

Orwell as Public Intellectual: Anarchism, Communism and the New Left

Nick Stevenson

ABSTRACT

This article seeks to recover the importance of George Orwell as a critical public intellectual. Orwell remains a controversial figure for both The New Left and Anarchists during the post-war period. Here I seek to recover the complexity of Orwell's writing which ranged across a number of political traditions including anarchism, liberalism and democratic socialism against some of the charges made by prominent members of the New Left. Especially critical at this juncture were a number of anarchist writers who were more receptive to Orwell's influence. In the concluding section I seek to argue that Orwell while not an anarchist remains an important figure for those concerned about the growing authoritarianism of the twenty-first century.

Keywords: *Anarchism, Liberalism, Socialism, New Left, freedom, state cruelty*

The critical legacy of George Orwell as a public intellectual is a matter of on-going debate by a variety of political factions. Here I seek to offer a sympathetic, but also critical account of Orwell as a complex socialist intellectual who offered an on-going commentary on the times in which he lived and whose legacy continues to bear a considerable amount of historical weight in the present (Taylor 2004). Despite Orwell's commitment to liberalism, freedom and socialism he remains a deeply divisive figure for those with socialist sympathies. Here I seek to explore a number of cultural and intellectual controversies that were ignited by members of the New Left and post-war anarchism. Orwell was an ambivalent and influential figure for many on the New Left for the way he sought to both distance himself from a Marxist and communist tradition while simultaneously engaging with individualistic and dissenting currents. Orwell also remains significant for

DOI:10.3898/AS.29.1.01

the way in which his writing can be connected to an English libertarian tradition and more mainstream versions of liberalism (Mill 1974, Hobhouse 1964). As E.P. Thompson (1979) argues the English left-libertarian tradition can be traced back to the Levellers, Diggers and the Chartists. Here Thompson (1979, p21) makes a crucial distinction between a bourgeois, individual, rights set of arguments (mainstream liberalism) and one more concerned with the collective practice of the community and attempts to deepen egalitarian and democratic sentiments through campaigns from below. Despite the deceptive simplicity of Orwell's writing I want to argue that both of these intellectual strains find expression within his life and writing. More critically I want to argue that while Orwell's writing remains both insightful and limited in many respects, his libertarian credentials were seriously damaged by his mostly uncritical support for the British war effort to defeat Nazism and his failure to more fully support the libertarian forms of socialism he encountered in Spain.

If Orwell (1968a, p28) wrote to make 'political writing into an art' he did so from a perspective that was committed to truthfulness and the need to confront the evasions and lies of the power politics of the time. If after Spain, Orwell was to view communism negatively through the lens of totalitarian domination he also disliked the evasions of a Marxist prose style that seemed trapped in its own logic and distant from the concerns of everyday life. Part of Orwell's (1968b, p170) message was a rejection of language that had become overly abstract and was able to 'make lies sound truthful and murder respectful'. Later New Left figures such as Raymond Williams and E.P. Thompson were critical of Orwell mostly because of the way his anti-communism had been used in the context of the Cold War. Significant in this respect was the debate on an essay written by Orwell in the 1930s on the writer Henry Miller, which is replied to by E.P. Thompson in the 1960s. While both Orwell and Thompson belong to a tradition of English libertarian socialism, their different understandings of the role of communism more generally shape their disposition towards the idea of freedom and the possibilities of an emancipated society in the future (Goodway 2006). Within the English context, however, there were other writers more closely associated with post-war anarchism who were more receptive to Orwell. English anarchism is significant in this setting as it is often unfairly written out of the histories of the New Left and should be recovered for offering alternative understandings of Orwell (Kenny 1995, Stevenson 1995). While figures such as Williams and Thompson are critical of Orwell, he remained highly regarded by many anarchists. Notably the English anarchist tradition, like Orwell, shared a similar distaste for communism. However Orwell was perhaps to forget, or at least partially displace, some of the deeper

lessons of the Spanish experience. This is evident in some of his exchanges with Alex Comfort where Orwell offers a less than critical stance on British militarism and the effects of aerial bombing (Laursen 2019). If this period alerted him to the defining power of the state and the corruptions of state communism, the Spanish revolution also demonstrates the need for an on-going critique of 'all political and social coercive institutions which stand in the way of the development of a free humanity' (Rocker 2004, 9). Orwell's decision to offer his service to the British state as a propagandist for the war and later support for the Labour Party is crucial in this regard.

