
Censorship and Orwell's Legacy

Interview with Jean Seaton

Questions by Benedetta Brevini

Benedetta Brevini (BB): Professor Seaton, no one has discussed and contemplated the notion of veiled censorship better than George Orwell – in Orwell's own words a type of censorship that is exerted 'without the need for any official ban'. Can you historically locate Orwell's critique? Could you also explain to us how ideologically dominant the 'uncritical admiration of Soviet Russia' was among British intellectuals of the time?

Jean Seaton (JS): Orwell identified the most terrifying kind of censorship: the kind that you do to yourself and that you even enthusiastically embrace. In *1984* the totalitarian state uses every means at its disposal to coerce intellectual compliance, it re-writes history, it invents new languages, it maintains wars and enemies, it creates positive propaganda, it uses fear, hate and violence, it has total surveillance, but the aim is to produce willing belief in the ideology. In the torture interrogation scene in *1984* (in itself the origin for much of the dramatic writing about power and its abuses since the Second World War – Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter both owe much to this single episode), the aim is to make Winston Smith actually believe the proposition that $2 + 2 = 5$, not merely to save himself from further pain by saying that it is the case.

Much of this 'hidden persuasion', Orwell believed, was carried out by the corruption of language and consequently of the power to think. In essays like 'Why I Write' and 'Politics and the English Language' (and many others), he wrestled with the power of words to describe reality. Clarity is moral for Orwell – and he alerts us to the distortions and lies that power imposes on language (what would he have made of 'extraordinary rendition'? – in many ways it is Orwell's legacy that such mendacity is pin-pointed) but also the dangers of jargons and obfuscations. Complexity is not clever but deceitful. In this way Orwell is the inheritor of a long tradition of radical English essayists, most obviously Swift, but Defoe, Paine, Burke as well. Along with this emphasis on clear writing 'like a mirror', there he is concerned with the capacity of language to describe reality. Political language he wrote 'is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable and to give the appearance of solidity to pure wind'. It is against this

Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture © 2010 (University of Westminster, London), Vol. 7(2): 6-11. ISSN 1744-6708 (Print); 1744-6716 (Online)

view that he was so concerned with good, clear, writing. His forensic analysis of the undermining of language by power makes his work as relevant as it ever was. ‘Newspeak’, ‘Doublethink’ and indeed the dystopian notion of ‘Orwellian’ still alert us to the destruction of language.

He also actively sought experience, and it was this empirical passion that informed his politics and his writing. It was not just that he went *Down and Out in Paris and London*, and wrote thousands of letters pursuing facts and information of every kind before he went on *The Road to Wigan Pier*, but he also served as an imperial administrator in the Burmese Police and fought in the Spanish Civil War. His acutely uncomfortable unpacking of the limits of imperial power in ‘Shooting an Elephant’, and ‘A Hanging’ are an exploration of the reality of power. While it was *Homage to Catalonia* and his furious identification of Communist lies and brutality in that conflict, during which he fought for the anarchists, was badly wounded, saw friends tortured and killed by Franco’s forces but also the communists, and his wife Eileen escaped arrest by moments, that finally forged his unique political voice. Eileen’s caustic, witty devotion to him and politics were also significant – her experience of the sheer political terror of Barcelona in 1938 was a resource for Orwell. He was ever after a man of the progressive left – but opposed to totalitarianism. It was this double opposition that made his work in *Animal Farm* and *1984* – both half fable, part novel, part essay – so radical. There were – as in any creative work – innumerable sources for these two works, his experience of the Second World War and bombing, his radical roots and his impartiality. *1984* is hallucinatory – and he wrote it while dying of TB.

His criticism of the left was that its ‘flabby pacificism’ in the 1930s, ‘shrieking for war’ in the late 1930s, and defeatism during the war itself was largely because of their ‘severance from the common culture of the country’. They took, he said, ‘their opinions from Moscow and their food from France’, and were always negative. So ‘engagement’ and getting out – as it were – was for Orwell another defence against false and easy ideas that were debilitating. Censorship is never simply an external imposed system for Orwell but also he identifies a far more insidious internal – self-imposed and self-pleasing – view of the world. It is because he defines the dangers of censorship both in the large oppressions of totalitarianism but also the small accommodations of comfortable lives that he is so useful.

