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## George Orwell as a Public Choice Economist

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Abstract: George Orwell is famous for his two final fictions, *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. These two works are sometimes understood to defend capitalism against socialism. But as Orwell was a committed socialist, this could not have been his intention. Orwell's criticisms were directed not against socialism *per se* but against the Soviet Union and similarly totalitarian regimes. Instead, these fictions were intended as Public Choice-style investigations into which political systems furnished suitable incentive structures to prevent the abuse of power. This is demonstrated through a study of Orwell's non-fiction works, where his opinions and intentions are more explicit.

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Perhaps no author is more famous for his anti-communist writings than George Orwell. Two of his novels in particular - *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* - are so well-known that they have entered common currency. For example, such phrases as “all animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others” (*Animal Farm* in *Complete Novels* 69) and terms as the “memory hole” (*Nineteen Eighty-Four* in *Complete Novels* 970) have entered into household parlance (cf. Howe, “1984: Enigmas of Power” 98 and Calder, “Orwell's Post-War Prophecy” 154f.). And it is colloquial to describe as “Orwellian” any statement which contains some internal contradiction or obfuscatory language meant to conceal an unsavory truth (cf. Deutscher, “1984—The Mysticism of Cruelty” 119). It is difficult to exaggerate the influence of Orwell's works, especially these two fictions; indeed, *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* are sometimes assigned by conservatives as *the* quintessential refutations of socialism and communism.

And yet it is often unknown to these same conservatives that Orwell was himself a socialist! (John Newsinger, *Orwell's Politics*, p. ix.) And as a socialist, Orwell could not possibly have intended to condemn collectivism outright. Therefore, any reading of *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* which interprets these works as criticizing collectivism and extolling the market economy, must necessarily be a false interpretation. The question then is, what *did* Orwell intend to convey in these works? To the credit of the conservatives, it must be admitted that their interpretation of Orwell's fictions as anti-socialist does in fact square quite nicely with the actual texts of those fictions. The only problem is that this anti-socialist interpretation contradicts Orwell's own personal life and convictions as a socialist. The challenge is to find an interpretation which accounts for what we know about Orwell himself as a socialist, while at the same time doing as much justice to what the actual texts themselves say, as does the conservative anti-socialist interpretation.

As Lane Crothers notes, there is a special difficulty in interpreting Orwell, for he advocated a socialist economy while simultaneously warning about the totalitarian potential of precisely such a

system (“George Orwell and the Failure of Democratic Socialism: The Problem of Political Power” 389).<sup>2</sup> How is this apparent contradiction to be squared? According to Crothers, some interpreters say Orwell changed his mind, abandoning socialism prior to writing *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, while others believe he was simply inconsistent. Still others do not even attempt a reconciliation at all (*ibid.*). Crothers tries to resolve the dilemma of Orwell the socialist warning against totalitarianism by arguing, “A better explanation for the inconsistencies of Orwell's thought can be found in his concern for the potential abuse of power in socialist states” (*ibid.* 389f.).<sup>3</sup> This present essay will come to a similar though not identical conclusion, arguing that Orwell was concerned not only with the potential for the *individual* abuse of power (per Crothers),<sup>4</sup> but additionally with the issue of which political *institutions* were and were not able to cope constructively with this individual potential for abuse of power.<sup>5</sup> If this conclusion is correct, then Orwell's concerns were crucially consistent with those of Public Choice, a sub-field of economics concerned with how political institutions condition the behavior of public officials.

Whether an institution can effectively deal with human nature depends crucially on which incentives that institution creates. Economic theory tends to assume that when a multitude of individuals in society engage in some consistent and patterned behavior, it is probably not coincidental or random, but that there is probably some set of societal institutions which somehow motivate those patterned behaviors. Institutions provide “incentive structures,” sets of incentives which promote consistent and predictable behavior - whether good or bad. For example, in the marketplace, if businesses are consistently satisfying customers and endeavoring to improve their products, economists do not tend to assume that businessmen are therefore altruistic. Instead, they ask what incentive structures are promoting this behavior. Economists tend to answer that businesses profit by providing goods which consumers prefer. If a business fails to provide anything preferable to the goods offered by its competitors, then nobody will buy anything from it. Businessmen therefore satisfy customers

principally (not exclusively) because doing so benefits themselves. Thus, the institutions of the market - such as private property and profit-and-loss - promote a certain behavior by harnessing and channeling self-interested motivations. Businessmen usually serve their customers not out of a sense of altruism, but because it pays them to do so. Indeed, as Adam Smith famously declared in 1776,

It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities but of their advantages. (*An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*, book 1, chapter 2, paragraph 2)

This interpretation of market activity as being based largely on self-interest is probably familiar to most readers, even those not trained in economics. Yet somehow, when we shift to the study of politics, the general assumption is often that political officials are *not* self-interested, that they serve only the public good for conscience's sake. The economics sub-field of Public Choice comes to question this assumption.<sup>6</sup> Public Choice offers what James M. Buchanan called “Politics Without Romance,” a realistically skeptical attitude which replaces a romantic notion of government as an infallible savior from imperfect markets which fail to live up to idealized criteria (Buchanan, “Politics Without Romance” 46). No doubt, there are many individuals who are in politics because they sincerely wish to advance the public weal. But Public Choice is skeptical of the assumption that just because someone is in government office, he is an altruist. Public Choice argues that we ought to assume that political officials are every bit as self-interested - or not - as market actors - no more, no less. In other words, Public Choice assumes moral, behavioral, and psychological equivalence between public and private actors. This does not necessarily mean people seek to maximize their financial wealth alone, for self-interest means only seeking to obtain whatever an individual person subjectively desires, which may or may not be money.<sup>7</sup> For example, if a person benefits his family out of love, then he pursuing his own self-interest, where his own personal happiness is partially a function of how

happy his loved ones are. But political officials are humans too, and we ought to assume that they are bound by the same human nature as everybody else, and the assumption that government will necessarily promote the public welfare just because some define the purpose of government as such, is considered in Public Choice theory to be naïve and unscientific. (Cf. Buchanan, “Politics Without Romance” 49.)

Therefore, while mainstream welfare economics predicts so-called “market failure,” Public Choice counters with the prediction of “government failure” (Buchanan, “Politics Without Romance” 46). Market failure is a threat because in certain institutional settings, private and public interest do not align. In such cases, when an individual acts in his own self-interest, the “invisible hand” of the market will fail to ensure that the public is suitably benefited, and the market will fail to satisfy certain idealized criteria.<sup>8</sup> But welfare economists often used to compare a real existing market with all its imperfections (market failure) to a theoretically perfect government assumed to be flawless (no such thing as government failure). Public Choice economist James M. Buchanan analogized this to a judge judging a singing contest. After the first singer finished his performance and earned anything less than a perfect score, the judge, said Buchanan, immediately pronounced the second contestant to be the winner without even listening to him. Harold Demsetz called this the “Nirvana Fallacy,” whereby one criticizes something for being imperfect without ever considering that its alternatives might not be any better. Public Choice argues that welfare economics often uncritically treats government as an infallible *deus ex machina*. Instead, Public Choice contends, one must examine whether the private interests of the government's officials are any more closely aligned with the public interest than the private market actors' private interests are. Only if the public officials' private interests are more closely aligned with the public interest will the government successfully solve market failures. But in many cases, says Public Choice, public officials are not sufficiently rewarded by the political process for consulting the good of the people instead of their own,<sup>9</sup> and public officials are often liable to do what benefits

themselves, just as market actors do when there is a market failure (Tullock, “Public Decisions as Public Goods”). In other words, “government failure” is just as real a possibility as market failure, for public officials are every bit as human as market participants. But if public officials are assumed to solve market failures altruistically, then market actors should be assumed to be equally altruistic. This would of course tend to eliminate the very possibility of market failures. And if markets may fail because market institutions fail to furnish suitable incentive structures, then the same is true of political institutions, which are just as liable to provide poor incentives. Public Choice economics extends the standard economic assumption of self-interest in market actors to public officials and proceeds to view government as a sort of marketplace amongst political figures (Buchanan, “Politics Without Romance” 50). Human nature is considered to be the same whether the actor is a market participant or a public official, and where imperfect political institutions lead to less than optimal political outcomes, the result will be “government failure” analogous to “market failure.”

Thus, Public Choice may be understood as the application of the methods and canons of economics to the study of political science (Buchanan, “Politics Without Romance” 48). It analyzes political behavior and institutions in light of the economic assumption that humans are self-interested rational actors who respond to incentives. According to one scholar of Public Choice,

Political science has often assumed that political man pursues the public interest. Economics has assumed that all men pursue their private interests . . . Public Choice can be defined as the economic study of nonmarket decision making, or simply the application of economics to political science. . . . The basic behavioral postulate of public choice, as for economics, is that man is an egotistic, rational, utility maximizer. (Dennis C. Mueller, *Public Choice III* 1f.)

Equivalently, James Gwartney and Rosemarie Fike have characterized one who neglects the contributions of Public Choice as one who

links the potential shortcomings of the political process with the human deficiencies of the political decision-makers, rather than the incentive structure they confront within the framework of political organization. (“Public Choice versus the Benevolent Omniscient

Therefore Public Choice is concerned with crafting political and societal institutions in such a way as to account for individual human behavior and nature by providing suitable incentives. A Public Choice theorist will not assume that government will automatically serve the public good just because that is its defined purpose or because political officials are inherently altruistic. He will assume that public officials are as self-interested as market participants and ask whether there are any incentive structures which promote such public-serving behavior on the parts of public officials. Perhaps the answer is that in a democracy, officials must satisfy the populace or else they will not be elected, just as a businessman must satisfy customers if he hopes to make a profit. As we shall see, Orwell himself might conceivably have said this. But whatever the answer, Public Choice theorists insist the question must first be asked: why would a public official want to serve the public good?

Therefore, if Orwell was concerned not only with the individual abuse of power (as per Crothers) but also with crafting suitable institutions to account for that potential, then Orwell's concerns were essentially the same as those of Public Choice. Although Orwell certainly was distrustful of individuals and suspected them of being liable to abuse their power, he was also interested, as we shall see, in what political *institutions* might affect their liability to abuse their power. While Orwell's skepticism of political power and his fear of individual abuse of that power are significantly consistent with Public Choice, in fact Orwell's concerns went much further. Therefore Orwell was not only a skeptic of political power but he was also concerned with political institutions and their incentive structures, and thus a practitioner of Public Choice economics.

