



DOSSIÊ: GEORGE ORWELL

My Path to and with Orwell

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The procedure by which academics produce books is not by and large a very exciting one. Writers of fiction may test the limits of romance and adventure, talking, drinking and loving late into the night in the cafes and dives of great bustling cities or contemplating the meaning of life in remote rural idylls. Academics sit in libraries, or in their cramped offices, tapping away on keyboards, devouring books, and more books, and still more books. Then they regurgitate, like a giant machine pulping hundreds of texts into sawdust in order to extract one more from the result. Then they edit and re-edit, endlessly adding and cutting, and then double- and triple-check their footnotes, until finally they can bear it no longer. All the while they suffer, wondering whether they have read too little or too much, written too little or too much, thought too shallowly (but never too deeply). They lurch from the exhilaration of days when a thousand or two words flow magically from the keyboard to the despondency of staring for hours at an empty screen or, worse, at prose which begs to be deleted. They come to hate their work, regarding it as an alien creature aiming to take them over, heart and soul. It may become their alter ego, begging, cursing, nagging, cajoling, disrupting even their sleep as it demand new and rewritten sentences and paragraphs. As George Orwell

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noted, "Writing a book is a horrible, exhausting struggle, like a long bout of some painful illness", adding that "One would never undertake such a thing if one were not driven on by some demon whom one can neither resist nor understand." (ORWELL,1968,p.7)

Yet authors repeatedly throw themselves into the fray, driven in part by academic imperatives, with devilish deans poking their behinds with pitchforks, but equally fuelled by the relentless urge to create, to make meaning through words, to write therapeutically, to cleanse their consciences and erase their traumas, but thereby also to justify their existence and the profession of the intellectual. Out of all the exasperation, and the endless sweat and tears, the hope persists of somehow making sense of something, and of making the world a little clearer.

No two books are alike, however, and some (to their authors as well as their readers) are doubtless more interesting than others. Sometimes research has a more contemporary or immediate application, and we feel we are doing our part to explore and explain humanity's difficulties, and to relieve our own consciences from the charge of uselessness. In part, too, or at least in this case, they may be more personal, and so go further to our emotional core, and our own working out of our own life's problems in print, than is usually the case. So it is with the composition of my *Dystopia: A Natural History* (2016). Let me briefly recount why, and specifically how George Orwell loomed large in its creation.

Having like many first encountered Orwell as a teenager, when I read *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, *Animal Farm* and *Homage to Catalonia*, I came to him as a scholar in the year 1984, when as a young lecturer in the English Department of a German university I offered a course on the great text and its background and contemporary implications. This included an overview of some of Orwell's other and less well known works. From my initial research three articles emerged which reflected my trajectory at the time, and also my growing interest in the subject and the man.² I was drawn immediately to Orwell, with

2 "The Lion and the Unicorn, Patriotism, and Orwell's Politics", *Review of Politics*, 47, no. 2 (April 1985), 186-211 and "Industrialism and Hedonism in Orwell's Literary and Political Development", *Albion*, 18, no. 2 (Summer 1986), 219-245, and "Der Begriff des 'Totalitarismus': Zur Realität des Grossen Bruders", *Gulliver: Deutsch-Englische Jahrbücher*, 14 (January 1984), 85-102.

his wry, sardonic humour and penetrating eye, his brisk and adept turns of phrase, his disarming candour, and his commitment to understanding the deepest problems of our times. I readily embraced his ambiguity about modern consumerism and the American way of life in particular, as well as his social radicalism. I saw him as a recent embodiment of an English radical tradition which stretched back to William Cobbett, Robert Owen and Thomas Paine, a tradition which championed the rights of the majority, and of the poor, and despised the pompous arrogance of the ruling elite.

