

His Fable, Right or Left: Orwell, *Animal Farm*, and the Politics of Critical Reception

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In “My Country Right or Left,” George Orwell attempts to synthesize two contradictory aspects of his political belief system. On the one hand, he was by this time fully committed to the international socialist cause, and more specifically to the development of English socialism in Britain. On the other, the beginning of the Second World War had led Orwell to question the value and function of his patriotism for an England he loved, but which he considered “the most class-ridden country under the sun” (*Essays* 303). Orwell ultimately fused this contradiction by deciding that it was only in supporting the British war effort—and thus British victory—that conditions for the emergence of socialism could ever emerge. This position allowed him, at least for a time, to fuse conventionally rightist and leftist frameworks into a unified whole: patriotically supporting the war enabled the survival of the nation and the possibility of a socialist future, while leftist critique of British capitalism hastened the breakdown of exploitative class relations, and thus worked toward that same future.

Unpacking this contradiction and the historical conditions that shaped it is central to understanding the history of critical debate about *Animal Farm*. Orwell wrote “My Country Right or Left” in 1940, as the German blitzkrieg was racing unchecked across Western Europe and the Battle of Britain raged above English cities. This situation directly informed Orwell’s position: adopt a traditionally conservative patriotic stance so as to keep a traditionally leftist hope for socialism alive. However, by late 1943, the tide of the war had turned in favor of the Allies. With the Red Army keeping the Germans occupied on the Eastern Front, many Britons felt that they shared common cause with the Soviets. Anything critical of Stalin or communism was therefore considered anathema to the war effort. This was even truer among socialists, many of whom

already supported Russian communism implicitly. Such naïveté in the face of Stalinist atrocities shocked Orwell, who had experienced the regime's brutality and obfuscation firsthand while fighting for the Republican cause in the Spanish Civil War. Orwell thus saw those who continued to defend Stalin after the horror of the 1930s as intellectually dishonest and, in the context of a developing English socialism, even dangerous. His experience in Spain had taught him that "the destruction of the Soviet myth was essential if we wanted a revival of the Socialist movement" in Britain (*Orwell* 319). With *Animal Farm*, Orwell attempted to shatter that myth by starkly presenting the betrayal of the Russian revolution in the form of a barnyard fable that could be widely understood. Yet, in doing so, he was once again forced to inhabit a political contradiction: criticize the left and the USSR so that a genuine socialism might flourish.

This paradox has dogged both popular and scholarly criticism of *Animal Farm* since its publication. For sure, many critical treatments background or marginalize the novel's political dimensions, and instead read the novel in terms of literary form, judging its merit on the successful execution of its satirical fable. However, the larger portion of criticism elevates the form's consequences above the form itself, focusing on the novel's send-up of Stalinism and, importantly, the ambiguous political positioning of its author. The latter point is significant because it is through readings of the author's politics that critics have often pursued their interpretations of *Animal Farm*. Indeed, what *Animal Farm* means has often depended on rhetorical context, on who was interpreting Orwell's political contradictions and why.

The Early Years: 1944-1946

The story of *Animal Farm*'s critical reception begins with the politics of finding a publisher. Had Orwell written the novel in the late 1930s, he would have had no problem locating a firm willing to publish an inventive fable critical of Stalinist Russia. By 1944, however, public support for the Soviets was high in Britain and, as Russell Baker notes, "even conservatives were pro-Soviet" (viii). Orwell's general publisher, Victor Gollancz, summed up the prevailing attitude: "We

couldn't have published it then. . . . Those people [the Soviets] were fighting for us and had just saved our necks at Stalingrad" (qtd. in Shelden 438). On the whole, four English publishers turned Orwell down, many out of fear of stirring up controversy (Shelden 438-40). Perhaps the most famous rejection came from T. S. Eliot at Faber and Faber, who noted in a rather cold letter that none among the firm's leaders had been sufficiently convinced that *Animal Farm's* message was "the right point of view from which to criticise the political situation at the present time" (qtd. in Flood). Finally, in July of 1944, the small London publisher Secker and Warburg agreed to publish.

