. These, of course, were not borne out by the events of the next generation. Much of the abuse of his fellow socialists which runs through the last half of *Road to Wigan Pier* Macdonald found distasteful, a point which has bothered other admirers of Orwell. He was a great hater, and though he found it difficult to hate someone he knew, Orwell seemed to enjoy overwhelming his enemies with rhetorical abuse.

Following the appearance of Macdonald's essay there was relatively little written about Orwell in the United States until the mid-1960's. Now his reputation was firmly established, his books sold well, and he was constantly quoted. For many American intellectuals, especially the cold war-haunted ones, Orwell became a virtual totem against whom the political-literary figures of the 1930's, 1940's and 1950's were constantly measured. American intellectuals enthusiastically reviewed studies of Orwell by Anthony Powell and George Woodcock. On the other hand, Raymond Williams's tendentious, and highly critical, examination of Orwell's career was passed over quietly in the United States unlike in England where it started a reevaluation of Orwell's work. As John Wain had noted in England in the early 1970's it suddenly became fashionable to snipe at Orwell. "Now as then, (cf. 1930s) his truth-telling is dismissed as 'perverse' and his warnings are shrugged off by what he himself called 'the huge tribe known as the right left people'. Now as then, the most vicious digs at Orwell came from men whose basic intellectual position is totalitarian." This was never the case in the United States. There were Americans critical of Orwell, but he remained essentially a highly popular figure here. Finally, the appearance of Orwell's *Collected Letters and Correspondence* in 1968 saw his reputation enhanced in the United States. These four volumes showed Orwell at his best and American reviewers were confirmed in their high opinion of his intellectual honesty, personal decency, as well as the breadth of his interest. Only Mary

McCarthy, in a highly critical review of his *Collected Letters*, dissented in any serious way from these glowing estimates. While admiring Orwell, she argued that he was in danger of being treated as a mythic figure in America. She zeroed in on two themes that ran through much of his career: his hatred of arbitrary power and his refusal to join in whatever was fashionable intellectually. These were attractive qualities, according to McCarthy, but they also hid certain flaws in Orwell's thinking. How, for example, to bring about the desired socialist state while detesting power? She also suggested that Orwell's hatred of the intellectually fashionable was the source of his fierce denunciations of his fellow leftists, an observation other writers had missed.

By the 1970's Orwell had entered deeply into the consciousness of the American scene. No longer an eccentric English intellectual anymore Orwell had become institutionalized as an American cult figure. In the words of Irving Howe, an uncritical admirer, Orwell was a hero to an entire generation. "More than any English intellectual of our age, he embodied the values of personal independence and a fiercely democratic radicalism." This is a perception of Orwell that has predominated to the present. To an age tired of intellectual heroes who fade almost with the change of seasons, it is an enormously appealing evaluation.