The anti-fascist left during the 1930s had largely been pro-communist (Bernard Crick in his great biography of Orwell describes the milieu well). They had ignored the Great Famine, they had ignored the show trials, they had ignored the emergence of barbarism and the intellectual bankruptcy of Soviet communism. From the literary left – from writers like Auden and Spender, to the political left and politicians like John Strachey, to the trade union movement, to publishers like

Victor Gollancz – who started the Left Book Club which took radical and socially progressive writing to a wide audience (but who, having been a huge supporter of Orwell, turned down *1984* in 1944 as too anti-communist) – the left was largely un-critical of communism. So Orwell's critical progressive politics isolated him from many whom he had regarded as companions and sympathizers. Orwell wrote that since the age of 5 or 6 he knew he the 'facility with words and the power of facing unpleasant facts, and I felt this created a kind of private world in which I could get my own back for my failure in everyday life'. It is this uneasy integrity that makes his work (despite its limits) so relevant. But Orwell was a socialist, abolishing cant was his aim, and his attacks on other socialists derived – not from a rejection of their goal – but from his own assessment of the vanities and humbug of many who adopted the label. 'Orwell', wrote Ben Pimlott, 'sniffs orthodoxies at a hundred yards: and, having sniffed it, seeks to upset its adherents.'

Orwell was a founding member of organizations like Amnesty and Pen, which works to protect writers and freedom of speech. His work is useful because on the one hand it says things about the very large abuses of freedom in tyrannies and on the other is continually alerts us to the apparently trivial, but dangerous, corruptions of language and thought in more comfortable places. However, although he is often treated as if he were an icon, his views were often to contemporary ears illiberal, and for much of the 1920s and 1930s he was struggling as any writer must to find a voice. Yet he was always almost masochistically self-critical.

BB: In his 'Preface' to *Animal Farm*, Orwell states several times that 'veiled censorship' operates not just in newspapers, but also in books and periodicals, plays, films and radio. Could you tell more about censorship in Britain at the time? Also, how commonly censorship operated at the BBC at the time in which Orwell was writing? Orwell denounced the fact that, for example, the BBC celebrated the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Red Army without mentioning Trotsky ... and certainly the Second World war must have been a tough test for BBC's independence.

JS: Orwell worked for the BBC – producing a whole series of programmes for India during the war. They introduced great Indian writers to large audiences and brought T.S. Elliot, Virginia Woolf, and many other writers to discussions of Indian culture. When he left (to go to Jura and write *Animal Farm*) he wrote the BBC an extraordinary letter, (which you can read on the BBC History website) saying that no-one had ever attempted to interfere with any thing he had done. However, he was – as many people were – also critical of the Corporation. At one point he observe (when looking at how William Empson had been trying to develop broadcasting to China) that the 'BBC was half way between a

warehouse and a mad house'. Particularly in the very early period of the war, there was real anxiety that the BBC would (and that had been the plan in 1938 – please also look at the BBC website for a wonderful seminar on ‘The Outbreak of War and the BBC’ – we held last year to commemorate the outbreak of war) simply be taken over by the government. It was not. The work that went into protecting the independence of the Corporation between 1938–9 (much of which was producing technical solutions to the problem of the enemy’s capacity to navigate using BBC transmissions) was vital. There was – of course – all sorts of censorship on the BBC (as there was on the press), but that was not ‘bad’ in itself, after all the nation was involved in a total war against a totalitarian tyranny. It is certainly the case that there was a constant anxiety and a nagging belief that the public was not being told everything. However, censorship was very different from during the First World War, when the British press combined jingoistic propaganda with a failure to report soaring casualties. The BBC and indeed the government recognized that the Second World War was a matter of home front morale and that the best way of maintaining that was – in the end – to be as truthful as possible.