Due to wartime paper rationing, Secker and Warburg postponed British publication until the summer of 1945, while the American edition—published by Harcourt Brace—was delayed until 1946. This setback profoundly affected initial public reaction to the novel. As the Western world turned from the exigencies of World War II to the looming Cold War with the Soviet Union, public opinion predictably pivoted toward ideological opposition to communism. Morris Dickstein notes that *Animal Farm* was thus "quickly projected onto the front lines of the new East-West conflict" (134). Ironically, the novel's satire of the Russian revolution, the inauspicious reason for which it had been shunned by publishers in 1944, was by 1946 the cause of its massive popular success. In Britain the novel sold over 25,000 hardcover copies in only a few years. The American market proved even more surprising. Not long after its publication, it was included in the popular Book of the Month Club, and it remained on the *New York Times* Bestseller list for eight weeks in 1946. By 1950, it had sold close to 600,000 copies (Shelden 441). Despite this commercial success, immediate critical reaction to the novel was mixed, with opinion often split between those who deemphasized the novel's political implications and those who accentuated them.

Positive reviews during this period often backgrounded politics and emphasized the text's successful execution of literary form, highlighting in particular Orwell's skillful deployment of the satirical fable to communicate a powerful, albeit simple, message. For example, in a 1945 review, *The Guardian* described it as "a

delightfully humorous and caustic satire on the rule of the many by the few” (“Books”). Following in this vein, the novelist Graham Greene lauded Orwell’s successful use of the fable form to evoke genuine human pathos rather than “a mere echo of human failings at one remove” (196). Writing in *The New Yorker* (1946), Edmund Wilson praised the skillful economy of Orwell’s style and form effusively: “Mr. Orwell has worked out his theme with a simplicity, a wit, and a dryness . . . and has written in a prose so plain and spare, so admirably proportioned to his purpose, that *Animal Farm* even seems very creditable if we compare it with Voltaire and Swift” (205). In what was perhaps the novel’s most glowing early review, Arthur Schlesinger Jr., writing for the *New York Times Book Review*, gushed over Orwell’s “superbly controlled and brilliantly sustained satire,” which, he further noted, “[is written] with such gravity and charm that [it] becomes an independent creation, standing quite apart from the object of its comment” (qtd. in Garner). While none of these writers completely ignore the text’s political implications, they also sideline or deemphasize explicit political positions. In one sense, we might see this as the granting of a respectful distance that allows the novel to speak for itself, as Orwell originally intended it to do (*Politics* 320). However, what might seem like respect from one angle is simply a willingness to accept oversimplified conclusions from another.

Predictably, it was also the text’s formal execution and its supposedly simple message that provoked the majority of the novel’s early negative reviews. Many held Orwell to harsh account for a failure to accurately or insightfully represent Russian history and politics, or for coloring that history with his own political despair. The essayist Cyril Connolly exemplified this approach when he wrote in a 1946 review for *Horizon* that Orwell allows “personal bitterness about the betrayed revolution to prejudice [his] attitude to the facts” (200). This charge of a “prejudiced attitude to the facts” was a common one. Writing for *The New Statesman and Nation*, for instance, Kingsley Martin accused Orwell of falling prey to disillusion and cynicism about the nature—and future—of humanity, and more importantly for sticking too close to history,

thereby “[inviting] every kind of historical and factual objection” (198). As though on cue, George Soule’s 1946 review for *The New Republic*—a publication that routinely defended Stalin through the 1930s and ’40s (Rodden, *Understanding* 136)—blasted *Animal Farm* for its “dull,” “creaking,” and “mechanical” execution, its supposed historical inaccuracies, and its “stereotyped ideas about a country he [Orwell] probably does not know very well” (138). Some early reviewers looked past the focus on form to examine *Animal Farm*’s political implications in more depth. In a frequently anthologized 1946 review, Isaac Rosenfeld also condemned the novel for its historical reductionism, but further blamed Orwell for “a failure of imagination,” where “failure to expand the parable, to incorporate into it something of the complexity of the real event . . . becomes identical with a failure in politics” (203). For Rosenfeld, the text’s simple, plain style and straightforward plot leave one wondering after the novel’s ultimate point or moral, making it both historically amateurish and politically inert.

As Rodden observes, these early reactions to *Animal Farm* were often characterized by a difficulty in understanding Orwell’s purpose. While British reviewers were more familiar with Orwell, they still often misread the author’s intentions (*Understanding* 125). This problem was only exacerbated in the American market, where most were comparatively unfamiliar with Orwell’s early novels, his wartime journalism in the UK, or his political leanings. One common theme across critical reception in both countries, however, was that the hostility of a review tended to increase in correlation with the reviewer’s support for Stalinism or global socialism, the former of which was viewed by some leftists as a standard-bearer for the latter. If this maxim held true throughout what Rodden calls “the crucial decade” of 1945-55, it shifted into a variety of complex permutations in the ensuing decades, as leftists were forced to reckon with the growing influence of Orwell and his fiction.