Like many on the left at the time, however, I recognised the intellectual and political difficulties of identifying with an author long deemed by critics on the left to be an opponent of socialism, through the fusion from the mid 1950s onwards of the text and themes of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* with conservative criticisms of Stalinism and of "totalitarianism", a term most on the left refused to use at the time. Though I already self-identified as a socialist, and had written my doctoral dissertation on early socialism out of a motive of wanting to understand the connections between Marx and Stalinism through the prism of early socialism, I had no such qualms. I had read Solzhenitsyn's *Gulag Archipelago* in the mid 1970s and in the horror of the Purges and state system of slave labour recognised Stalinism as a colossal betrayal of socialism. To airbrush this regime and its imitators out of history was a huge mistake. A refusal to confront its shortcomings I regarded (and still regard) as both intellectually dishonest and a substantial barrier to forward movement. Moreover, even a cursory glance at Orwell's statement of his own political positions and intentions revealed his insistence that *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was (to quote Orwell himself) "not intended as an attack on socialism, or on the British Labor party, but as a show-up of the perversions to which a centralized economy is liable, and which have already been partly realized in Communism and fascism." (ORWELL, 2002, p.135). Orwell, it was clear to me, was a humanist socialist first and foremost, who saw Stalinism first hand (in Spain) for what it was, and hated it. This to my mind was a legacy worth preserving and promoting. So amongst my endeavours at this time was a first crude attempt to compare what Orwell had described in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* with what was then known about Stalinism through the rubric of the concept of totalitarianism, to compare the reality with the fictional portrayal as a means of

revealing the different truths exposed by each.³

This in essence was the seed of the project which finally bore fruit in *Dystopia: A Natural History* more than thirty years later. But as I delved further into Orwell I also found much more to identify with. Like Orwell in *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933) my own path to socialism involved youthful work as a dishwasher, hotel porter, and cook. I had had my already low wages stolen by employers, and been a union activist as a postgraduate student at university. I had lived with enough of the legacy of the events of 1968 to appreciate the need for an alternative to capitalism which did not mirror the grey and dismal features of Soviet leaders lined up at Red Square parades. I had also inherited enough of the 1960s bid to create an enduring counterculture to feel that socialism's quest for greater leisure needed to take account of such movements. And, by the early 1980s, and especially after Chernobyl, it was rapidly becoming evident that the proto-ecological elements of the counterculture were now demanding a full realisation that the destruction of the natural world posited the potential for a global catastrophe of unprecedented proportions, the acknowledgement of which we are only just now making today. Here Orwell's fascination with nature chimed with that compendious passion which pervades Cobbett's *Rural Rides* and *Cottage Economy*, which seemingly makes a real appreciation of the land, insects and animals the basis of a real patriotism rooted in love of place.

I set out to write *Dystopia* in 2012, having finished a brief book on utopia the previous year which helped reveal my own inadequate grasp of its notional antithesis.⁴ In the early stages my ideas were also focused on a re-interpretation of Mill's theory of liberty which also drew out what later modern readers might well regard as some of the more dystopian aspects of Mill's proposals, notably around mandatory family planning.⁵ This too revealed the overall project I had in mind to be more complex and ambiguous than I had initially assumed. More than anything I had written previously, *Dystopia* also reflected the mood of the times. I had begun working on the utopian literary

3 It was published as "Der Begriff des 'Totalitarismus': Zur Realität des Grossen Bruders", Gulliver: Deutsch-Englische Jahrbücher, 14 (January 1984), 85-102.

4 Searching for Utopia: The History of an Idea (Thames & Hudson, 2011)(2nd edn, Utopia: The History of an Idea, 2020).

5 Mill and Paternalism (Cambridge University Press, 2013).

tradition in the mid 1980s, and was initially concerned to try to make more widely accessible (in those pre-internet days) the huge variety of primary sources which expressed the richness of the tradition as a whole. Eventually I edited some eighteen volumes of such texts, as well as various collections of essays and commentary. But by the beginning of this century aspirations towards utopia were beginning to look increasingly futile. Discussions of "climate change" and "global warming" were becoming increasingly anxious, and a study of the facts indicated a potentially dire future unfolding. Yet all the while denial and ignorance seemed to prevail. Those who had the good life wanted to preserve it, and the rest aspired to attain it. Very few wanted to confront the awful truth of what the twenty-first century might deliver us, and which is now all too evident around us.

