
Keeping George Orwell on the Left

BY

BENJAMIN SCHACHT

The term “Orwellian” has long been a vacuous cliché, and now even allies of Trump are making use of it to deride their opponents. But George Orwell, a self-described democratic socialist, always belonged on the Left.

Donald Trump’s presidency ended the same way it began — with a spike in sales of George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

The first Trump-induced surge in Orwell sales occurred in 2017, shortly after the presidential inauguration. References by members of Trump’s administration to “alternative facts” recalled the manipulation of reality practiced by the Ministry of Truth, the propaganda department where inconvenient bits of evidence are sent down the “memory hole” to be incinerated in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Orwell’s most famous novel, in this context, appeared as a portent for the post-truth media landscape Trump was said to foster.

Four years later, as Trump’s single presidential term drew to a close, sales of Orwell’s classic jumped again. This time, in a bizarre inversion, it was Trump’s own allies invoking the author to describe not their president but his adversaries.

It was following the riot at the Capitol on January 6 that Donald Trump Jr angrily compared his father’s banishment from Twitter to Orwell’s dystopia, claiming that “We are living in Orwell’s 1984. Free speech no longer exists in America. It died with big tech and what’s left is only there for a chosen few.” Meanwhile, Missouri senator Josh Hawley described the cancellation of his book contract by Simon & Schuster as “Orwellian” and an instance of “the Left looking to cancel everyone they don’t approve of.”

While these Trump-era invocations demonstrate the enduring resonance and rhetorical power of Orwell’s name, they also raise fresh questions about how his legacy should be understood. Is it more accurate to describe Trump as the victim or the perpetrator of Orwellian forces? What did Orwell himself believe, and what, if anything, can he tell us about politics in our own era?

On Truth

Let's begin with Hawley and Trump Jr, whose appeals to Orwell draw on his reputation as a forthright speaker of unpleasant truths and dogged defender of free expression. Were Orwell alive today, they imply, he would see the actions of Twitter and Simon & Schuster as infringements on their freedom of speech.

Orwell was indeed a staunch opponent of censorship, even for views to which he strongly objected and, as historian Laura Beers recently emphasized, regardless of whether the censor was the state or a private party. "The degree of freedom of the press existing in this country is often overrated," wrote Orwell in the pages of the British left-wing magazine *Tribune*. "Technically, there is great freedom, but the fact that most of the press is owned by a few people [means that it] operates in much the same way as state censorship."

This certainly sounds like someone who would be wary of monopolistic social media firms policing users' opinions. And as Beers reminds us, given the difficulties he often had in finding a publisher willing to print his own controversial views, it's not hard to imagine Orwell questioning the implications of Simon & Schuster's decision.

But unlike Hawley and Trump Jr, Orwell knew from experience that the primary victims of political suppression are rarely conservatives. As he wrote in the same article,

The British police are not like a continental *gendarmerie* or Gestapo, but I do not think one maligns them in saying that, in the past, they have been unfriendly to left-wing activities. They have generally shown a tendency to side with those whom they regarded as defenders of private property.

He goes on to describe how the police lent their support to the British fascist Oswald Mosley, observing a dynamic reminiscent of the disparate police responses to Black Lives Matter protestors and pro-Trump demonstrators. "At the only big Mosley meeting I ever attended," Orwell writes, "the police collaborated with the Blackshirts in 'keeping order,' in a way in which they certainly would not have collaborated with Socialists or Communists."

So, even if it's reasonable to speculate that Orwell would have recognized merit in Hawley's and Trump Jr's complaints, it's probably safe to say that he would not have sympathized with their sense of persecution, not to mention their larger ideological agenda.

But if Hawley and Don Jr cannot unproblematically claim Orwell on their behalf, can Trump's opponents? Did Trump's election really portend the nightmare vision embodied in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*?

His authoritarian tendencies notwithstanding, Trump is clearly not equivalent to Big Brother, if only because his grip on power was always much more tenuous than the Inner Party's in Orwell's novel. Trump did exhibit an emotional appeal of the sort that Orwell warned about in his 1940 review of Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, but Orwell also cautioned against overusing the term *fascist* as merely a swear word to denigrate one's political adversaries, suggesting that he might have dissented from the way some on the Left have described the peculiar threat posed by Trump.

Moreover, to many, Trump is liable to seem somewhat less Orwellian than his Republican predecessor George W. Bush, who also garnered comparisons to Big Brother for his significant expansion of the national security state after the attacks of 9/11. Indeed, the other recent surge in Orwell sales occurred

following Edward Snowden’s revelations about NSA spying, a legacy of the emboldened surveillance apparatus whose impetus dates to the Bush years.

