

WHY DO WE STILL READ GEORGE ORWELL?

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Abstract: This paper approaches Orwell's writing from the perspective of the 21st century and asks whether *Animal Farm*, his satirical fable of the USSR, and the dystopian vision of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* remain relevant. It dismisses the suggestion that these last two novels can be regarded as the natural culmination of Orwell's earlier work, principally by examining these other writings demonstrates that there is no natural trajectory. The paper also refers to key dates in Orwell's life and comments on his career at those particular moments. Orwell remains relevant, the paper concludes, because the forces of oppression he so vehemently opposed remain potent today. The residue of Stalinism survives in some countries, while others have become tyrannies where personality cults can flourish. Political doublethink still exists. The very fact that the adjective "Orwellian" remains current in English, and that his metaphors have entered mainstream discourse, are further indications that his work remains important. Far from being a writer of the 1930s, Orwell has been able to transcend both distance and time. **Keywords:** Relevance, Satire, Orwellian, Derivative, Universal

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Introduction

Most would agree that Orwell's fame as a writer rests primarily on his last two novels, *Animal Farm* (1945) and *Nineteen Eighty Four* (1948). Yet the year 1984 has come and gone. The date was celebrated by a "plethora of world-wide conferences" (Buitenhuis and Nadel, 1988, p. Xi), though discussion at none of them argued that Orwell's dystopian vision was approaching reality. Indeed, since 1990, and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, a tripartite division of the world has become less, rather than more, likely, and what Macey (1988, p. 31) describes as "the credibility gap" is wider than ever. The very title of the book has become an anachronism.

Yet the suggestion that Orwell set his book 35 years in the future, knowing "that the price would be the annihilation of his own greatest monument" (Macey) more than overstates the case. The collapse of the Soviet Union has allowed scholars access to classified documentation that proved, if proof were still needed, how close Orwell's satire had come to reality in the Soviet bloc. Montifiore's (2004) account of life in Stalin's Kremlin, and his biography *Young Stalin* (2008), coupled with Applebaum's (2003) history of the gulag, Service's (2007) history of the communist parties, and even comparatively light journalistic travelogues (Frazier, 2010), have all given the lie to "the belief, shared by many intellectuals, that Marxism is a science, and that we can

‘know’ thanks to the predictive power of science, that the Marxist creed will ultimately be victorious.” (Popper, 1992, pp. 231-232).

Orwell lived in a world where communism could still present itself as a “progressive” force,” although that characterization begs the question “progressive in comparison with what?” *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* both appeared in that narrow window of time between the end of the Second World War and the start of the Cold War. This is significant, because much of Orwell’s career is governed by dates.

Important date

In 1980, the Indian polymath Shashi Tharoor went to Huesca in Aragon for the express purpose of drinking a cup of coffee (Tharoor, 2005, p.182)! He did this in homage to George Orwell, who, in 1937 during the Spanish Civil War, fought in a sector of the Aragon front, opposite Huesca. Orwell and his comrades from the Partido Obrero de Unificacion Marxista (POUM) always promised themselves that “Tomorrow we’ll have coffee in Huesca” (Tharoor, 2005, p. 183).

Orwell never drank coffee in Huesca. Indeed, he never set foot in the town. On May 20th, 1937, a Nationalist sniper shot him through the neck, just under the larynx. Had the bullet been a fraction to the left, he would have been killed instantly, and his name would now be linked with that of the poet John Cornford – as a minor British writer remembered only for the fact that he died in Spain.

Logical fallacy

Many who work in Orwell studies follow the logical fallacy of post hoc, ergo hoc – the notion that the last two novels were in some way the culmination of his life’s enterprise and that all other writings had been leading to this glorious conclusion. In a 1984 panel discussion, Michael Ross maintained said, “I certainly see Orwell’s novels as a kind of series that leads up to the best known of his novels” (Buitenhuis and Nadel, 1988, p. 184) although he was immediately contradicted by Orwell’s biographer, Bernard Crick, who replied, “I don’t see his novels as a series. I see him thrashing around all over the place.” (Buitenhuis and Nadel, 1988, p.185).