In this way, through the Public Choice interpretation of Orwell, we may reconcile the sensibility and straightforwardness of the conservative interpretation of *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as having been written to oppose socialism, with the actual fact that Orwell was a socialist. For after all,



Orwell was and always remained an advocate of democratic socialism and he could not have been a critic of collectivism *per se*. At the same time, the conservative interpretation seems so sensible and appears to so readily agree with the texts precisely because it is not altogether wrong. Orwell was not opposed to socialism *per se* as the conservative interpretation suggests, but he was opposed to a particular kind of socialism, *viz.* any form of socialism which turned totalitarian because it neglected to provide suitable political institutions to mitigate the abuse of power. The conservative interpretation of Orwell's fictions as anti-socialist thus carries an important kernel of truth. Therefore, *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* were not intended as criticisms of the abstract economics of collectivism in theory, but rather of the political dynamics of “decayed communism,” non-democratic forms of collectivism in practice. Though these two fictions have many differences - *Animal Farm* being an allegorical beast fable about the very recent past, *Nineteen-Eighty Four* a relatively realistic dystopian novel set in the future - it is this polemical intention which they share in common.<sup>10</sup> The Public Choice interpretation of Orwell helps us understand that Orwell was opposed to a particular form of socialism -the totalitarian kind - and why. In doing so, this interpretation allows us to square the sensibility of the conservative anti-socialist interpretation with the fact that Orwell was a socialist.

It might be objected that when Orwell wrote, the discipline of Public Choice did not exist yet. Indeed, the field of Public Choice was formalized only sometime around the 1960s - most notably by James Buchanan and Gordon Tullock - after Orwell was already deceased. But Public Choice is best understood not as a specific, formal school of thought, but rather as a general mode of inquiry and study which was pursued even before the field was formalized. Therefore, Orwell may be understood as following approximately the same methods and inquiries as Public Choice does, even though he predated its formalization. Indeed, many older scholars demonstrated qualities and concerns which would have landed them within the school of Public Choice had they lived in another era. In this sense, it is conceivable for Orwell to have been a practitioner of Public Choice. To illustrate this point, let us

quote a most important and famous scholar who enunciated the concerns of Public Choice centuries before the formalization of that field: according to none other than James Madison, it is not enough to hope fervently that government will fulfill its duties. Instead,

The interest of the man must be connected with the constitutional rights of the place. It may be a reflection on human nature, that such devices should be necessary to control the abuses of government. But what is government itself, but the greatest of all reflections on human nature? If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary. In framing a government which is to be administered by men over men, the great difficulty lies in this: you must first enable the government to control the governed; and in the next place oblige it to control itself. (*Federalist no. 51*)

Further, government may be compelled to fulfill its purpose, he said,

by so contriving the interior structure of the government as that its several constituent parts may, by their mutual relations, be the means of keeping each other in their proper places. (*Ibid.*)

In other words, Madison was concerned with the institutional incentive structures of government: what will motivate public officials to behave the way they ought to? This was the motivation underlying his famous theory of checks and balances and the separation of powers. He did not assume that public officials would be angels. Instead, he assumed that the governors would be frail and fallible humans just like the governed, and he argued that therefore the government must be framed with such incentive structures as would motivate self-interested public officials to fulfill their duties. After all, it is precisely because men are self-interested that government is even necessary. If in order to solve the problem of limiting government, one assumes that men – including public officials – are not self-interested, then one has in fact vitiated the very need for government's existence in the first place. The solution would deny the very problem to be solved. Therefore, we ought to make the same assumptions of public officials as we do of private actors. Indeed, Madison said,

This policy of supplying, by opposite and rival interests, the defect of better motives, might be traced through the whole system of human affairs, private as well as public. (*Ibid.*)

Thus, it is not anachronistic to suggest that Orwell was a practitioner of Public Choice. Though the school had not been formally institutionalized yet, the concerns characteristic of Public Choice had been enunciated long before Orwell. Indeed, according to James Buchanan, one of the founders of the field of Public Choice, he and his coauthor Gordon Tullock were “simply writing out in modern economic terms more or less Madison's framework” (Buchanan, “Interview with James Buchanan”).<sup>11</sup> This does not prove Orwell actually did practice Public Choice, only that it is conceivable that he could have.

One more point about Public Choice needs to be made in order to clarify how its concerns are compatible with Orwell's: Public Choice economics crucially assumes for the sake of argument that any given theoretical economic policy would work if only properly implemented. However, it questions whether the officials in power can be trusted to indeed implement the system properly. It is not only critical of human nature on an *individual* level in its assumption of self-interest, assuming moral, behavioral, and psychological equivalence between public and private actors. Public Choice also analyzes which *institutional* arrangements affect how power-holders behave. It investigates how these two layers – the individual and the institutional - will affect the practical implementation of an economic system. But for the sake of argument, Public Choice crucially assumes that the economic system itself is sound in theory. Therefore, Public Choice scholars do not question the propriety or sensibility of specific policies themselves. If someone suggests that a certain policy will cure a certain economic or societal ill, the Public Choice scholar does not question the policy itself. Instead, he asks whether the government and its officials will have any incentive to actually implement the policy correctly. Who will be in charge of executing the policy? Will there be oversight? If a government official abuses his trust, will he face any consequences? Even the most abstractly perfect policy is only as good as its execution. For example, attempts to deliver aid to impoverished countries have often failed because the officials of those countries committed fraud and absconded with the charity, never

distributing it among the people for whom it was intended. Even if a policy is perfect on paper, Public Choice investigates whether it is actually capable of faithful execution, and if so, what conditions are necessary to ensure this positive outcome. It assumes for the sake of argument that *if* the policy were implemented as intended, that it really would accomplish its aims. But this is a tremendous “if,” and it is precisely here where Public Choice focuses its inquiry.

The reason this is so important for our present purposes, is that Orwell was after all a socialist. Were Public Choice analysis, as a branch of economics, to hold that socialism is theoretically unsound, then Orwell could not have been a practitioner of Public Choice. Only if Public Choice analysis is compatible with an assertion of the soundness of socialism, could Orwell have belonged to the school of Public Choice. Happily, a Public Choice analyst would necessarily assume, for the sake of argument, that socialism *per se* is a perfectly sound economic system if only the political institutions are framed appropriately and effectively.<sup>12</sup> Thus, when Orwell accepts socialism as an economic system but questions its specific political implementation, he is being perfectly consistent with Public Choice.

And so, at a time when many socialists were naïvely starry-eyed about the Soviet Union and confidently predicted that it would usher in utopia, Orwell warned them that not all socialisms were equal, that one must still establish procedures which would ensure that the people in authority use their power properly.<sup>13</sup> It is not enough to design an economic system on paper; one must ensure that the political system is arranged such that the right people will become responsible for its implementation and that those people will face such incentives as will encourage them to use their power properly. Orwell saw that even the system which was best in theory could be ruined if that system were structured such that those in authority were not suitably incentivized to use their power as intended. Orwell assumed that socialism would succeed if it were properly implemented, and he advocated democratic socialism because he thought that that specific institutional arrangement would implement true socialism more successfully than the non-democratic socialism depicted in *Animal Farm* and

*Nineteen Eighty-Four*. These two fictions were directed not against socialism *per se* in the theoretical abstract. Rather, they attempted to illustrate how an appreciation of human nature indicated that some institutional arrangements would unfortunately doom socialism to devolve into totalitarianism.

It now remains for us to prove that these were actually Orwell's concerns and intentions in *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. This will be demonstrated by having recourse to his other works, especially his non-fictional polemical essays and autobiographical works. These materials will shed light on what Orwell's concerns were and what he put into the writing of those two fictions, because the essays and other non-fiction writings are more explicit about his own personal opinions and experiences than are his novels. It will be shown not only *that* Orwell was in fact a socialist opposed to the market economy, but also *why* he was a socialist and *how* he came to become one, and in addition, what taught him to have those misgivings which he had about different forms of socialism. From all this, it will be demonstrable that Orwell's concerns about socialism were essentially similar to those of Public Choice, that he was a socialist who doubted not socialism *per se*, but questioned which institutional arrangements would be adapted to human nature and successfully implement the system as intended. This understanding is key to unlocking Orwell's intentions in authoring his most famous fictions, *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

In a sequel essay to be published in the future, I will compare Orwell's fictions to other criticisms of socialism - fiction and non-fiction - by different authors who take an entirely different approach from Orwell's, in order to highlight what is special and peculiar in Orwell. In other words, in order to understand what *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* had to say about socialism, it will prove useful to look at what they did *not* say. To appreciate Orwell's Public Choice-style criticism of socialism, we should compare his works to criticisms of socialism not based on Public Choice. In that same sequel essay, a criticism will be made of Orwell's specific institutional recommendation of democracy as a means of solving the Public Choice problem inherent in socialism.

## II.

It is unfortunate that, as Isaac Deutscher has noted,

A book like *1984* may be used without much regard for the author's intention. Some of its features may be torn out of their context, while others, which do not suit the political purpose which the book is made to serve, are ignored or virtually suppressed. (“*1984—The Mysticism of Cruelty*” 119f.)

This appears to have indeed been the fate of Orwell's two famous fictions, with Communists and pro-market conservatives alike falsely portraying them as intended to be criticisms of socialism *per se* and/or defenses of free-market capitalism (Newsinger, *Orwell's Politics*, pp. xi, 122, 155ff.; Calder, “Orwell's Post-War Prophecy” 152). Ironically, Deutscher himself misconstrued *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as “a document of dark disillusionment not only with Stalinism, but with every form and shade of socialism” (“*1984—The Mysticism of Cruelty*” 126f., quoted in Newsinger, *Orwell's Politics* 123). But contrary to a popular perception, Orwell was no friend of capitalism, and therefore *Animal Farm* (1945) and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) were not meant as indictments of socialism *per se* (Calder, “Orwell's Post-War Prophecy” 154).<sup>14</sup> According to Orwell's essay “Why I Write” (1946),

The Spanish war and other events of 1936-37 turned the scale and thereafter I knew where I stood. Every line of serious work that I have written since 1936 has been written, directly or indirectly, *against* totalitarianism and *for* democratic Socialism, as I understand it. (*Essays* 1083f.; emphasis in original)

The statement bears no equivocation. Orwell wrote in the cause of democratic socialism. This essay was written *after* *Animal Farm* (1945), so Stephen J. Greenblatt's claim that *Animal Farm* represents a change of heart and a loss of faith on Orwell's part (“Orwell as Satirist” 105) appears impossible.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, we cannot defend the conservative interpretation of Orwell's fictions as anti-socialist by saying that Orwell was no longer a socialist anymore when he wrote those fictions.