Orwell, *Animal Farm*, and the Left: 1955-1980

In the Britain of the fifties, along every road that you moved, the figure of Orwell seemed to be waiting (Williams, *Politics and*

Letters 384). Orwell's battles with the left have taken on something of the aura of myth in the nearly seventy years since his death. From the 1930s onward, Orwell frequently quarreled with members of the British left in particular, excoriating them in print for their hypocrisy, their inability to include the colonized world in theories of class struggle, their recalcitrance in the face of Soviet atrocities, and, perhaps most incisively, for their willingness to dispose of their intellectual independence, the one thing Orwell believed kept humans truly free. Orwell's premature death in 1949 instantly transformed a person with considerable cultural mystique into a full-blown myth, or what Lionel Trilling called "a figure" (Gale 499). As the British Marxist literary scholar Raymond Williams admitted many years later, leftist intellectuals in the decades after Orwell's death could not help but engage with this figure, a man who had expended a great deal of energy criticizing the left, but who was nonetheless often viewed as a leftist hero, in part because he sought to expose uncomfortable truths to which many orthodox leftists preferred not admit.

As is now generally acknowledged, Orwell's frequent attacks on his leftist contemporaries were not intended as expressions of disillusionment with socialism or as attempts to undermine revolutionary politics. Alex Zwerdling observes that "his criticism was always designed as internal; it was precisely Orwell's unquestioning fidelity to the ideals of the movement that, in his mind, justified his uncompromising critique of some of its theories, tactics, and leaders" (5). Nonetheless, since at least the publication of *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937), orthodox leftists, including those associated with the British Communist Party, had frequently attempted to discredit or disclaim him as a turncoat or a petit bourgeois interloper (Rodden, *Politics* 185-87). When *Animal Farm* appeared, many on the orthodox left predictably received it as an insidious act of political betrayal, but one in keeping with an established image of the man as a disillusioned and pessimistic contrarian, contemptuous of ordinary people and bitter about possible socialist revolution. For instance, the American Marxist Milton Blau's scathing 1946 review for *New Masses* disparages the

novel as the creation of “a mind which seethes with hatred for man and argues for nihilism, for the destruction of both man and art” (140). While overblown and inattentive to Orwell’s purpose, Blau’s characterization of *Animal Farm* as motivated by political despair and self-loathing foreshadows the more nuanced leftist arguments that would follow.

These arguments took a variety of forms, but most were motivated by a concern for the potential consequences Orwell’s now-famous later novels might have on the socialist movement. In the context of the Cold War, both *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* came to represent the ultimate expression of principled opposition to totalitarianism. However, because Orwell’s primary historical reference point in both cases is the Soviet Union, both were easily and popularly misinterpreted as direct attacks on any form of socialist politics. Orwell’s rapid rise to posthumous fame in the 1950s popularized both his novels and such misinterpretations. Therefore, as public consciousness of both texts expanded, leftists were forced to excavate and attack the assumptions embedded in each. Some argued that *Animal Farm*’s depiction of the Russian revolution’s betrayal extended far beyond its immediate historical context, ultimately promoting the idea that all revolutions are inevitably corrupted by power politics and totalitarianism (Hollis 150-52). If revolution was the engine of history, as many Marxists believed, then *Animal Farm*’s internal circularity seemed to demonstrate that real social progress was impossible. Others claimed, like Blau, that *Animal Farm* illustrates a bitter, ex-socialist’s decaying faith in humanity (O’Neill 41, 86). For these critics, the crucial question was Why? Why does the Manor Farm revolution fail? Why do the pigs turn against the ideals of Animalism? Why don’t the other animals rise up against Napoleon when he begins to consolidate privilege and power? In a brief discussion of Orwell near the end of *Culture & Society*, Williams concludes that in both *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the answer is that Orwell simply did not believe in the power of the working class to take the historical reins: “The hated politicians are in charge, while the dumb mass of ‘proles’ goes on in very much its own ways, protected by its very stupidity”

(293). It was precisely because Orwell had fashioned himself as a commonsense empirical thinker that these implications seemed so damaging. One of the most prevalent and powerful mythological constructions of Orwell was as the honest and plain-speaking man, unafraid to tell truth to power, no matter the political consequences. The worry was that people—and particularly future generations of political leftists—would believe in Orwell’s critique of Stalinist socialism simply because of their more profound belief in the truth of the man himself (Norris 242-43).

