

Interpretation

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For many decades George Orwell has been among the most widely read novelists in the English language and perhaps the most widely read novelist to make political themes central to his works. Orwell's popularity rests primarily on two books: the revolutionary-allegory-as-animal-fable *Animal Farm*, and the dystopian satire *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Among more dedicated Orwell readers, however, his reputation rests primarily on his nonfiction prose. In this category he wrote three book-length works: *Down and Out in Paris and London* (about his life among the working poor and "tramps" in those cities); *Road to Wigan Pier* (about the conditions of the poor in the English industrial North in the mid-1930s and the state of English socialism); and *Homage to Catalonia* (about his time on the front in the Spanish Civil War). *Homage* is also the work where Orwell first firmly staked his ground among the anti-Communist left. Alongside the nonfiction books are numerous well-known and much-loved essays such as "Shooting an Elephant," "Politics and the English Language," "Charles Dickens," "Inside the Whale," and "England Your England."

This accumulated body of work has led Orwell to acquire a particular reputation for integrity and clear-sightedness. He is often seen as the pre-eminent man of the left of his time to see through the dogmatic cant of Communists and their fellow travelers and to discern the looming totalitarian threat posed by the Soviet Union, at that time still the object of adulation (or at least busy apologetics) among his leftwing peers. Orwell called a spade

a spade—and this frankness caused him to be a rather isolated figure among a Left that only belatedly admitted the truth of his observations. In the end, however, on the important things, Orwell was right, and he was vindicated.

Or so the story goes. In *Orwell Your Orwell: A Worldview on the Slab*, David Ramsay Steele seeks to debunk nearly every claim of the foregoing paragraph. The goal of Steele's book is not so much intellectual biography as the presentation and evaluation of Orwell's worldview. (He summarizes that worldview on pp. 7–9.) On the whole, Steele is highly critical of Orwell and presents him as both less original and less insightful than he is often taken to be. It is clear that Steele is very fond of Orwell as a writer, but he believes that Orwell was, on many important matters, simply wrong or at least uninteresting, and that these facts about Orwell have been obscured by his reputation for brave, lonely, nondogmatic truth telling. Steele seeks to set the record straight.

For the most part, Steele persuasively argues his case. He demonstrates that Orwell was not, in fact, a bravely isolated, nondogmatic and clear-sighted man of the left. In chapters 1 and 2 (“The Purveyor of Orthodoxies” and “The Follower of Intellectual Fashion”), Steele shows that, on most matters, Orwell's “views were entirely typical of a leftwing intellectual” of the 1930s (56). For example, although the second part of *Wigan Pier* is sometimes presented as containing Orwell's critique of socialism, Steele reminds readers that it certainly contains harsh criticisms of many typical middle-class *socialists*, but no criticism at all of *socialism* as a political objective (see 38–39 and all of chapter 3).

Likewise, just as Orwell's socialism was quite conventional, so was his anti-Communism. Far from Orwell's anti-Communism making him a lonely dissident voice in the British Left, Steele shows that “in the 1930s, there was nothing unusual in being leftwing and anti-Communist,” that “in fact, most of the British Left were never pro-Communist,” and that the Communist Party always had a very marginal place in British left politics. It is true that, during the Popular Front era, the *New Statesman* refused to publish Orwell's anti-Communist essays about the Spanish Civil War, but this was not out of any sympathy for Communism on the *New Statesman*'s part, nor did Orwell pay any broader price for adopting his anti-Communist position. Rather, the editor of the *New Statesman* refused to publish the essays because he thought doing so would weaken the Republican cause in the Civil War. That is a judgment call, and one that Orwell questioned, but it is hardly an instance of ideological blindness. Nor was Orwell proscribed from publishing in left-wing

journals or even the *New Statesman* because of his anti-Communist stance. (Steele's treatment of this episode is excellent; see 44–50. A similar story plays out with respect to the initial rejection and somewhat delayed publication of *Animal Farm* a few years later; see 50–55).

In the remaining nine chapters, Steele reconstructs Orwell's thought along several dimensions: Orwell as "socialist," as "post-socialist," as "reactionary," as "anti-imperialist," "anti-Communist," and so forth. There is at times substantial overlap among these chapters, but they add up to a remarkably comprehensive portrait of Orwell's thought. Along the way, Steele provides the reader with a sometimes humorous, often caustic, but nearly always interesting tour of fin-de-siècle and early twentieth-century British intellectual history. These at times seem to lack a coherent internal structure, but they are full of fascinating details and sharp observations. Any reader interested in Orwell's intellectual milieu will enjoy and profit from them.