Similarly, the Communist Samuel Sillen could hardly have been more incorrect when in 1949

he said of *Nineteen-Eighty Four* that “The premise of the fable is that capitalism has ceased to exist in 1984; and the moral is that if capitalism departs the world will go to pot” (“Maggot-of-the-Month” 297).<sup>16</sup> But Sillen is correct that the advocates of capitalism often misinterpreted Orwell's works in this fashion, saying

Orwell's novel coincides perfectly with the propaganda of the National Association of Manufacturers, and it is being greeted for exactly the same reasons that Frederick Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom* was hailed a few years back. (“Maggot-of-the-Month” 299)

According to John Newsinger, Orwell himself “lamented the fact 'any hostile criticism of the present Russian regime is liable to be taken as propaganda against Socialism’” (*Orwell's Politics* 111).

Furthermore, says Newsinger, “The failure of much of the left to recognise . . . that the Communist regimes . . . had nothing whatsoever to do with socialism, gave the right a spurious claim to his legacy, a claim that cannot be seriously sustained with any degree of intellectual honesty” (*Orwell's Politics* 158).

Orwell's socialist convictions are perhaps most evident in his review (1944) of F. A. Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom*. Hayek's thesis was very similar to that of *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and indeed, in his review, Orwell conceded, “In the negative part of Professor Hayek's thesis there is a great deal of truth” (“Review of *The Road to Serfdom* by F. A. Hayek”, in *Collected Works* 118). Sheldon Richman observes, “This is a significant endorsement, for no one understood totalitarianism as well as Orwell” (“From 1944 to *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: A Tale of Two Books”). However, Richman continues, “But true to his left state-socialism, Orwell could not endorse Hayek's positive program” (*ibid.*). As Orwell said,

Professor Hayek . . . does not see, or will not admit, that a return to “free” competition means for the great mass of people a tyranny probably worse, because more irresponsible, than that of the State. The trouble with competitions is that somebody wins them. Professor Hayek denies that free capitalism necessarily leads to monopoly, but in practice that is where it has led, and since the vast majority of people would far

rather have State regimentation than slumps and unemployment, the drift towards collectivism is bound to continue if popular opinion has any say in the matter. . . . Capitalism leads to dole queues, the scramble for markets, and war. Collectivism leads to concentration camps, leader worship, and war. There is no way out of this unless a planned economy can somehow be combined with the freedom of the intellect, which can only happen if the concept of right and wrong is restored to politics. (Orwell, "Review of *The Road to Serfdom* by F. A. Hayek", *op. cit.*, in *Collected Works* 118f.)<sup>17</sup>

It is difficult to imagine a more spirited condemnation of capitalism than this.<sup>18</sup> The author of these indictments cannot possibly have intended for *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* to defend free-market capitalism.

Likewise, in his "Review of *Communism and Man* by F. J. Sheed" (1939), Orwell wrote,

. . . in the state of industrial development which we have now reached, the right to private property means the right to exploit and torture millions of one's fellow-creatures. The Socialist would argue, therefore, that one can only defend private property if one is more or less indifferent to economic justice. (*Essays* 112)

And whereas the partisan of the free-market would define capitalism as essentially the freedom of association, the freedom for individuals to form only those social relationships of their personal choosing, Orwell thought that "Capitalism, as such, has no room in it for any human relationship; it has no law except that profits must always be made" ("Will Freedom Die with Capitalism?" [1941] 1683).<sup>19</sup> Similarly, in "The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius" (1941), which he wrote during World War II, Orwell defined "economic liberty" as "the right to exploit others for profit" (*Essays* 294). Furthermore, discussing Britain's ability to wage a defensive war, he continued,

What this war has demonstrated is that private capitalism - that is, an economic system in which land, factories, mines and transport are owned privately and operated solely for profit - *does not work*. It cannot deliver the goods. (*Ibid.* 315; emphasis in original)<sup>20</sup>

In the same essay, Orwell came to the conclusion that

*Laissez-faire* capitalism is dead. The choice lies between the kind of collective society that Hitler will set up and the kind that can arise if he is defeated. (*Ibid.* 344)

Therefore he advocated the



Nationalization of land, mines, railways, banks, and major industries. . . . The general tendency of this program aims quite frankly at turning . . . England into a Socialist democracy.” (*Ibid.* 334)<sup>21</sup>

The conservatives who interpret Orwell's works as defenses of their favored system, capitalism, might wish to reconsider whether a man with opinions such as these was really their ally.

In light of all this, one neglected passage towards the very end of *Animal Farm* takes on new significance. Paraphrasing Pilkington's toast at the banquet celebrating the rapprochement of pigs and men, the narrator states,

Between pigs and human beings there was not, and there need not be, any clash of interests whatsoever. Their struggles and their difficulties were one. Was not the labour problem the same everywhere? . . . Mr. Pilkington congratulated the pigs on the low rations, the long working hours, and the general lack of pampering which he had observed on Animal Farm. (*Complete Novels* 71)

It is obvious enough from the story of *Animal Farm* that the pigs abused their power, and the moral of the story is clear enough. But what is remarkable is that in Orwell's judgment, capitalists would be inclined to side with the pigs, the villains of the story. Not only did the pigs pervert socialism for their own benefit, but the capitalists congratulated them for this. As Stephen J. Greenblatt notes in this connection,

It is amusing, however, that many of the Western critics who astutely observe the barbs aimed at Russia fail completely to grasp Orwell's judgment of the West. After all, the pigs do not turn into alien monsters; they come to resemble those bitter rivals Mr. Pilkington and Mr. Frederick, who represent the Nazis and the Capitalists. (“Orwell as Satirist” 110.)

For this reason, says John Newsinger, “The fable offered little comfort to the conservative right” (*Orwell's Politics* 116), and so *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* cannot in any way be interpreted as the products of a man favorable towards capitalism. “Animal Farm was written not to attack socialism but to help bring about a revival of the socialist movement free from Communist influence” (Newsinger, *Orwell's Politics* 116).

But if Orwell was a socialist, the question remains, why? What about socialism appealed to him? Thankfully, Orwell tells us in his autobiographical “Preface to the Ukrainian Edition of *Animal Farm*” (1947):

I became pro-Socialist more out of a disgust with the way the poorer section of the industrial workers were oppressed and neglected than out of any theoretical admiration for a planned society. (*Essays* 1211)<sup>22</sup>

Thus, we should not expect that Orwell necessarily read widely in economics, and certainly it seems that even if he had, this was not what influenced him towards socialism. Instead, it appears that what Orwell rejected more than anything else was any hierarchy or inequality which he perceived to be socially unnecessary (Orwell, “Review of *The Machiavellians* by James Burnham” [1944] in *Essays* 525; Orwell, “James Burnham and the Managerial Revolution” [1946] in *Essays* 1070; cf. Goldstein in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in *Complete Novels* 1100). So Orwell was a socialist because he was an egalitarian. Indeed, according to Richard White, he was what Marxians would disdainfully call a “utopian” socialist, a socialist inspired by ethical and moral views, determined to institute socialism for the sake of social justice, whereas Marxists would consider socialism to be an amoral historical inevitability (White, “George Orwell: Socialism and Utopia”). According to John Newsinger, Orwell thought that the “great strength” of the working class “was that they, unlike the intellectuals, knew that . . . socialism . . . could not be separated from justice and common decency [and t]his saved them from [Marxist?] 'orthodoxy'” (*Orwell's Politics* 40). Lane Crothers interprets Orwell similarly, arguing,

Orwell . . . focused always on one basic principle: egalitarianism. Regardless of the specific subjects Orwell wrote about - most commonly class-equality, anti-imperialism, and economic fair play - egalitarianism was his ultimate value. Orwell's is thus a strongly political rather than economic definition of socialism, concerned more with social relations than with economic reorganization. (“George Orwell and the Failure of Democratic Socialism” 390)

Earlier we saw that Orwell states in “Why I Write” that he wrote to advocate democratic socialism and we ought to look a little deeper into what Orwell thought that specific system entailed. It

is here that we will finally begin to see Orwell exhibit the concerns characteristic of Public Choice. In “The Lion and the Unicorn,” an essay boldly advocating and optimistically predicting a socialist revolution of England in the middle of World War II,<sup>23</sup> Orwell made sure to note that,

“[C]ommon ownership of the means of production” is not in itself a sufficient definition of Socialism. One must also add the following: approximate equality of incomes (it need be no more than approximate), political democracy, and abolition of all hereditary privilege, especially in education. These are simply the necessary safeguards against the reappearance of a class-system. Centralized ownership has very little meaning unless the mass of the people are living roughly upon an equal level, and have some kind of control over the government. “The State” may come to mean no more than a self-elected political party, and oligarchy and privilege can return, based on power rather than money. (*Essays* 317)

This passage cuts to the heart of Orwell's concerns in *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

Nationalization of property is an insufficient condition for socialism. Richard White observes that in “Lion and the Unicorn,” Orwell

is at pains to point out that nationalization or ownership of the means of production achieves nothing if the workers remain subject to a ruling cadre who make all the important decisions in the name of “the State.” (“George Orwell: Socialism and Utopia” 84.)

Elsewhere, Orwell wrote similarly that

Socialism used to be defined as “common ownership of the means of production,” but it is now seen that if common ownership means no more than centralized control, it merely paves the way for a new form of oligarchy. Centralized control is a necessary pre-condition of Socialism, but it no more produces Socialism than my typewriter would of itself produce this article I am writing. (“Catastrophic Gradualism” in *Essays* 926.)

Orwell even argued that by virtue of their undemocratic and collectivist nature, Nazi fascism and

Soviet communism were essentially the same thing, a fact which he accused his fellow socialists of

failing to appreciate:

[T]ill very recently it remained the official theory of the Left that Nazism was “just capitalism.” . . . Since nazism was not what any Western European meant by socialism, clearly it must be capitalism. . . . Otherwise they [the Left] would have had to admit that nazism *did* avoid the contradictions of capitalism, that it *was* a kind of socialism, though

a non-democratic kind. And that would have meant admitting that “common ownership of the means of production” is not a sufficient objective, that by merely altering the structure of society you improve nothing. . . . Nazism can be defined as oligarchical collectivism. . . . It seems fairly certain that something of the same kind is occurring in Soviet Russia; the similarity of the two regimes has been growing more and more obvious for the last six years. (“Will Freedom Die With Capitalism?” [1941] 1684; emphasis in original)<sup>24</sup>

Something more than collectivization alone is necessary or else socialism will turn into what Orwell called “oligarchical collectivism” - what we call totalitarianism.<sup>25</sup> Other socialists had avoided facing this intellectual dilemma by conveniently demurring that fascism was really just capitalism after all. By referring to any failed or flawed implementation of socialism as “capitalism”, these socialists did not have to face the inconvenient fact that political institutions matter as much as economic systems. These socialists did not have to admit that socialism could fail because any time it did, they exercised a sort of “definitional imperialism” (Novak 172); any time socialism failed, the failed system was redefined as something else besides true socialism. Their system could never fail because it was defined as succeeding. It seems apparent that this was what Orwell was driving at in his famous fictions, that just because property is collectivized does not automatically mean that society is transformed into the desired socialist utopia. If undemocratic governance spoiled a socialist system, one could not innocently conceal this failure by blithely calling that system something else besides “socialism.” The abstract economic system was not enough; the political institutions had to be gotten right as well or else the economic system would be corrupted.