While financial considerations were also significant, the logical fallacy may also have partly underpinned Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus’ (1968) four-volume work *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*. Their belief appears to have been that no scrap of writing should be omitted, as it might be the key to something greater.

This suggestion has not lost its power. In an appendix to Taylor’s (2004, pp. 432-35) biography of Orwell, there is an analysis of two recently unearthed letters from Orwell to the journalist Malcolm Muggeridge. Had they been bombshells, like Gunter Grass’s (2007) admission that he spent the last eight months of the Second World War serving in the Waffen SS, the letters might have been worth reading. As it is, they are both entirely banal.

How Orwell himself would have regarded this gathering of literary relics is, of course, a mystery, but the chances are that he would have rejected it. Much of his 1930s journalism was based on reviewing now forgotten novels, and in the 1940s he worked as a drama critic, arguably the most transient of literary roles. He specifically stated that he did not want *A Clergyman's Daughter* (1935) or *Keep the Aspidochelone Flying* (1936) to be reprinted. His estate executors ignored these instructions, though in doing so they probably did him no great service. It is also salutary to remember that, had Orwell died outside Huesca in 1937, those two novels would have accounted for half his total output.

The early novels

Let us briefly examine the novels that appeared between 1933 and 1936. The first, *Down and Out in London and Paris* (1933) was part novel, part reportage, but from the outset it is clear that it owed an enormous debt to Jack London's (1903) *The People of the Abyss*. However, precisely because it is so derivative, it lacks the original's impact and of course the conditions Orwell describes are nowhere near as extreme as those witnessed by London. Roberts (1971) explains how the introduction of a non-contributory old age pension scheme in 1909, and the Criminal Justice Administration Act of 1914, instantly reduced the numbers of the truly destitute in England. He also points out that the 1920s was a period of considerable prosperity for the British working class, an era in which their overall standard of living improved to such an extent that many were actually able to save.

Burmese Days (1934) is an oddity. Orwell himself obviously thought quite highly of it, mentioning it, along with *Homage to Catalonia* (1938), in the preface to the 1947 Ukrainian translation of *Animal Farm*. By that time, however, the British hold on Burma had been loosened to the point of nominal suzerainty. In the nineteenth century, by

contrast, Burma had been so secure, and such a backwater of Empire, that Bahadur Shah Zafar II, India's last Mughal Emperor, was exiled there after the so-called Indian Mutiny (Dalrymple, 2006). During Orwell's time as a military policeman in Burma, however, imperial prestige took a significant knock when a boycott of British goods forced the authorities to extend the reforms of the 1919 Government of India Act to include the province. The original act had expressly exempted Burma, and so this climb-down was a definite nationalist victory.

By 1947, moreover, the political climate in Burma had been utterly transformed. The Japanese victories of 1942, and the rout of the British, broke the myth of imperial superiority and involved a far greater impact than the British forces' eventual reconquest of the country. Japan's retreating armies, furthermore, abandoned stocks of weaponry that could be used against the returning administration. From the viewpoint of the post-war British government, therefore, granting independence was

far easier, and much cheaper, than attempting to reimpose control. These events of course left *Burmese Days* as little more than a period piece. Even the extent to which it can be described as an anti-colonial novel is open to dispute. The British at the Kyauktada Club are a deeply unpleasant group, almost a caricature – the club bore, the alcoholic, the cad, the racist bully, the memsahib; the penniless girl of good family who needs a husband. Yet, as Meyers (1991, p. 48) points out “the chief villain is a Burmese, who exploits his people more ruthlessly than the British do.” In his determination to be elected as the sole, token, “native” member of the Club, U Po Kyin deliberately sets out to destroy the reputations of both Flory and Dr. Veraswami and succeeds. Flory commits suicide and Dr. Veraswami is demoted – but to what end? U Po Kyin wins a prize that is effectively worthless.