The BBC was (I have always believed) oddly assisted in its view of accuracy by the simple fact that Britain suffered nothing but defeat, followed by catastrophic defeat until 1943. The BBC had to decide – as did the government how it would tell that story. Of course some strange and almost fabulous interpretations were put on the defeats – but no one ever doubted, for example, that France had been defeated. The important distinction is between censorship that the British public would have agreed to – in its own interest – no one would want the Germans to know where bombs had landed, for example, as that would let them target tonight’s bombs more accurately, and so on – and that which was unnecessary. Overall, the BBC told the British public far more accurately what was happening, and indeed broadcast into occupied Europe with a truthfulness that was remarkable and hard fought for. It carried propaganda, it censored itself, it had battles about censorship – but it was also an agent of truth.

BB: In 1984 Orwell introduces a new language, the *Newspeak* that will gradually substitute English as the official language and will eventually make old books, or books written before the ruling Party era, unreadable. What message do you think this metaphor conveys for contemporary Britain and Europe? Isn’t the loss of memory the most dreadful form of censorship?

JS: 1984 is partly an extended essay on the necessity of history. Winston Smith spends his days ‘re-writing’ history by changing the newspaper stories. Memory is fallible, personal, prejudiced, and yet what constitutes a person. ‘History’ – if it is not merely ideology – attempts to reconstruct the reasons for things by examining evidence, and it challenges myths and convenient mis-remembering. Tyrannies

always want to control history – which is why it is in the front line of keeping political systems decent.

BB: Orwell famously affirmed that ‘War is Peace’, in other words, the persistence of a war guarantees the permanence of the current order. What lesson can contemporary Europe learn from this reflection? Is the durability of war perpetrating veiled censorship today?

JS: Orwell was no pacifist; on the contrary, he both hated war and believed that tyranny ought to be fought, and was a consistent anti-appeaser during the 1930s. I don’t think there is such a thing as ‘war’ – there are indeed different kinds of war, for different purposes. There are Just Wars. So Orwell sends one back to some difficult decisions. However, he does remind us that you have to identify what actually you are fighting. He reminds us that propaganda is most effective where you don’t recognize it. He reminds us that our understanding can be prejudiced by things we don’t perceive. In a period when news is becoming less well resourced, where conflicts are fought in distant places, and when politics is not merely treated with scepticism (which is apt) but cynicism (which can be very dangerous), creating an informed citizenry is ever more challenging.

BB: Are there any less famous essays where the discourse of Orwell around censorship develops?

JS: There are many: his essays are spectacular. There are many that foreshadow all of cultural studies, looking seriously at popular culture in essays on Donald McGill (whose *risqué* cartoons were popular seaside postcards), thriller writing and the meanings of food; these are not directly about ‘censorship’ but they are all explorations in the construction of ideas. But all of his interest in the way in which newspapers and the films, radio and magazines worked – as businesses as well as ideological machines – feed his sophisticated image of censorship and propaganda. As *1984* showed, he had a deep interest in the impact of the media and was influenced by new American writing on the power of advertisements. Other essays explore ‘Englishness’ – Britain is seen as a place with the wrong people in charge, with a dreadful underside of poverty, full of hypocrisy, incompetent politicians – and yet it is a society that has (especially after the experience of the Second World War) a kind of grudging respect from him. Very accessible essays like ‘Why I Write’ and ‘Cigarettes or Books’, are always poring over the power of words and writing to mis-describe reality. They are all listed on the Orwell Prize website – along with our attempt to use Orwell’s insights in the contemporary world through hundreds of debates and arguments. He was no saint (although he had an odd charisma), but he does offer a corrective lesson in not following herds, attempting to communicate clearly, thinking for yourself and the importance of not being comfortable. Everything he wrote ‘is part of an extended polemic in

Seaton/Brevini, Interview

seeing the truth, however ugly, in ourselves'. This is his prophylactic against censorship and propaganda – starting closest to home with one's own ideas and assumptions.

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