Indeed, discussing the rise of tyranny, Orwell elsewhere states, in “Review of *Russia Under Soviet Rule* by N. de Basily” (1939) that

The essential act is the rejection of democracy - that is, of the underlying values of democracy; once you have decided upon that, Stalin - or at any rate something *like* Stalin - is already on the way. (*Essays* 111; emphasis in original)

The message of *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* thus seems to be what specifically

undemocratic socialism will look like. It is not socialism *per se* which these novels condemn for a totalitarian tendency, but only undemocratic forms of socialism. In a manner typical of contemporary Public Choice analysis, Orwell understood that the economic system of socialism - even if assuming it could work in theory - would not produce the desired results unless it was paired with the proper political system. Orwell was an advocate of socialism, but he believed that without democracy, Soviet communism would be virtually indistinguishable from German fascism - both equally totalitarian, both alike forms of “oligarchical collectivism.” Orwell appears to have appreciated the wisdom of James Buchanan (founder of Public Choice)'s exhortation that people “should cease proffering policy advice as if they were employed by a benevolent despot, and they should look to the structure within which political decisions are made” (quoted in Holcombe, “Make Economics Policy Relevant: Depose the Omniscient Benevolent Dictator” 7).

And with this, once again, another neglected passage of *Animal Farm* is thereby illuminated. By the end of the story, of course, the pigs have abused their power. But how does Animal Farm fare prior to the pigs' betrayal? According to Orwell,

With the worthless parasitical human beings gone, there was more for everyone to eat. There was more leisure too, inexperienced though the animals were. (*Animal Farm*, in *Complete Novels* 16)

Contrary to those who interpret *Animal Farm* as anti-socialist, it would seem that socialism was really working successfully. The pigs had not yet betrayed the revolution and begun to abuse their power, and as a result, the animals really were better off than before. Apparently, if Animal Farm had been governed democratically, the pigs never would have become tyrants - at least, not according to Orwell - and the story would have ended very differently, with the socialist Animal Farm as the most prosperous farm with the highest standard of living for all the workers. Conservative fans of Orwell's novels might do well to keep that in mind.

Therefore, Orwell's complaint was not with a specific economic policy - viz. socialism - but rather with its institutional implementation. There is nothing wrong with socialism *per se*, he thought, but it must be implemented within a system of democracy in order to ensure that those with authority behaved as they ought and refrained from abusing their power. As Orwell wrote in his "Letter to Noel Willmet (18 May 1944),

Everywhere the world movement seems to be in the direction of centralised economies which can be made to "work" in an economic sense but which are not democratically organised and which tend to establish a caste system. (*A Life in Letters* 232)

And further, in his "Review of *Communism and Man* by F. J. Sheed" (1939):

It is obvious that any economic system would work equitably if men could be trusted to behave themselves but long experience has shown that in matters of property only a tiny minority of men will behave any better than they are compelled to do. (*Essays* 113)

Recall that the Public Choice theorist assumes for the sake of argument that a policy is abstractly correct, and questions only whether it can be faithfully implemented. Institutions must be framed with proper incentive structures in order that the executors of the policy behave the way they are supposed to. But this is all that is assumed necessary. Orwell's concern was the same as Madison's: how to establish a system in which men are incentivized to do what they ought to do. If only that could be accomplished, then everything else good would follow. Orwell never doubted that socialism "can be made to 'work' in an economic sense", but he was critical of its political institutionalization.

Of course, one could still argue, as Greenblatt did, that *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen-Eighty Four* represented changes of heart on Orwell's part ("Orwell as Satirist" 105). One could argue against this present essay's thesis that almost every source by Orwell which has been cited, was written prior to *Animal Farm*, and that absolutely every single one was written before *Nineteen-Eighty Four*. One would defend the conservative interpretation of Orwell's fictions as anti-socialist by arguing that Orwell was no longer a socialist anymore when he wrote them. And it would be difficult to refute the

claim that Orwell had a change of heart prior to writing his last two major works for the same reason that it is difficult to challenge a claim that someone had made a deathbed recantation or confession. Nevertheless, a few facts suggest that the change-of-heart thesis is false: first, Orwell's "Why I Write" - where he stated that everything he had ever written was meant as a advocacy for democratic socialism - was written in 1946, *after* the publication of *Animal Farm*. Second, in his 1947 "Preface to the Ukranian Edition of *Animal Farm*," Orwell gives no indication that *Animal Farm* had been meant as a recantation of anything he had ever written before. If *Animal Farm* had been intended as a rejection of the one thing which Orwell himself had said had motivated nearly his entire writing career (Orwell, "Why I Write"), surely he would have told us so. Finally, as Julian Symons says in his introduction to Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia* regarding *Nineteen-Eighty Four*,

Those who think the picture of Oceania carries a message of disillusionment ignore the letter Orwell wrote not long before his death, in which he said: 'My recent novel is NOT intended as an attack on Socialism or on the British Labour Party (of which I am a supporter)'" (p. x).<sup>26</sup>

Nor was Greenblatt correct in saying - based on *Nineteen Eighty-Four* - that "The whole world, Orwell felt, is steadily moving toward a vast and ruthless tyranny, and there is absolutely nothing that can stop the monstrous progress" ("Orwell as Satirist 112). For the same letter by Orwell just quoted from Symons continues,

I do not believe that the kind of society I describe necessarily *will* arrive, but I believe (allowing of course for the fact that the book is a satire) that something resembling it *could* arrive. (emphasis in original)

Furthermore, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* itself contains evidence contrary to Greenblatt's argument about Orwell's alleged belief in the inevitability of the rise of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* style totalitarianism: in the "Appendix: The Principles of Newspeak" which concludes that novel, we read, "Newspeak was the official language of Oceania and *had been* devised to meet the ideological needs of Ingsoc, or English Socialism" (*Complete Novels* 1176; emphasis added). The appendix reads like a scientific account

written after the collapse of Oceania and its regime of oligarchical collectivism. Orwell may have been pessimistic about the short-term, beholding the rise of Nazism and Soviet communism in his own day and seeing no actual democratic socialism in existence, but he seems to have intended to nevertheless convey hope for the long-term future of humanity.

Therefore, we ought to assume a continuity of purpose on Orwell's part: *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen-Eighty Four* were meant to demonstrate the same things which nearly all of Orwell's previous works had. Orwell was a democratic socialist who believed that capitalism and non-democratic socialism would both lead to tyranny (Roback, "The Economic Thought of George Orwell" 127-9). The purpose of *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was not to discredit socialism *per se*, but to discredit non-democratic forms of socialism, warning that they would give rise to totalitarianism. His concern was a Public Choice one: how the political institutionalization of socialism will condition the use or abuse of power. Democracy, he thought, would solve the Public Choice dilemma by ensuring that socialist public officials would promote equality and not degenerate into promoters of "oligarchical collectivism," socialism under a self-serving power-elite.

### III.

We may better understand the nature of Orwell's criticism of specifically totalitarian forms of socialism by examining those life experiences which influenced most profoundly his worldview.<sup>27</sup> There appear to have been at least three major formative influences which shaped Orwell's worldview in ways relevant to this essay's concerns: his educational experiences as a child,<sup>28</sup> his time serving the British empire in Burma,<sup>29</sup> and his military service in the Spanish Civil War. We will focus on the last-named because it was in Spain that Orwell discovered what he believed to be the truth about the Soviet regime.

Orwell related his experience as a soldier in the Spanish Civil War in his *Homage to Catalonia*



(1938). Orwell had joined what was perceived as a Trotskyist militia,<sup>30</sup> and towards the end of his tour, the Communists had begun to accuse all the Trotskyists of being closet fascists and counter-revolutionaries fighting for Franco. Those suspected were rounded up and imprisoned by the Communists, who were deliberately reversing the socialist revolution and reinstating the bourgeois state in the interests of Soviet foreign policy (Orwell, “Spilling the Spanish Beans” [1937]; Newsinger, *Orwell's Politics* 44, 49f., 52f.). Orwell had to flee the country for his life, and when he saw English newspapers, he realized they were uncritically buying everything the Communists told them, things which Orwell himself knew were false (Orwell, “Spilling the Spanish Beans” [1937] and “Preface to the Ukranian Edition of *Animal Farm* [1947] in *Essays* 1212; Newsinger, *Orwell's Politics* 54). This taught Orwell the dangers of propaganda, censorship, and historical revisionism, and in his subsequent reminiscing on the Spanish Civil War a few years after the fact (c. 1942), he even presaged some of the themes of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. After noting how the newspapers carried stories which Orwell himself knew to be false (“Looking Back on the Spanish War,” in *Essays* 439), he despaired that, “This kind of thing is frightening to me, because it often gives me the feeling that the very concept of objective truth is fading out of the world. . . . If the Leader . . . says that two and two are five — well, two and two are five” (*ibid.* 440f, 442). This observation on the Spanish Civil War is almost a summary of Winston's interrogation by O'Brien in the last third of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.<sup>31</sup>

This dread of propoganda and historical revisionism which he had learned in Spain is demonstrated every time the pigs of *Animal Farm* alter the Seven Commandments (*Complete Novels* 34, 35f., 47, 57, 69). And the parallel to Orwell's own life is even more marked in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Just as Orwell knew that the Communists were lying about Spain because Orwell himself had been there personally, so too, Winston knows that the government of Oceania falsifies history because he is literally one of the people responsible for altering the records. And Winston constantly remembers even having held a photograph depicting men who had been stricken from the historical record.