So, the idea that Trump uniquely embodies the kind of totalitarian tyranny that Orwell warned about in the mid-twentieth century isn’t quite right either.

Orwell and the Proles

What then is Orwell’s relevance to our times?

If Orwell speaks to our current predicament, it has less to do with the traditional associations his name attracts — the looming specters of propaganda, surveillance, and totalitarianism — and more to do with an aspect of his legacy that has curiously, though perhaps tellingly, been far less acknowledged: his political commitments.

To describe Orwell as a democratic socialist — a term he explicitly embraced — might at first seem rather surprising. After all, Orwell’s best-known book aside from *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is *Animal Farm*, a satirical allegory of the Russian Revolution told from the perspective of farm animals whose revolt against human rule results in the pigs cynically using the ideas of the revolution to justify their dictatorship over the other animals.

But Orwell’s posthumous reputation as a caustic critic of socialist revolution is deeply misleading, and mostly an artifact of a Cold War culture in which his works were enlisted as anti-Soviet propaganda.

It’s true that Orwell opposed Soviet-style communism, but what is rarely included within the predominant cultural image of Orwell as an anti-communist crusader is that he did so not out of any love for capitalism but in order to save socialism from what he considered a dire threat to its original liberatory meaning. Here is how he explained his intentions in the preface to the Ukrainian edition of *Animal Farm*:

[I]n 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 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.

Orwell’s antipathy to Soviet communism stemmed not from a hostility to socialism but from his firsthand experience of Soviet methods, which he in fact criticized as anti-revolutionary. He came to this conclusion after fighting with the POUM, an independent Marxist party, during the Spanish Civil War. Whereas the POUM aimed to wage war against Francisco Franco’s fascist forces and social revolution simultaneously, the Communists insisted on maintaining their alliance with Spain’s liberal bourgeoisie, which meant putting revolution on hold.

In the internecine conflict that ensued, members of the POUM were imprisoned, tortured, and killed by Soviet-aligned forces. Though Orwell and his wife Eileen managed to escape across the border to France, some of their comrades were not so lucky. Already hostile to Bolshevism as a style of politics, Orwell solidified his anti-Soviet views in light of his Spanish experiences.

But this did not mean that he gave up on revolutionary socialism — just the opposite, in fact. As World War II broke out and Orwell found himself once again looking down the barrel of a fascist gun back home in England, he sought to apply the lessons he learned in Spain.

Orwell's 1941 pamphlet *The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius* represents his attempt to make the POUM's argument in an English context. To defeat the Nazis, Orwell claimed, the English people must forge an indigenous socialism out of their own political and cultural traditions, marshalling England's native socialist sentiment to usher in the kind of sweeping transformation at home that would build the morale necessary for winning the war against fascism abroad. Points in the socialist program that Orwell sketched in *The Lion and the Unicorn* included the nationalization of major industries and the equalization of incomes.

Orwell's belief in revolution waned somewhat as the 1940s wore on, and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is clearly an expression of his pessimism regarding the future. But Orwell did not intend even so bleak a book as a rejection of socialism. As he wrote in a 1949 letter to Francis A. Henson of the United Automobile Workers,

My recent novel is NOT intended as an attack on Socialism or on the British Labour Party (of which I am a supporter) but as a show up of the perversions to which a centralized economy is liable and which have already been partly realized in Communism and Fascism. I do not believe that the kind of society I described necessarily *will* arrive, but I believe (allowing of course for the fact that the book is a satire) that something resembling it *could* arrive. I believe also that totalitarian ideas have taken root in the minds of intellectuals everywhere, and I have tried to draw these ideas out to their logical consequences. The scene of the book is laid in Britain in order to emphasize that the English-speaking races are not innately better than anyone else and that totalitarianism, *if not fought against*, could triumph anywhere.

Though it is questionable whether Trump possessed the skill and ambition to become the kind of dictator that his opponents feared he would, his victory in 2016 and the 74 million votes he won in 2020 suggest there is at least the potential for a more committed and competent demagogue to succeed on the basis of similar appeals. After all, the conditions of alienation and resentment that enabled Trump's initial success are still in place and will continue to fester so long as capitalism remains unrestrained by countervailing social democratic forces.

Stopping the next Trump-like figure will therefore require activating the popular energies that Orwell believed were the key to defeating fascism. As Winston Smith, the protagonist of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* tells us, if there is hope, it lies in the proles.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Benjamin Schacht is an independent scholar and freelance editor. He holds a PhD in comparative literature from Northwestern University.

FILED UNDER

UNITED KINGDOM

POLICING AND REPRESSION / MEDIA / LITERATURE / HISTORY / BOOKS

CENSORSHIP / GEORGE ORWELL