Dystopia turned out to be a five-year project full of surprises. I had initially projected the book in the understanding that while there was no single study of the subject, the secondary literature should be relatively solid, so that it should be possible to summarise this more or less elegantly, and concentrate on alerting readers to the large number of hitherto ignored primary sources. I was surprised to find that much of what had been written about dystopian literature, and even more the relationship between literature and history, was of a relatively low intellectual level, was riven with ideological bias (much of it directed against Orwell), and was presented clothed in obscure and misleading language. No chronology of texts existed, definitions were varied and contradictory, a bewildering jargon was foisted on the public by some authors, and little effort had been made to bridge the approaches posited by different disciplines, and most notably history, politics, sociology, psychology and literature. Distressingly little effort had been devoted to interdisciplinary approaches to the subject which contrasted historical and autobiographical narratives with literary portraits of despotic or fearful regimes. Ideological positioning, in which Orwell was often portrayed as an ally of anti-utopian or conservative writers, also meant that the political legacy of the Cold War continued into the 1980s and beyond. Some excellent work had been done on individual authors, like Orwell himself, and Wells and Huxley. But no account stitched together the subject as a whole, gave it a beginning, and wedded its many interdisciplinary sub-genres and sub-narratives together in a meaningful

way. So I concluded that it was necessary to rethink the entire subject. Eventually it would take some 280,000 words to accomplish this - and there was much more left to say. As a historian I was especially concerned to try to bridge the gap between literature and history, and here to evaluate how literary texts refracted real-life regimes based on despotic and other fearful regimes. I also realised that in so doing a constant dialectic was at work between thinking about dystopia and utopia, and that far from being opposites, the two were interwoven to a much greater extent than I had previously assumed, or posited in my own writing.⁶ The demon /driving me on demanded some reconciliation between these various claims, but the further I proceeded the more complex the task became.

Those who have written lengthy books know that the longer they are, the more they become organic entities having a life of their own, and taking on an existence which eventually may overwhelm their increasingly powerless author, who becomes at time a mere hapless observer of the narrative unfolding before his or her eyes. Within the text, arguments come to assume the status of formal positions, and begin to contend with other positions, all begging for recognition and a more elevated status. Different disciplines and authors vie for treatment, often having already commenced an internal dialogue of their own with rival authors and approaches. The demand to produce something original, which is incumbent on all academic writers, weighs heavily on most. This was not a daunting problem here. For it soon became obvious that much of the subject could be reinterpreted, and with the scrutiny of some two hundred lesser-known texts, a quite different narrative respecting dystopia could be constructed. Yet on the literary side it was equally clear that the leading and most influential twentieth century authors, and especially Aldous Huxley and Orwell, had to be accorded the status their work had earned them. Orwell in particular, it was obvious, provided the prototype for most readers of what dystopia - then still, unlike today, a relatively unknown term - consisted in. *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, after all, had probably outsold all the utopias and dystopias ever written put together. It was clear to

⁶ E.g., in "Malice in Wonderland: The Origins of Dystopia from Wells to Orwell", in Gregory Claeys (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*

me that Orwell would in some way dominate the book, but equally obvious that the vast amount of new information we had about the tradition as a whole as well as the historical realities surrounding it would modify in some way his understanding of regimes which terrorised their population.

My usual mode of working is to read as much as I can get my hands on about a subject, then begin writing, then identify holes in the narrative and go back to find ways of filling these. Most of my books have been written in the order in which the eventual chapters were published, often because historians adopt a chronological narrative as the most natural means of explaining how ideas evolve. In the case of *Dystopia*, Part One, *The Theory and Pre-History of Utopia*, was thus written first, with Part Two, *Totalitarianism and Dystopia*, coming next, and Part Three, *The Literary Revolt against Collectivism*, coming last. The advantage of this ordering was that I was able to unfold a theoretical structure for the subject before actually testing out any of my hypotheses. I early on settled on the concept of fear as the central organising category for the actual regimes under study, for there was a legacy for this approach in the theory of despotisms in my own field, intellectual history, Montesquieu being a key precedent. I then posited a fear-to-friendship spectrum as a way of reconsidering the relationship between dystopia and utopia. The "natural history" of the title indicates the emotional nature of this conception, and derives from eighteenth century debates about the "passions". This made it evident that some consideration of other types of societies in which fear dominates, for example those dominated by disease, and also including fear of witchcraft and the devil, and of monsters and monstrosity, was necessary, in order to delve into the psychology of the dystopian condition.