This returns us to Crick’s comment that Orwell was “thrashing about all over the place.” Nowhere is this more obvious than in *A Clergyman’s Daughter*. The repressed Dorothy has a mental breakdown, wanders away from the vicarage and its debts, and gets involved with a group of East End Londoners who go down into Kent to pick hops. Returning to London, she becomes briefly destitute before rescue by a distant relative who secures her a place teaching in a terrible little private “school.” From there, again, she is rescued and returns to her father’s vicarage. The plot creaks, but allows Orwell to use material left over from *Down and Out in London and Paris* alongside his own experiences of hopping and suburban school teaching. He stumbles badly when he attempts to employ a sub-Joycean stream of consciousness technique to convey the nightmare quality of a night spent in Trafalgar Square, but ultimately the novel fails because so dated. After 1939, hopping as it was called disappeared as seasonal casual work and the 1944 Education Act closed down the few remaining private “schools”, like Mrs. Creevy’s, that had managed to survive the war. Most importantly, however, what Taylor (2004, p. 141) calls the book’s “obsession with money” undermines it. Asking the rhetorical question “in what other 1930’s novel can one learn the price of a packet of spearmint bouncers or a pound of cheap Danish bacon” (Taylor) begs the second question of why anyone would want to know. Yet such prices are important. Before starting work at Ringwood House School, Dorothy goes shopping: “She bought herself a ready-made tweed coat and skirt and a jersey to go with them, a hat, and a very cheap frock of artificial printed silk, also a pair of passable brown shoes, three pairs of lisle stockings, a nasty, cheap little handbag, and a pair of grey cotton gloves that would pass for suede at a little distance. That came to eight pounds ten.” (Orwell, 1974, p. 172).

Even so, we should never read Orwell because he is assumed to be undemanding. “Orwell is not a naïve writer: his simplicity is the result of care and deliberation” (Calder, 1987, p. 32-33). Unthinking GCSE examiners, and some EFL teachers, appear to believe that a fable about animals must be easy for students to understand. In fact,

the plot of *Animal Farm* is far more complex than the plots of most Jane Austen novels, where a nice girl meets a nice man. Then there is a problem, but the problem is resolved and they marry.

Neither should we use Orwell's work as a peg on which to hang syntactic and lexical exercises or comprehension exercises that slowly beat the texts to death, concentrating on details and ignoring the author's central themes. Orwell deserves better than that. He wrote for adults, for people with adult political concerns. It does him an injustice to reduce his work to the level of a compulsory school text.

If we read Orwell, therefore, we do so because what he says matters and because his last two novels remain relevant. The mass readership Orwell attracted in the 1940s and early 1950s recognized that a basic truth was reflected in his slightly distorted mirror image of their reality. *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* took on new relevance as the countries of Eastern Europe metamorphosed into the Warsaw Pact and held their own versions of Soviet show trials to purge heresy from their party ranks. As readers are aware, after Stalin's death, a succession of other Orwellian tyrants arose across the world, in Eastern Europe, Asia, Africa and Latin America – rulers who concerned only with their person aggrandizement, blind to their own shortcomings, using doublethink, stifling debate by fear and coercion, neglecting the desperate needs of their people for economic and social progress and in one case even inflicting genocide on them.

Conclusion

So far as Orwell's writings are concerned, therefore, it is clear that we must reject the logical fallacy of "post hoc, ergo propter hoc" examined at the start of this paper. In the last two novels there are occasional echoes from the earlier work, but nothing more. Calder (1987, p. 41) sees a physical similarity between George Bowling and Winston Smith, though Bowling is comparatively prosperous and, if anything, rather too well-fed. Smith is an out-of-condition drudge who survives on unappetizing canteen food. His "golden country" and the bluebell wood on the outskirts of London that he visits with Julia, however, definitely recall the Georgian Thames Valley that held George Bowling in thrall. *Animal Farm*, moreover, is set in a rural England that still maintains mixed agriculture, with a variety of animals, and plough-horses. Thanks to wartime exigencies, that type of agriculture was still common in the 1940s, but even before the Second World War farmers had experimented with specialization – being exclusively agricultural or raising specific types of stock – beef, poultry, pigs. Orwell ignored this, being "a revolutionary who is in love with 1910".

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