This is why, in the 1960s and ’70s, thinkers associated with the British New Left attempted to investigate the influence of Orwell and his work on the formation of a new era of socialist activists and scholars. In his 1971 monograph on Orwell, Williams turns on the 1950s reading of *Animal Farm* as pessimistic, admitting that the novel “carries a feeling that is more than disillusion and defeat,” and that, at moments, it offers “a radical energy that goes far beyond its occasion and has its own kind of permanence” (Orwell 75). However, this reading is overpowered by Williams’s subsequent criticism of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, which he accuses of naturalizing a misrepresentation of socialist revolution as doomed to failure (78-82). At issue for Williams and his contemporaries was the notion that Orwell had effectively popularized political passivity by preemptively undermining the possibility of belief in progressive causes. For example, in “Outside the Whale” (1960), Williams’s New Left contemporary E. P. Thompson asserted that Orwell’s work “contributed a good deal to the form of a generalised pessimism which has outlasted the context in which it arose,” and that it was by Orwell’s hand that “not only was a political movement . . . buried, but so also was the notion of disinterested dedication to a political cause” (14, 17). While early cultural studies icons such as Williams and Richard Hoggart remained attentive to Orwell’s writings on English popular culture, Thompson ultimately moved the political conversation further toward the radical left, shifting the context in which leftists received *Animal Farm* so that it came to be seen as an expression of political defeatism.

Orwell, *Animal Farm*, and the Right

Many of the qualities for which leftists chastised Orwell and *Animal Farm* were, conversely, the very same reasons the novel was championed by conservatives during the Cold War. As critics such as Williams and Thompson point out, Orwell's tendency to vacillate between precise observation and historical generalization sometimes made his political diagnoses tendentious and his historical renderings overly simple (Thompson 12-17; Williams, *Orwell* 71-75). From the perspective of the left, this made Orwell an imprecise thinker, but it also made his work vulnerable to incorporation by the right. Orwell's clearly dwindling faith in the efficacy of revolution, evinced in a number of his later essays, allowed the right to frame him much as the left had done—as a disillusioned and despairing former socialist. While this was patently untrue—Orwell remained committed to socialism until his death—it was nonetheless an argument many were capable of believing after reading *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Orwell's long history of conflict with the left made his supposed defection even easier to sell. Indeed, this led writers such as Norman Podhoretz to brand Orwell “the neoconservative ‘guiding spirit’” and “the patron-saint of anti-Communism” (qtd. in Rodden, *Understanding* 142). This was particularly true in the United States, where Orwell's political history was relatively unknown. As Russell Kirk elaborates, “Orwell was, in the mid-fifties, a dramatic force for turning people away from socialism and progressivism. That was a period of painful reflection for Americans, who no longer believed left-wing ideas about the much-promised benefits of bigger government or the welfare state. Orwell's disillusion with socialism assisted such reflections” (144).

If misread properly, it is certainly possible to view *Animal Farm*'s attack on the Russian revolution as a general critique of socialism or revolutionary politics. In one such misreading, Stephen Sedley asserts that “Orwell's argument . . . is that socialism in whatever form offers the common people no more hope than capitalism, that it will be first betrayed and then held to ransom by those forces which human beings have in common with beasts” (158). William Empson, a poet and colleague of Orwell's during

World War II, is said to have told the latter that “[he] must expect [*Animal Farm*] to be misunderstood on a large scale,” and even, much to Orwell’s chagrin, that Empson’s son, a conservative, had found the novel “very strong Tory propaganda” (qtd. in Rodden, “Ethics” 87). Indeed, the novel’s value as propaganda went from figurative to literal soon after its publication.

This was in part due to Orwell’s own involvement in its use. In the years leading up to his death, Orwell collaborated with British intelligence in the translation and distribution of *Animal Farm*, particularly to nations facing imminent threat from Soviet expansionism in Eastern Europe and Asia (Rodden, *Understanding* 145). Meanwhile, the American Central Intelligence Agency diligently promoted the distribution of the novel around the world as a means of ideological warfare against communism. According to Daniel J. Leab, the CIA played an integral role in the production of the first cinematic adaption of the novel in 1954 (11-20). By the mid-1950s *Animal Farm* had been canonized in the Anglo-American secondary school classroom for a variety of reasons, one of which was that it offered “an anti-Communist and anti-revolutionary ‘lesson’” in easily taught and digested form (Rodden, *Politics* 385-86). The zealotry with which the right received and reused the novel was directly related to the degree to which it could manage the contradictions at the heart of the Orwell figure. By highlighting Orwell’s historically situated critiques of the Soviet Union and then essentializing that criticism as universal truth, the right was able to revise and reconstruct a politically expedient conception of Orwell and *Animal Farm*.