I was also concerned from the outset to adapt concepts derived initially from nineteenth century crowd, mass and group psychology, in which ideas of unconscious group manipulation and what would later be called groupthink, loom large. Group theory did not play a major role in any existing account of either utopianism or dystopias, though its importance is clearly hinted at in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. But it seemed to me to provide considerable insights into utopianism, and especially communitarianism. It suggested ways of seeing utopias as ideal groups, defined largely by friendship and similar forms of

belongingness, while dystopias were often defined by extreme groupthink driven by an intensely distorted collectivism, and a perverted form of the same desire to feel part of a larger whole. Also central to my concerns was the effort to compare real-existing regimes with literary accounts of their excesses and crimes, most notably Nazism and Stalinism, but including some later catastrophes, like Pol Pot's ruthlessly anti-modernist rule in Cambodia between 1975-9, which resulted in the deaths of as many as two million people, a third of the population, often in an exceptionally brutal manner even by the standards of such regimes. Orwell had repeatedly been charged with exaggerating the horrors of Stalinism. But it seemed to me likely that reality was far worse, and so it proved.

By a stroke of good fortune I managed to get some grant funding to do research in Cambodia, where memoirs unavailable elsewhere were being published, and where the archivists of the Documentation Center of Cambodia proved exceptionally helpful in assessing the literature. The horrors of this regime are far less well known in the west, and the section on the book devoted to them, while painful to write, was rewarding in the degree to which it drew on this largely unknown literature. When I visited the "Killing Fields" of Choeung Ek, just outside Phnom Penh, where many of the victims of the Tuol Sleng prison in the city were murdered, I walked on fragments of bone and cloth still emerging onto the surface of the soil from the unexcavated mass graves beneath. Nowhere, outside of the infamous Hall of Hair in Auschwitz, which stunned me as if I had been hit with a wooden plank, has the horror of totalitarian rule ever been brought home to me so directly. The fact that these particular victims were mostly Khmer Rouge cadres being devoured by the very revolution they had done so much to make so brutal did not diminish the force of this horror. You can see some of their portraits in the exhibition hall at Tuol Sleng; though they are themselves often the executioners, they are human too.⁷

By the time I reached Part Three, on literature, it was already evident to me that the very large number of comparatively unknown dystopian texts was bound to alter a narrative built on a few major figures, simply through an

⁷ See <https://tuolsleng.gov.kh/en/>.

emphasis on diversity and variety if nothing else. Many dystopian themes, like the fear of computers, robots, great corporations, surveillance systems, consumerism and mass culture, had separate histories and were interwoven in many works by the late twentieth century. The anti-collectivist dystopian tradition, I ascertained, could be dated with some certainty to literary attacks on the idea of equality at the time of the French Revolution. It was also evident that the great age of modern utopian writing, commencing in the 1880s, also witnessed new visions of the apocalypse and a proliferation of racism, imperialist and eugenic themes in both utopian and more overtly dystopian form. This again muddied and blurred the distinction between utopia and dystopia, making clear-cut divisions increasingly difficult.

From the outset I had planned on separate chapters on Huxley and Orwell to acknowledge their standing in the field, and to contrast the very different versions of dystopia each presents. What I was not prepared for, when I began the Orwell chapter, was the realisation that Orwell had been largely on a very similar trajectory to my own in the years in which *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was being conceived and written. Specifically, the short and shrewd if also confused essay entitled "Notes on Nationalism" (1945), which had been overlooked by many Orwell scholars, provided key insights into a theory of groups which Orwell had been musing over for some time, and which reflects, more than most of his works, a distinctive anarchist influence.⁸¹ As I began over about three months to read all of Orwell's works once again, this time chronologically, I realised that around 1944 Orwell had come to conceive his own personal and political problematic more clearly than at any previous point. What he realised, in brief, and what quite encapsulated (I think) his experience over the past decade, was that the position of the engaged writer on the left always involved conceiving of society in terms of groups dedicated to particular tasks, and always concerned with the search for or retention of power, and quite willing to dispense of their competitors in the furtherance of their own aims and ambitions.