Winston's position is thus very similar to Orwell's: he knows the government is lying because he was there. Winston, like Orwell himself, begins to fear whether such a thing as objectively recorded history can exist in a totalitarian world ("Looking Back on the Spanish War," in *Essays* 440f, 442; "Letter to Noel Willmet" (18 May 1944) in *A Life in Letters* 232; *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in *Complete Novels* 967). As a result, the freedom of thought was to become more vital to Orwell than perhaps anything else. He described "a form of Socialism which is not totalitarian" as one "in which freedom of thought can survive the disappearance of economic individualism" ("Literature and Totalitarianism" [1941] in *Essays* 364), and in his diary in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Winston described the essence of freedom itself to be "the freedom to say that two plus two make four. If that is granted, all else follows. (*Complete Novels* 1004; the original is entirely italicized).

But Orwell not only learned about the nature of propaganda and gained an appreciation of the freedom of speech from Spain. He also learned what the Soviets and Communists were really about, their true nature. As Orwell explained in his "Preface to the Ukrainian Edition of *Animal Farm*,"

And so I understood, more clearly than ever, the negative influence of the Soviet myth upon the western Socialist movement. . . . [I]t was of the utmost importance to me that people in western Europe should see the Soviet régime for what it really was. Since 1930 I had seen little evidence that the USSR was progressing towards anything that one could truly call Socialism. On the contrary, I was struck by clear signs of its transformation into a hierarchical society. . . . In such an atmosphere [as England's] the man in the street . . . quite innocently accepts the lies of totalitarian propaganda. (*Essays* 1212f.)<sup>32</sup>

And therefore, Orwell wrote *Animal Farm* with a mission, saying that the Soviet myth

has caused great harm to the Socialist movement in England, and had serious consequences for English foreign policy. Indeed, in my opinion, nothing has contributed so much to the corruption of the original idea of Socialism as the belief that Russia is a Socialist country and that every act of its rulers must be excused, if not imitated. And so for the past ten years I have been convinced that the destruction of the Soviet myth was essential if we wanted a revival of the Socialist movement. (*Ibid.* 1213f.; cf. Newsinger, *Orwell's Politics* 110, 117)

Thus, Orwell's experiences in Spain convinced him *not* that socialism was a false ideal, but that the

Soviet Union and the Communists had betrayed that ideal. Orwell “was a socialist but, ever since Spain, an anti-Stalinist socialist and his hostility to Communism was a pervasive feature of his political writing” (Newsinger, *Orwell's Politics* 97). He thought that “Communism is now a counter-revolutionary force” (Orwell, “Spilling the Spanish Beans” [1937] 67), working against socialism. He became inspired to expose their duplicity and conniving, and he related the theme of the Soviet betrayal of the cause of socialism with the totalitarian rewriting of the past:

The Communist movement in Western Europe began as a movement for the violent overthrow of capitalism, and degenerated within a few years into an instrument of Russian foreign policy. (“Inside the Whale” [1940] in *Essays* 233f., quoted in Newsinger, *Orwell's Politics* 113)

He furthermore referred to “Russian Communism . . . [as] a form of Socialism that makes mental honesty impossible” (Orwell, “Inside the Whale” 235), and so *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* were written not as defections from socialism, but as attempts to redeem true socialism from the betrayal of the Communists.

What is striking about Orwell is how clear-headed and unbiased he was. “[H]is determined stand as a socialist opposed to Communist dictatorship and its apologists remains as an example of intellectual honesty and political courage” (Newsinger, *Orwell's Politics* 135). Other socialists had been whitewashing the Soviet Union, believing either that because it claimed the title of “socialist,” it could not possibly be guilty of any wrong, or else that anything it did had to be justified *ad hoc* in a spirit of socialist solidarity. These socialists were therefore either naïve or else biased because of party-spirit.<sup>33</sup> In their travelogue, *Soviet Communism: A New Civilization?* (1935), the Fabian socialists Sidney and Beatrice Webb famously denied the *Holodomor* (“Hunger-extinction”), i.e. the Ukrainian famine which occurred at the very time they visited the Ukraine during their Potemkin tour through the Soviet Union.<sup>34</sup> The muckraker Lincoln Steffens exclaimed of the Soviet Union that “I’ve seen The Future - and it works!”<sup>35</sup> Orwell mockingly remarked, “When one sees highly-educated men looking on

indifferently at oppression and persecution, one wonders which to despise more, their cynicism or their short-sightedness” (“The Prevention of Literature” [1946], in *Essays* 943). It was against such naïve and biased socialists as these that Orwell wrote, and his attempt to publish *Animal Farm* only confirmed his opinion, for he discovered that many of the British intelligentsia responded that criticizing the Soviets was something that simply ought not be done (“The Freedom of the Press (*Animal Farm*)” [1945] in *Essays* 890), for “in their hearts they felt that to cast any doubt on the wisdom of Stalin was a kind of blasphemy” (*ibid.* 893). For example, he said,

The endless executions in the purges of 1936-38 were applauded by life-long opponents of capital punishment, and it was considered equally proper to publicise famines when they happened in India and to conceal them when they happened in the Ukraine. (*Ibid.*)<sup>36</sup>

“‘It is now,’ he wrote, ‘next door to impossible to get anything overtly anti-Russian printed’” (Newsinger, *Orwell's Politics* 98), and Orwell despaired that “[a]t this moment what is demanded by the prevailing orthodoxy is an uncritical admiration of Soviet Russia” (“The Freedom of the Press (*Animal Farm*)” [1945] in *Essays* 890). And on the other hand he castigated “[t]he servility with which the greater part of the English intelligentsia have swallowed and repeated Russian propaganda” (*ibid.*). But such naivety and knee-jerk reactionary apology for the Soviet Union was doing no service to the cause of socialism, and Orwell wished to debunk these apologists and open the eyes of the dupes. According to John Newsinger, Orwell thought “[i]t was not possible to 'build up a healthy Socialist movement if one is obliged to condone no matter what crime when the USSR commits it’” (Newsinger, *Orwell's Politics* 107). Similarly, according to Jennifer Roback,

Orwell was disgusted with English socialists, because they failed to point out the tyranny which existed in the Soviet Union. In fact, they seemed to him to feel obligated to defend every Soviet action. In Orwell's opinion, these Soviet apologetics were destroying the chances of true socialism every being established in Great Britain. (“The Economic Thought of George Orwell 128).

As an example of the sort of reaction which Orwell probably wished to evoke, we might quote

the testimony of the Orthodox Jewish Rabbi Dr. Emanuel Rackman. In his words, writing in 1970 while living in New York City,

And it is not the Fascists alone who have created states with no respect for human life and dignity. The whole story of Communist terror must yet be told. Liberals, and I am among them, have helped the Communists to conceal their nefarious achievements. We were deluded for a long time by the profession of high ideals and we presumed that a better society was really their goal. I have visited behind the Iron Curtain and I have one firm conviction: states must be kept at bay. (*One Man's Judaism* 110)

Though Rackman did not cite Orwell, he is probably the sort of man for whom Orwell was writing, socialists who were deluded until they discovered the truth of the Soviet regime. There was no intention to refute or debunk socialism *per se*, but only to uncover a fraudulent betrayal by certain alleged socialists - a whole, vast nation of them! - and to point the way towards preventing such betrayals in the future. In a way, then, Orwell's intention was similar to those of many disillusioned former Communist authors such as Arthur Koestler - author of *Darkness At Noon* (1940), the fictionalized account of the Stalinist Purge Trials - and the contributors to *The God that Failed* (1949, ed. Richard Crossman), the god being communism.<sup>37</sup> But whereas these were former Communists who had themselves contributed - in varying degrees and with differing intentions - to the evils of the Soviet Union, Orwell had himself never been complicit or associated with the Soviet Union in any way, for from almost the outset of his career as a socialist until his death he had been opposed to it (Newsinger, *Orwell's Politics* 110). As Lionel Trilling says of Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia*,

Orwell's book, in one of its most significant aspects, is about disillusionment with Communism, but it is not a confession. . . . Orwell's ascertaining of certain political facts was not the occasion for a change of heart, or for a crisis of the soul. What he learned from his experiences in Spain of course pained him very much, and it led him to change his course of conduct. But it did not destroy him, it did not, as people say, cut the ground from under him. It did not shatter his faith in what he had previously believed, nor weaken his political impulse, nor even change its direction. It produced not a moment of guilt or self-recrimination. ("George Orwell and the Politics of Truth" 219)

In this way, Orwell stands apart from other examples of "a whole literary genre with which we have

become familiar in the last decade, the personal confession of involvement and then of disillusionment with Communism” (*ibid.* 218). Perhaps Orwell's lack of affiliation made it easier for him to recognize the failure of the Soviet Union and distance himself from it, for he had no personal investment. For a Communist to admit the Soviet Union for what it was and renounce his affiliation, meant to admit that much of his life's work had been futile waste if not counter-production. Orwell had no similar internal obstacle holding him back.<sup>38</sup>

Interestingly, Orwell's concerns were perhaps presaged by the nineteenth-century anarchist-socialist Mikhail Bakunin, who also warned that Marxism would give rise to despotism and tyranny. Bakunin himself had translated Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* into Russian, and about that work he said, “the only defect, say, is that it has been written, in part, but only in part, in a style excessively metaphysical and abstract” (“The Capitalist System”, note 2). So Bakunin did not find any fault with the economics of Marxist socialism. It was rather the political program which offended him, and so Bakunin argued that

They [the Marxists] maintain that only a dictatorship -- their dictatorship, of course -- can create the will of the people, while our [the anarchists'] answer to this is: No dictatorship can have any other aim but that of self-perpetuation, and it can beget only slavery in the people tolerating it; freedom can be created only by freedom, that is, by a universal rebellion on the part of the people and free organization of the toiling masses from the bottom up. (G. P. Maximoff, *The Political Philosophy of Bakunin* 288, quoted uncited in Bryan Caplan, “Anarchist Theory FAQ,” version 5.2)

Bryan Caplan explains,

Marx ridiculed Bakunin's claim that a socialist government would become a new despotism by socialist intellectuals. In light of the prophetic accuracy of Bakunin's prediction in this area, . . . [i]t is on this point that most left-anarchists reasonably claim complete vindication; just as Bakunin predicted, the Marxist “dictatorship of the proletariat” swiftly became a ruthless “dictatorship over the proletariat.” (Caplan *ibid.*)

How different the twentieth-century may have been had Bakunin carried the day against Marx! But Orwell bravely did his best to make a similar argument, one which few socialists had the courage to

admit. An examination of Orwell's experiences in Spain and the conclusions he drew from them, makes it clearer that Orwell was not opposed to socialism *per se* as some interpretations of *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen-Eighty Four* would suggest. Instead, the Spanish Civil War had taught Orwell that political power could be abused and truth could be perverted by propaganda. Orwell did not abandon socialism but he blamed the Soviet Union for being totalitarian and betraying the socialist movement and ideal. As Jenni Calder notes, Orwell “deplored Soviet society precisely because of its corruption of socialist principles” (“Orwell's Post-War Prophecy” 152). This exploration of Orwell's experiences in and reflections on Spain helps us understand that what Orwell opposed was not socialism *per se* but only undemocratic forms thereof. Orwell's fear was not that socialism was undesirable but that the worthy goals of socialism would be perverted if socialism were implemented by unsuitable political institutions. Studying what happened to Orwell in Spain helps us see that Orwell wrote *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* not as a capitalist but as a Public Choice socialist.