***Animal Farm* in the 1980s**

The 1980s saw a renewed critical and popular interest in Orwell and his work. The election of Ronald Reagan to the American presidency in 1980 ushered in a new era of militarism and Cold War anxiety, which in turn increased interest in Orwell, and in *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in particular. As Rodden observes, it is from this moment that attention to *Animal Farm* often goes hand in hand with attention to its more contentious follow-up. This was especially

true when the year 1984 occasioned a predictable explosion of scholarly and popular interest in Orwell's titular novel. Between 1980 and 1995 critics published more than twenty-five monograph-length studies on Orwell's work, life, and politics. A good portion of these scholars frame *Nineteen Eighty-Four/Animal Farm* through the lens of political commitment and character. For instance, Bonifas (1984), Patai (1984), and Rai (1988) echo earlier interpretations of *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as statements of political and cultural pessimism and despair, while others elaborate on this thesis by exploring Orwell's evocation of the collapse of civilization and the arrival of a new (presumably Western) dark age. However, a handful of studies balance this focus on pessimism by reaffirming the power of Orwell's fiction—including *Animal Farm*—to generate hope for a future of individual autonomy, personal freedom, and political progress. As Erika Gottlieb contends, while this flurry of Orwell criticism during the 1980s produced a wealth of new studies and insightful approaches, it also in some ways left us back at the start, puzzling over the same contradictions between despair and hope, apathy and commitment, the right and the left (109, 119).

It was also during this decade that *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* saw their initial approved publications in portions of the socialist world, including the USSR. While Orwell's work had been available for decades in various underground formats, it was only in the 1980s that residents of the societies Orwell's novel could be said to target were officially able to acknowledge and respond to his treatments of the conditions under which they had been living. Rodden's *Understanding Animal Farm* presents a variety of Russian and East German reactions to the work, many of which, he observes, go to great pains to underscore that the novel "attacks the 'mockery' of socialist ideals, not socialism or its socialist ideas themselves" (173). Here we can see a new audience operating in full knowledge of how the novel had been deployed as a vehicle of American anti-Communist propaganda. As a result, they at times come much closer to capturing Orwell's original intentions for the book than, say, those in the United States who had uncritically accepted it as a useful ideological weapon during the Cold War (Rodden 175-82).

***Animal Farm* into the Twenty-First Century**

Animal Farm is undoubtedly tied to the Cold War era in which it was published, promoted, and canonized; since the end of the Cold War in the late twentieth century, direct attention to the novel itself has waned considerably. However, it remains relevant into the twenty-first century in large part because the academic publishing industry and the global news media seem unable to let Orwell slip away. The centennial of Orwell's birth in 2003 occasioned a new round of critical reassessments of his work, many of which focused on the writer's relevance in a post-Cold War world. Among the most visible and popular of the centennial-era books was *Why Orwell Matters* (2002), by the English cultural critic and intellectual Christopher Hitchens. In his typically pugnacious style, Hitchens confronts Orwell's critics one by one, all the while expounding on the latter's humanism and his value as a lightning rod for discussions of English national identity, British imperialism, the importance of language and the natural environment, and issues of objective truth (10-14). Hitchens is surely correct in his assessment that both Orwell and *Animal Farm* still matter, as more than two dozen new monographs have been published on the man and his work since 2000.

While very few of these take *Animal Farm* as their primary object of inquiry, nearly all find a way to discuss it, often in the context of the issues Hitchens identifies. Robert Colls's *George Orwell: English Rebel* (2013), for example, moves away from the Cold War context and instead reads Orwell's barnyard archetypes relative to ongoing critical discussions of English national culture. This analysis dovetails with a vital current of academic inquiry into representations of English national culture in the context of British devolutionary politics and the post-Brexit construction of British identity. Michael Brennan (2017) discusses the novel relative to Orwell's long intellectual engagement with religion, particularly Orwell's fascination with similarities between Catholicism and communism. While new critical ground continues to be broken, more than a few recent studies use the novel as a lens through which to once again explore Orwell's relationship to the left, to Marxism, and to theories of revolution that have only grown more relevant

in a twenty-first century geopolitical climate characterized by revolution, civil war, and political unrest.¹ If anything, what recent criticism reveals is that Orwell, *Animal Farm*, and the historical and political contradictions they entail continue to provoke critical thought across multiple intersecting spectrums of political belief, historical context, and cultural relevance.

Note

1. A sampling might include Bounds, *Orwell and Marxism* (2009), Rodden, *The Unexamined Orwell* (2011), Robbins, *George Orwell, Cosmopolitanism, and Global Justice* (2017), and Newsinger, *Hope Lies in the Proles* (2018).

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