The Orwell that emerges in these chapters is a curious (but not unique) mixture of "progressive" and "conservative." On one hand, he believes that capitalism is doomed by underconsumptionism; that central planning is more efficient than the market; that most of society's productive resources ought to be nationalized; that religion is bunk; that fascism is part capitalist conspiracy and part irrational instinct; and that the British empire is immoral and exploitive (see chapters 3 and 6–8). On the other hand, he believes that country village life is superior to city life; that hedonism is bad; that technological progress makes us soft and unmanly; that homosexuality is bad; and that birth control is bad (see chapters 4–5). All these various positions are discussed in detail (though often without sufficient citations), and I very much recommend this portrait of Orwell as one of the most comprehensive (if unflattering) available. I will mention here a few highlights.

Steele does an admirable job of showing that, at times, Orwell misrepresents or is even culpably unfamiliar with contemporaneous thoughts and thinkers. For example, Steele persuasively shows that Orwell rather consistently and perhaps deliberately misrepresents H. G. Wells in a manner that makes the latter look naively optimistic (102–7). And despite being an avowed socialist for most of his literary career, Orwell seems to have been less familiar with many critiques of socialism than many of his left-wing associates, and even appears to have been uninterested in and unfamiliar with the Keynesian "Third Way" approach that was on the ascendant during his last decade (70–72, 317).

To account for the more “conservative” aspects of Orwell’s thought, Steele coins two terms that are helpful not only for classifying Orwell but for identifying the broader currents of thought of which he was a part. The first term is “Post-Socialism,” discussed in chapter 4. This cluster of beliefs, which begin to coalesce in the 1880s, “accepts all or most of the socialist complaints against capitalism and liberalism, but lacks any confidence in a socialist future” because it accepts many “pre-socialist views which reject urbanization, mechanization, and progress” (87). This is the current of thought skeptical of secular rationalism and consumerism as spiritually enervating, and which sees technological progress as causing the degeneration of natural human abilities. “Anti-degenerationism” (discussed in chapter 5), is the related view that urbanization and industrialization, by destroying older, small, more rooted forms of community, lead to social pathologies such as homosexuality, birth control, ill health (caused by modern “conveniences”), and hedonism (see 119–20). The discussions of post-socialism and anti-degenerationism very helpfully put two aspects of Orwell’s thought in their broader context.

The book benefits from the fact that Steele is willing to assess Orwell’s ideas in addition to presenting them. As a libertarian, Steele is especially critical of Orwell’s anticapitalism and belief that the industrial future will inevitably be collectivist. Steele also shows the faulty premises or internal contradictions of some of Orwell’s more socially conservative views. Even if, for example, preference for the country life or opposition to birth control are defensible positions, the reader will see that, if they are, it is probably not because of the particular reasons Orwell had for those views. It is refreshing to see Orwell presented as someone worthy of arguing *against*.

On the other hand, the arguing is almost invariably “against.” Steele has little favorable to say about Orwell’s worldview. Indeed, my primary complaint with the book is that its persistently critical examination of Orwell’s general worldview fails to convey not only the force, charm, and humanity of Orwell’s writings, but also the countless incisive judgments they contain. Orwell might have been wrong about a lot of “big ideas,” but his writings are nonetheless peppered with insights about life, character, literature, society, and more. One would hardly know this from *Orwell Your Orwell*. This is a curious admission, since Steele himself asserts more than once that he considers Orwell a great writer. As he says in one passage: “Although Orwell was not an original thinker, and his ideas, broadly characterized, were all fairly standard for his time and social position, he had a superb gift for formulating

these ideas sharply, so that their implications appeared fresh and startling. These writings sparkle with polemical virtuosity; they throb with life. They will make entertaining and enlightening reading for centuries to come” (23). It would have been helpful to readers, and it would have made the book more pleasant to read overall, if Steele had devoted some space to discussing Orwell’s acknowledged strengths. It would have been especially helpful since at least some readers might be puzzled by Steele’s claim that Orwell provides “enlightening” reading despite being mostly conventional and wrong. In what ways does Steele consider Orwell enlightening? We do not know.

Nonetheless, Steele’s book provides an excellent overview of many of the most important aspects of Orwell’s thought, puts them illuminatingly in their intellectual context, and offers many persuasive criticisms that will force any devoted reader of Orwell to take stock of why, exactly, Orwell “matters.”