#### IV.

Thus, they err who read *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as defenses of capitalism. Orwell was in fact a socialist and an anti-capitalist. He meant not to condemn socialism *per se*, but only non-democratic forms thereof. As Julian Symons says in his introduction to Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia*,

The two great books of this decade, *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, have their roots in the other side of the Spanish experience, the deceits and persecutions carried out by the Communist parties and their dupes or allies in the pursuit of power, but nothing Orwell learned, either in Spain or afterwards, affected his belief in Socialism or his desire for an equalitarian society. Those who think the picture of Oceania carries a message of disillusionment ignore the letter Orwell wrote not long before his death, in which he said: “My recent novel is NOT intended as an attack on Socialism or on the British Labour Party (of which I am a supporter),” and ignore also the words Winston Smith puts down in his forbidden diary: “If there is hope it lies in the proles.” (Symons p. x; emphasis in original; quoting Orwell's “Letter to Francis A. Henson (extract)”); cf.

Orwell argued not that socialism *per se* would necessarily fail, but that it would fail if institutions were not crafted to suitably incentivize those in power to behave as they ought. His concerns were similar to those of James Madison, who saw that government officials cannot be naively trusted, but that the political system must be crafted so as to direct them where they ought to go. Otherwise, they would abuse their power and establish a despotic oligarchy. Or as Thomas Jefferson declared, “In questions of powers, then, let no more be heard of confidence in man, but bind him down from mischief by the chains of the Constitution” (Jefferson, “Kentucky Resolution of 1798”). Orwell believed that a democratic socialism was the solution to the totalitarian potential in socialism. Orwell therefore essentially presaged modern Public Choice in terms of the sorts of questions he asked.

At the same time, this means the conservative interpretation of Orwell as an anti-socialist is not altogether wrong and it contains an important kernel of truth. Orwell's two famous fictions were not meant to debunk socialism, but they were intended to criticize the totalitarian form of socialism on Public Choice grounds. This is why the conservative interpretation, though wrong, does such a good job of making sense of those two fictions. *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* really do appear to be intended as arguments against socialism, and the Public Choice interpretation helps us understand why this is so. Our task has been to reconcile the sensibility of the conservative argument with the fact that Orwell was really a socialist after all. The Public Choice interpretation accomplishes this by showing that Orwell was not opposed to socialism but to a particular kind of socialism, *viz.* totalitarianism or “oligarchical collectivism.”

On the one hand, this means Orwell missed whatever truths there were in the arguments of others who took the complete opposite tack. These others - for example, Eugen Richter, Henry Hazlitt, Ludwig von Mises, and F. A. Hayek - assumed for the sake of argument that socialism really could be



instituted without political corruption. In other words, they assumed the entire Public Choice problem away. Instead, they argued that even a non-corrupted socialism would never work for purely economic reasons. They assumed the perfect sincerity and beneficence of the socialist government's officials and instead analyzed the economic logic of the socialist system as an abstract theory.<sup>39</sup> On the other hand, Orwell's message was still an invaluable one, especially to fellow socialists who naively assumed that once socialism was implemented in any form whatsoever, the right people would automatically and infallibly rise to the top. Orwell may have gotten only half the argument right, but nobody else got it more right than he did. In apprehending quite early the nature of the Soviet Union, where other socialists were either starry-eyed dupes or bigoted apologists, Orwell was both critically observant and brutally honest.

Detractors of socialism who commend *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* to their audiences, should be aware of Orwell's opinion, and should not present these fictions as criticism of socialism *per se*, but only as directed against of one particular kind of socialism, viz. non-democratic socialism which produced totalitarianism or oligarchical collectivism. To depict Orwell's intentions otherwise is academic dishonesty and perversion of the truth. At the same time, the conservative interpretation of these two fictions as anti-socialist contains an important kernel of truth. The Public Choice interpretation helps us reconcile what is true about the conservative anti-socialist interpretation with the reality of Orwell's personal socialist convictions. Once Orwell's argument is correctly appreciated for what it is, even detractors of socialism may sincerely recommend Orwell's fictions as at least partially refuting certain forms of socialism. To go further than that requires going beyond Orwell and making arguments which Orwell himself would have vehemently opposed.

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Part of a letter, since lost, written on 16 June 1949 by Orwell to Francis A.

Henson of the United Automobile Workers answering questions about *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Excerpts from the letter were also published in *Life*, 25 July 1949, and the *New York Times Book Review*, 31 July 1949; the following is an amalgam of these.

*CEJL* IV 502 also notes,

*Nineteen Eighty-Four* was published in London by Secker & Warburg on 8 June 1949 and in New York by Harcourt, Brace on 13 June 1949.

The letter is rpt. in its entirety in Jeffrey Meyers, *George Orwell: The Critical Heritage* 24 (which cites *CEJL*) and again in Anonymous, “George Orwell’s statement on *Nineteen Eighty-Four*,” and partially quoted in Newsinger, *Orwell’s Politics* 122, in Howe, “1984: History as

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<sup>2</sup> I thank Christopher Fleming for referring me to this essay.

<sup>3</sup> Similarly, according to Jennifer Roback, Orwell was worried that socialism would turn totalitarian because of the fact that central economic planning requires someone to have the power to enforce the plan; that person will wield impressive political power which they might easily abuse (“The Economic Thought of George Orwell 128). Likewise, Stephen J. Greenblatt understands *Animal Farm* as “as a realization of Lord Acton's thesis, 'Power tends to corrupt; absolute power corrupts absolutely'” (“Orwell as Satirist” 110). Greenblatt adduces as proof O'Brien's statement to Winston in *Nineteen-Eighty Four* that “The Party seeks power entirely for its own sake” (“Orwell as Satirist” 116; cf. Newsinger, *Orwell's Politics* 128). One might also cite Orwell's statement that “In the minds of active revolutionaries . . . the longing for a just society has always been fatally mixed up with the intention to secure power for themselves” (Orwell, “Catastrophic Gradualism” in *Essays* 926, quoted in White, “George Orwell: Socialism and Utopia” 84).

Philip Rahv too appears to have come to the conclusion that the essential lesson of Orwell's is the liability for the abuse of power, saying,

I recommend it [*Nineteen-Eighty Four*] particularly to those liberals who still cannot get over the political superstition that while absolute power is bad when exercised by the Right, it is in its very nature good and a boon to humanity once the Left, that is to say “our own people,” takes hold of it. (“The Unfuture of Utopia” 19)

<sup>4</sup> That Orwell's emphasis was only on the *personal* abuse of power by corrupt *individuals*, Crothers argues

It is in light of his skepticism about the nature of socialist parties and socialist leadership that the horrors Orwell imagines in his depictions of fully realized socialist regimes, *Animal Farm* and *1984*, must be understood. (“George Orwell and the Failure of Democratic Socialism” 401)

Crothers might have quoted in his support a statement issued by Orwell's publisher, Fredric Warburg, concerning *Nineteen-Eighty Four*, Orwell thought that

If there is a failure of nerve and the Labour party breaks down in its attempt to deal with the hard problems with which it will be faced, tougher types than the present Labour leaders will inevitably take over, drawn probably from the ranks of the Left, but not sharing the Liberal aspirations of those now in power. (Quoted in Anonymous, “George Orwell’s statement on *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.”)

(This is almost a summary of F. A. Hayek's thesis in “Why the Worst Get on Top,” the tenth chapter in *Road to Serfdom* (157-170); and Hayek's chapter begins by quoting Acton.) Indeed, Crothers adduces as a source of Orwell's skepticism of power, his personal mistrust of *specific, individual* socialist parties and party leaders (*ibid.* 398). But Crothers argues that Orwell relied too much on liberal culture as a preventive safeguard, and did not pay enough attention to political *institutions*:

The failure of Orwell's democratic socialism, then, is his inability to describe political and economic arrangements which would let people have a private space in which to be individuals, and yet which would be sufficiently centralized to compel the equitable distribution of goods and services. Quiescent cultures were, Orwell ultimately decided, incapable of preventing centralizing powers from becoming totalitarian. (*Ibid.* 399)

This essay will directly contest this specific claim by Crothers. According to the Public Choice interpretation of Orwell offered in these pages, Orwell did in fact attempt to “describe political and economic arrangements” which were suitable or which were not.

<sup>5</sup> John Considine has already advanced the thesis of Orwell as writing in the tradition of Public Choice, but for Considine, this means only that “fears about the centralization of power permeates

much of his writing” (“The Simpsons: Public Choice in the Tradition of Swift and Orwell” 222) and that “he did not believe that those in power used that power in the public interest” (*ibid.*).

Furthermore, “Orwell presented an attitude toward government that was consistent with those in power being self-interested” (*ibid.* 223). Like Greenblatt, Considine cites in his support O'Brien's statement to Winston in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* that “The Party seeks power entirely for its own sake” (Considine, “The Simpsons” 222; Greenblatt, “Orwell as Satirist” 116; cf. Newsinger, *Orwell's Politics* 128). While Considine is correct that Orwell's skepticism of power is consistent with Public Choice's assumption of moral symmetry between public and private actors (self-interest), Considine does not indicate any overlap there may be between Orwell and the *institutional* concerns of Public Choice.