This essay to my mind tells us more about Orwell's intellectual

8 I pursued this further in "Orwell's 'Notes on Nationalism' and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*", in Thomas Horan, ed. *Critical Insights: Nineteen Eighty-Four* (The Salem Press, 2016), pp. 71-82.

conclusions about the mid-twentieth century, and more about the makeup of his final great work, than any other preceding piece, *Animal Farm* included. It was immensely gratifying to feel that my own conclusions had moved in the same direction unprompted, so to speak, though as a result in part of some influences which Orwell also shared, like William Godwin, the so-called founder of philosophical anarchism who also offered a prototype for thinking about the influence of groups on individual opinion. Orwell in particular understood that the lust for power dominated public life as never before, and became an end in itself for many, including the intelligentsia, about whom he became increasingly suspicious, whose notional aim was to benefit humanity. The realisation that my own account of groups in Part One overlapped considerably with this theory of power made the book in my view "Orwellian" in a very positive sense, as an extension and hopefully a deepening of the insights of "Notes on Nationalism" and its relation to *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. In a brief moment of eureka-like euphoria I sensed that this was the direction Orwell himself would have moved with the much greater knowledge of totalitarianism which we possess today.

My *Dystopia* was completed in 2015, just before the world-wide celebrations of the 500th anniversary of the publication of Thomas More's *Utopia*. I could not have anticipated that the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States, which had seemed so preposterous a possibility during the primaries, would occur, and bring with it an Orwellian (in the usual sense) deluge of "fake news", downright lying, and right-wing propaganda of the worst kind. I had not foreseen that catastrophic environmental breakdown would at the same time gain dramatically in credibility as new information about the rate of global warming became available. Grim warnings of the likely fate humanity would face if our behaviour did not alter rapidly became increasingly shrill, and increasingly realistic. Suddenly dystopia was everywhere in the news, and seemed to mirror the temper of the times. The long wave of post-war growth and optimism now seemingly came to an end, and with it the concept of linear material progress which suffused western thought in the past two centuries. We had now, it seemed, to find an alternative both to capitalism and to the debunked versions of communism which equally mirrored ideas of infinite growth.

I began a therapeutic antidote to this dystopian spirit in a book now entitled *Utopianism for a Dying Planet: Life After Consumerism* (Princeton University Press, 2022). Like many of us, I sense a feeling of impending doom in many of the trends of our times. I think of Orwell every time I enter a pub with five TV screens, background Muzak, and fifty people staring at their phones and not conversing with their friends. And I think: Orwell would want to talk. I think of Orwell every time a new system of state and corporate surveillance is introduced, and reflect, with the radical American historian Howard Zinn, that the political problem of the moment is not civil disobedience, but civil obedience, our connivance in this awful fate we face in the coming decades. And I think: Orwell would want to act. He would not be cowed into submission by the tinpot dictators of our time, and the relentless onslaught upon democracy and liberty which has become so prevalent. He would not get his news from Facebook or any of the dominant right-wing papers of our time. And he would be a utopian still.

So let me conclude with a quote (used in the next book) which to my mind characterises that spirit of fraternity, comradeship and solidarity which Orwell identified as lying at the heart of the socialist and anarchist traditions. It comes from *Homage to Catalonia*, where Orwell comments, on reaching Barcelona during the Spanish Civil War, that "Nobody said 'Senor' or 'Don' or even 'Usted'; everyone called everyone else 'Comrade' and 'Thou', and said 'Salud!' instead of 'Buenos dias'. This he immediately recognised was "a state of affairs worth fighting for". At this moment he first felt that socialism (and anarchism) meant an identity of belonging based on equality. It touched him deeply, and the memory remained with him the rest of his life.⁹ This is a spirit we can still appreciate, and strive to attain. For without this greater sociability, a drawing together and fostering of a sense of common destiny, we are still too divided to forestall our fate. And so my sense is that today Orwell would be on the front line of protests against our continuing policies of environmental devastation. He loved nature, the earth, the of all of it would have angered him deeply.

⁹ Its inversion is portrayed in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

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