- <sup>6</sup> Helpful summaries of and introductions to Public Choice economics include Shughart II, “Public Choice”; Hill, “Public Choice: A Review”; Lemieux, “The Public Choice Revolution”; Butler, *Public Choice - A Primer*; Buchanan, “Politics Without Romance”; Stevens, *The Economics Of Collective Choice*; Simmons, *Beyond Politics: The Roots of Government Failure*; Tullock, Seldon, and Brady, *Government Failure: A Primer in Public Choice*; and Tullock, *The Vote Motive*. See also Gwartney and Fike, “Public Choice versus the Benevolent Omniscient Planner Model of Government: Evidence from Principles Textbooks”; Gwartney, “The Public Choice Revolution in the Textbooks”; Gwartney, “What Should We Be Teaching in Basic Economics Courses?”; Holcombe, “Make Economics Policy Relevant: Depose the Omniscient Benevolent Dictator.”
- <sup>7</sup> As Orwell himself noted, “The desire for pure power seems to be much more dominant than the desire for wealth” (“As I Please 63” 1137). I thank my professor William Cotton for pointing this out.
- <sup>8</sup> A prime example is the case of externalities, where one person's activities bestow benefits or impose costs on uninvolved third parties. For example, if a factory produces pollution, this imposes a cost on neighbors which the factory's owner will often fail to take into account. The pollution is a

negative externality, and the owner will over-produce, producing more than he would had he borne these additional costs himself. Similarly, if someone's activities bestow unintended benefits on others for which the others do not pay, then this is a positive externality, and the producer of the positive externality will produce less than he would were the beneficiaries to pay him. The problem in both cases is that the producer of the externality is self-interested and takes only his private costs and benefits into account and does not base his behavior on the public or societal good and bad. The standard assumption of Pigovian welfare economics is that the government will reliably internalize these externalities, taxing negative externalities and subsidizing positive externalities in order to bring private and public costs and benefits into alignment. One problem (not the only problem) with this Pigovian analysis is that it assumes that governments are altruistic and will internalize externalities just because that is the right thing to do.<sup>8</sup> It ignores the question of whether any government has any incentive to promote internalization of externalities.

To take another example, welfare economics predicts market failure when there is asymmetric knowledge. This is when one market participant possesses knowledge which another market participant lacks, and the one possessing the knowledge exploits his advantage for his own benefit, failing to act with the interests of the more ignorant partner in mind. But Public Choice points out that voters are often “rationally ignorant” and do not possess the same knowledge as do public officials. If equivalence is assumed, then public officials are as likely to exploit their superior knowledge and deceive voters as say a used-car salesman might try to sell a car that only he knows is defective. If public officials are any less likely to exploit their superior knowledge than the used-car salesman, it can only be because political institutions somehow penalize venal politicians more than the marketplace punishes deceitful salesmen. However, this fact must be proven, not assumed. It could just as well be that the market process punishes unsavory salesmen more swiftly and mercilessly than the political process penalizes conniving politicians who abuse their privileged positions.

And there are at least two other problems with the analysis of welfare economics: first, that Pigou neglected the ability of private property to internalize externalities (Coase, “The Problem of Social Cost”). Secondly, according to the Austrian School, even if the government's officials were completely altruistic and did nothing except to sincerely promote the public welfare, they would lack the data to know what was necessary to successfully internalize the externalities (Hayek, “The Use of Knowledge in Society”). Notice that the Public Choice and Austrian responses are polar opposites.

<sup>9</sup> This charitably assumes there really is such a thing as the “good of the people” or the “public welfare.” More likely, there is a conflict of widely divergent private interests – what James Madison called “factions” - none of which can be considered any more “public” than another. As William F. Shughart II has noted (“Public Choice”), in Public Choice analysis,

the individual becomes the fundamental unit of analysis. Public choice rejects the construction of organic decision-making units, such as “the people,” “the community,” or “society.” Groups do not make choices; only individuals do.

In addition, Kenneth Arrow's Impossibility Theorem demonstrates that it is mathematically impossible for any democratic process to reliably discover the public will in all possible situations.

<sup>10</sup> I thank William Cotton for pointing out the need to account for the differences between these two fictions.

<sup>11</sup> One anonymous referee pointed out that James M. Buchanan and Gordon Tullock discuss many other intellectual forerunners of Public Choice in their two separately-authored appendices to their co-authored *Calculus of Consent*.

<sup>12</sup> If one doubts whether a typical Public Choice economist could assume the theoretical soundness of socialism, then see James Buchanan's and Richard Wagner's *Democracy in Deficit: The Political Legacy of Lord Keynes* (1977). Buchanan and Wagner did not principally question whether Keynesian demand-side theories of the business cycle were correct against Say's Law and Supply-



Side theories, for that is a question of macroeconomics, not Public Choice. Instead, as Public Choice economists, Buchanan and Wagner argued that Keynesianism was guilty of removing the moral stain which had previously been placed on budget deficits, and therefore unintentionally encouraged public officials to run perpetual deficits. Keynes himself had counseled public officials to run surpluses in boom times and to run deficits only during downturns. But Buchanan and Wagner argued that politicians would only hear the part which they wanted to hear, listening to Keynes when he advocated deficits but ignoring him when he urged surpluses. In short, Buchanan and Wagner did not question the theoretical soundness of Keynes's theory but only whether his theory could ever be successfully transplanted to the world of politics. They concluded it could not be unless discretionary power was removed from fiscal and monetary authorities - in other words, if the legislature and central bank were bound by fixed rules such as a balanced-budget mandate. Only by binding government with rules which removed discretionary power, could public officials be trusted to do what they were supposed to do instead of what they wanted to do. Once again, institutional incentive structures largely determine individual behavior and affect whether a policy may be successfully implemented, and Buchanan and Wagner did not question Keynesianism in theory as a matter of macroeconomics. (On *Democracy in Deficit*, cf. Buchanan, "Interview with James Buchanan".)

<sup>13</sup> Jennifer Roback, "The Economic Thought of George Orwell" 128 contrasts the utopianism of other socialists and their tendency to defend or white-wash the Soviet Union, with Orwell's more skeptical and critical awareness of the reality of the Soviet regime.

<sup>14</sup> For an exploration of precisely what Orwell had to say about economics and about capitalism as an economic system, see Jennifer Roback, "The Economic Thought of George Orwell." (Thanks again to Christopher Fleming for this reference.) According to Roback, Orwell was definitely a socialist, demonstrated by quoting him (p. 127). In particular, she says, Orwell thought that capitalism was prone to monopoly and over-production, views quite typical for his time (p. 128). However, she

says, Orwell broke free of the prevailing socialist orthodoxy when he insisted that the Soviet Union was totalitarian, whereas Orwell's fellow socialists continued to defend the USSR's every action (p. 128). Roback argues that Orwell thus occupied the troubling position of believing that both capitalism and socialism tended toward tyranny: capitalism because of abuse of monopoly power and socialism because those in charge would abuse their political power (pp. 128f.). Roback puts Orwell in the context of the widespread pessimistic intellectual climate of his time, including the widespread abandonment of classical liberalism on account of the Great Depression (pp. 130f.), but she criticizes him for having no appreciation of the problem of economic calculation, spontaneous order, or the workings of the market process (p. 131)

<sup>15</sup> So Greenblatt: “Throughout Orwell's early novels, journals, and essays, democratic socialism existed as a sustaining vision that kept the author from total despair of the human condition, but Orwell's bitter experience in the Spanish Civil War and the shock of the Nazi-Soviet pact signaled the breakdown of this last hope and the beginning of the mental and emotional state out of which grew *Animal Farm* and *1984*” (“Orwell as Satirist” 105).

<sup>16</sup> And the Communist Sillen's distortion of Orwell's life history can only be described as, well, Orwellian. Sillen derisively says of Orwell that “He served for five years in the Indian Imperial Police, an excellent training center for dealing with the 'proles'” (“Maggot-of-the-Month 298), neglecting to mention that this was prior to Orwell's becoming a socialist and that by Orwell's own admission, it was precisely that imperial service which taught him the immorality and oppressiveness of colonialism. Sillen continues that Orwell “was later associated with the Trotskyites in Spain, serving in the P.O.U.M and he [Orwell] freely concedes that when this organization of treason to the Spanish Republic was 'accused of pro-fascist activities I [Orwell] defended them to the best of my ability’” (“Maggot-of-the-Month” 298), conveniently omitting the fact that Orwell's defense was along the lines that the P.O.U.M. was not really fascist at all and that the accusation was false! And so it was not only pro-market conservatives who misinterpreted

Orwell; Communists too could not tolerate Orwell's negative observations on the Soviet experiment so that they had little choice but to claim that Orwell was either a capitalist or a fascist. A similar though far less outright deceitful attempt by a Communist to recast Orwell as an advocate of capitalism is found in James Walsh, "George Orwell."

- <sup>17</sup> This passage is quoted (at least partially) by Richman, "From 1944 to *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: A Tale of Two Books," *op. cit.*; and by Jennifer Roback, "The Economic Thought of George Orwell" 128. See further in Richman for a direct defense of Hayek and rebuttal of Orwell's claims against Hayek and capitalism. Cf. Roback 130-2 that Orwell did not understand spontaneous order, the workings of the market process, or the problem of economic calculation generally.
- <sup>18</sup> However, in his more pessimistic moods, Orwell sometimes admitted that capitalism had some genuine virtues. As Arthur Eckstein notes in "*1984* and George Orwell's Other View of Capitalism," the novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* constantly compares the squalid and tyrannical present to the greater intellectual freedom and material plenty of the capitalist past (Eckstein 11f.). Eckstein points out that in "Literature and Totalitarianism" (1941), Orwell frankly admitted that economic laissez-faire had enabled literary and intellectual freedom, an admission that must have been as painful for a socialist such as Orwell as it was rare (Eckstein 15). "It was never fully realised," said Orwell, "that the disappearance of economic liberty would have any effect on intellectual liberty" ("Literature and Totalitarianism" 362, quoted in Eckstein 15). Eckstein comments, "This is an astonishing passage . . . The explicit connecting of economic liberty with intellectual liberty . . . is an analysis worthy of Norman Podhoretz." And as Eckstein shows, Orwell would sometimes credit England's liberal, Protestant heritage as responsible for its relative freedom in contrast to the totalitarianism which Orwell saw on the horizon. For example, in "Inside the Whale" (1940), Orwell noted that

Any Marxist can demonstrate with the greatest of ease that "bourgeois" liberty of thought is an illusion. But when he has finished his demonstration there remains the psychological *fact* that without this "bourgeois" liberty the creative powers wither away. (*Essays* 239; emphasis in original)

Orwell realized that perhaps capitalism was not so entirely bad, and maybe the socialist future would not necessarily be better. I thank Christopher Fleming here too for the reference.

<sup>19</sup> Again I owe Christopher Fleming for referring me to this exceedingly obscure essay of Orwell's.

<sup>20</sup> Against the claim that capitalism and markets are insufficient to wage war, see Hayek, *Socialism and War*, part II, "The Economics and Politics of War": 151-78. Hayek argues that wars may be successfully fought without the extensive resource-commandeering and wage-and-price controls characteristic of Western states in the two world wars, which Orwell seems to have thought necessary.

<sup>21</sup> As William Cotton pointed out, much of this actually did occur post-war. Indeed, according to a letter of T. R. Fyvel of 8 July 1950, Orwell

was pleasantly surprised at the firmness with which the Labour Government here at home continued in office after mitigating the worst harshnesses of British society by means of the Health Service, the National Social Insurance Act, the nationalisation of the mines, the development of the depressed areas, and so on. All these measures were steps in the direction Orwell desired. (Quoted in Anonymous, "George Orwell's statement on *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.")

However, according to John Newsinger, Orwell was dissatisfied with these post-war reforms and thought they were insufficient half-measures that did too little to make the society fundamentally more democratic and egalitarian (*Orwell's Politics* 136f.). For a history of British Labour Party nationalization, see for example Daniel Yergin and Joseph Stanislaw, *The Commanding Heights: The Battle for the World Economy*. For a criticism of that period, see John Jewkes, *The New Ordeal By Planning: The Experience of the Forties and Sixties*. Hayek had cited an earlier edition of Jewkes's work, saying, "[i]t is the best discussion known to me of a concrete instance of the phenomenon discussed in general terms in this book," i.e. of central economic planning resulting in tyranny (*Road to Serfdom* 51). Meanwhile, Jewkes described Hayek's *Road to Serfdom* as "masterly" (*The New Ordeal* xiii) for its "analysis which has never been confuted" (*New Ordeal* 182 note).

<sup>22</sup> On Orwell's personal experiences with poverty, see John Newsinger, "Down Among the Oppressed", chapter 2 in *Orwell's Politics* 20-41, covering especially Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London* (1933), and *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937). (An excerpt of *Down and Out* was published as "The Spike" [1931].) Fictional depictions of poverty by Orwell may be found in *A Clergyman's Daughter* (1935) and *Keep the Aspidistra Flying* (1936). That the purpose of the last-named was not to indict capitalism but to depict poverty, see Nicholas Guild, "In Dubious Battle: George Orwell and the Victory of the Money-God." See also Lane Crothers ("George Orwell and the Failure of Democratic Socialism" 390-3) and Richard White ("George Orwell: Socialism and Utopia" 78) for discussions of what motivated Orwell to become a socialist; Crothers and White adduce Orwell's experiences in Burma and in Spain, and in writing *The Road to Wigan Pier*, and White adds Orwell's *Down and Out*. Crothers and White argue these turned Orwell into an egalitarian opposed to class distinctions. White, Newsinger, and John Wain all place emphasis on a passage in Orwell's *Road to Wigan Pier* where Orwell states that his time in Burma made him an opponent of "every form of man's dominion over man" (White, "George Orwell: Socialism and Utopia" 78; Newsinger, *Orwell's Politics* 4, 20; Wain, "George Orwell as a Writer of Polemic" 92). But too much emphasis should not be placed here, for "Orwell himself later confessed that 'up to 1930 I didn't consider myself a Socialist' and had 'no clearly defined political views'" (Newsinger, *Orwell's Politics* 22); Orwell had left Burma in autumn 1927 (Newsinger, *Orwell's Politics* 6) and the first draft of Orwell's *Down and Out* was completed by October 1930. When Lane Crothers cites Orwell's experiences in Burma as contributing to his socialism, he also emphasizes Orwell's observation that imperialism not only oppressed the governed populace but also morally corrupted the governing class, degrading the oppressor as much as the oppressed ("George Orwell and the Failure of Democratic Socialism" 392f.); on this, cf. Newsinger, *Orwell's Politics* 5f. Whether Orwell's experiences in Burma made him a socialist is to be distinguished from how it taught him to be critical of political power; on that, see note 29. Finally, see note 28 that Orwell's experiences with

education made him critical of both political power and capitalism as an economic system.

- <sup>23</sup> Newsinger, “Only Revolution Can Save England,” in Newsinger, *Orwell's Politics* 61-88. Orwell made a similar though more subdued and less thoroughgoing proposal a few years later - in 1944 - in “The English People” (*Essays* 639-648)
- <sup>24</sup> This represented a change in opinion from 1937, when Orwell derided the “Communist propaganda . . . that Fascism has nothing to do with capitalism”, whereas, he said, “Fascism and bourgeois 'democracy' are Tweedledum and Tweedledee” (“Spilling the Spanish Beans” 70f.).
- <sup>25</sup> Cf. Newsinger, *Orwell's Politics*, p. ix.
- <sup>26</sup> The letter Symons refers to is Orwell's “Letter to Francis A. Henson (extract).” The letter was written on 16 June 1949, only eight days after *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was published, and a mere few months prior to Orwell's death.
- <sup>27</sup> Cf. Crothers, “George Orwell and the Failure of Democratic Socialism” 397-399 for a similar attempt to place Orwell's views in the context of his own life. This author would like, once again, to emphasize that Crothers's conclusions are very similar to the present essay's and highly worth reading.
- <sup>28</sup> Orwell tells the story of his own childhood education in an essay of unknown date, “Such, Such Were the Joys.” Jeff Rigggenbach explores how Orwell's childhood education is reflected in the totalitarianism of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in Rigggenbach, “The Brilliant but Confused Radicalism of George Orwell.” Among the other sources which Rigggenbach relies in relating “Such, Such Were the Joys” to the totalitarianism of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* are Gordon Bowker, *Inside George Orwell* 371 and Anthony West, *New Yorker*, 28 January 1956, pp. 86-92. West's article is reprinted in Jeffrey Meyers (ed.) *George Orwell: The Critical Heritage* 71-79. West is similarly quoted in Greenblatt, “Orwell as Satirist” 113. Rolando A. López relates Orwell's childhood experiences to his adult opposition to totalitarianism in “The Despot and the Poet: On the Duty of the Intellectual” 92.

Orwell's experience in school also seems to have contributed to his negative view of capitalism

(which is not to be confused with his skepticism of political power). The boarding school which he attended was private, and according to Orwell, the headmaster was not concerned with offering true education, but only with the profits he could squeeze out from his students (“Such, Such Were the Joys,” in *Essays* 1300). In addition, Cotton pointed out to me that Orwell had himself become a private school teacher in 1933; cf. *Essays* xxxviii. Orwell incorporated his negative impressions of private education into his 1935 novel, *A Clergyman's Daughter*. The protagonist, Dorothy Hare, becomes a schoolteacher and discovers that the headmistress - Mrs. Creevy - has rather different ideas than Dorothy about what constitutes a good education. The education offered is a farcical sham, very similar to how Orwell had depicted his own, consisting mostly of rote memorization and handwriting practice (*A Clergyman's Daughter* in *Complete Novels* 490). Orwell proceeds to deliver a page-long narrative disquisition of his own on the evils of private schools. He argues that “there is the same fundamental evil in all of them; that is, that they ultimately have no purpose except to make money” (*ibid.* 493). “So long as schools are run primarily for money, things like this will happen” (*ibid.* 494). It would seem that part of Orwell's animus against capitalism also owed to his childhood experiences in a private school, where the pursuit of profits led the school to offer a fraudulent lack of any real education. On other sources of Orwell's socialism, see note 22.

<sup>29</sup> Orwell served in the British imperial police in India, an experience which made him aware of the true nature of political authority in general and of imperialism in particular: Newsinger, *Orwell's Politics* 3; T. R. Fyvel, “A Writer's Life” 385; Orwell, “Shooting an Elephant” (1936) in *Essays* 43; Orwell, “A Hanging” (1931) in *Essays* 16-20. Orwell further vented his frustrations with his experiences as an imperial policeman in his 1935 novel, *Burmese Days* (cf. Newsinger, *Orwell's Politics* 7f.) There, the protagonist, John Flory, is a British civil servant in Burma, and his fellow Brits contemptible bigots who preach the white man's burden *Complete Novels* 106f., 130, 131). Orwell's experiences in Burma seem to have imbued in him a skepticism of politics and government. He saw through the lies of British claims of benevolence in British colonial territories, and that

prepared him to realize the fraudulence and betrayal of the Soviet Union as well. As we saw in note 22, Orwell's experiences in Burma also played a role in his becoming a socialist, but by no means are his economic and political views to be conflated.

<sup>30</sup> But see Newsinger, *Orwell's Politics* 44, 163 n. 19, on why this Trotskyist perception may have been incorrect.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Orwell's "Letter to Noel Willmet" (18 May 1944):

Hitler . . . can't say that two and two are five, because for the purposes of, say, ballistics they have to make four. But if the sort of world that I am afraid of arrives, a world of two or three great superstates which are unable to conquer one another, two and two could become five if the fuhrer wished it. (*A Life in Letters* 232)

Of course, when Winston is interrogated by O'Brien in the end of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, O'Brien does indeed cause - as far as Winston can perceive - two and two to become five. Cf. also Orwell, "The Prevention of Literature" (*Essays* 944).

<sup>32</sup> Most of this passage is quoted in Roback, "The Economic Thought of George Orwell" 128. On the last point, the unfamiliarity of the average Englishman with true tyranny, cf. "Inside the Whale" in *Essays* 236, 238; discussed in Newsinger, *Orwell's Politics* 114.

<sup>33</sup> A different but still critical assessment of these Communists is in Newsinger, *Orwell's Politics* 132-135.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Wendy McElroy, "A Webb of Lies."

<sup>35</sup> Quoted by his wife Ella Winter in the title page to her *Red Virtue: Human Relationships in the New Russia*. On these Potemkin tours in general, cf. Paul Hollander, *Political Pilgrims: Western Intellectuals in Search of the Good Society*.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Newsinger, *Orwell's Politics* 106f., regarding Orwell's reaction to the hypocritically differing responses of Communists to British occupation of Greece on the one hand and Soviet occupation of Poland on the other.

<sup>37</sup> Regarding *The God that Failed*, compare Paul Hollander, *The End of Commitment: Intellectuals*,



*Revolutionaries, and Political Morality.*

- <sup>38</sup> Incredibly, some socialists never became disillusioned. To his dying day, Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm never renounced his support for Stalin nor regretted the atrocities which the Soviet Union committed (Oliver Kamm, “It takes an intellectual to find excuses for Stalinism;” Arnold Beichman, “The Invitational at Columbia;” Hollander, *The End of Commitment* 289). Meanwhile, the socialist Gabriel García Márquez's friendship with Castro and his empathetic portrayals of dictators suggest that if he has ever undergone a change of heart about the abuse of political power, he has not made it public as an intellectual ought (Rolando A. López, “The Despot and the Poet: On the Duty of the Intellectual”).
- <sup>39</sup> In a sequel essay, I will examine these arguments and their implications for Orwell's thesis.