GEORGE ORWELL: OUTSIDE THE WHALE

If Orwell is remembered for his critique of totalitarianism and participation in the Spanish Civil War his later writing is marked by a growing sense of pessimism. Especially significant in this respect is the warning offered by his novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as a satire of a world which 'could arrive' (Orwell 1968c, p502). The state-controlled world of Orwell's novel was meant to revive amongst the intellectual class a sense of responsibility that he felt had been eroded through the rise of totalitarianism and fascism and the coming world based upon state control. Within this context, Orwell (1968d) detected the emergence of a Left 'orthodoxy' that he found intellectually dishonest thereby betraying the responsibility of intellectuals to tell the truth. In order to do this Orwell (1968d, p469) argues that any creative writer would need to avoid instructions from a party machinery (or collective group ideology) while recognising that power politics is ultimately a sordid business. Orwell (1968d, p469) argues that politically 'one can never do more than decide which of the two evils is the lesser'. Notably towards the end of his life Orwell (1968e, p209) became convinced that 'the general drift has almost certainly been towards oligarchy'. This was especially evident in the emergence of a state that even within the liberal-democratic context had concentrated huge amounts of bureaucratic power in hierarchical institutions. This more pessimistic strand was to displace competing sensibilities that find their fullest expression in his work on the Spanish revolution.

Orwell after his experiences in Spain, would eventually describe himself as a democratic socialist and as a supporter of the Labour Party, but he remained especially sensitive to people on the Left who were attracted by totalitarianism (Crick 1988, 1990). In this sense, Orwell's observations are similar to those of Czeslaw Milosz's (1981) arguments seeking to explain how a specific class of Marxist intellectuals in the 1930s became gripped by the confines of totalitarian thought.

Milosz (1981, p11) describes how a certain brand of Marxism became caught up with descriptions of humanity not 'as it is, but as it should be'. For Orwell and Milosz many communist intellectuals during the 1930s dismissed non-Marxist thought as a form of decadence. Scott Lucas (2004, p6) has in this respect accused Orwell of adopting the disposition of the 'maverick intellectual(s)' while reproducing a distinction between the so-called freedom loving West and totalitarianism of Eastern European socialism that would become a staple of the Cold War. Within this account Orwell is criticised as acting like a policeman of the Left who is contemptuous of people who became sympathetic towards the cause of communism in the 1930s. Raymond Williams (1979a, p392) comments that Orwell gave the 'impression of consistent decency and honesty' while polarising debate in ways that were often unhelpful. There is a concern that Orwell's pose as a truthful critic often takes on the mask of intellectual freedom while being fiercely intolerant of the complexity of intellectual positions with which he disagreed. While there is some truth in this criticism, we need to remember that Orwell's unrelenting critique of communism after his experience in Spain remains one of the most important features of his legacy.

The inconsistency of Orwell (1968f) can also be traced within an extended essay on the American novelist Henry Miller written in 1940. Within the essay Orwell is exercised by the rise of a political orthodoxy amongst writers who were committed to the communist cause. At this point, Orwell (1968f, p562) argues that during the 1930s 'the central stream of English literature was more or less directly under Communist control'. This remains problematic as reading literature should be one of the places where more unconventional ideas could be experienced. English communists could not be relied upon and should be defined as enemies or 'people who are mentally subservient to Russia' (Orwell 1968f, p562). This was a double betrayal in terms of both intellectuals' lack of patriotism and calling on their part to nurture and cherish freedom. Orwell (1968g) argued that if nationalism is ultimately connected to the world of power politics and the division of the world between different blocs, patriotism has a different orientation. For Orwell (1968g, p411), patriotic sentiments were connected to more naturalistic feelings that implied 'devotion to a particular place and a particular way of life' that did not necessarily imply the violent need to impose them upon other people.

Orwell's (1968h) own version of socialism was rooted in what he perceived was the often contradictory but good sense of the English people who were immune to the kind of power-worship that had befallen intellectuals. Patriotism remained connected to class politics as the desire for a decent society remained rooted in

the common sensibilities of ordinary people. If 'England remained the most class-ridden country under the sun' it was capable of its own revolution free from the corruptions of European communism so beloved by intellectuals (Orwell 1968h, p87). A socialist economy would require public ownership, increasing equality, welfare provision, democratic education and the protection of liberty. Orwell's specific brand of socialism was based less upon the leadership of intellectuals than on 'the native genius of the English people' (Orwell 1968h, p108). Instead what is required is an open revolt against the class system guided by what Orwell (1968h, p109) called 'traditional patriotism'. During this period, Orwell kept his distance from the Labour Party preferring the libertarian socialism of the Independent Labour Party of the 1930s. This was indeed the only political party that Orwell ever joined attracted to its socialism and its pacifism. This, as we shall see, further dramatises Orwell's decision to join the war effort later.

That intellectuals and artists should not accept what amounted to state control of their ideas explicitly concerned Orwell. The answer as to why this had come about was to be found within unemployment and the moral collapse of the 1930s. During this period Western civilisation had begun to decay to such a degree that patriotism, religious attachment and other social features had declined leaving 'the need for something to believe in' (Orwell 1968f, p564). Whereas some writers like Evelyn Waugh and others had joined the Catholic Church, many had joined the Communist movement. Orwell's English socialism was especially critical of a generation who had turned their back on the real freedoms offered by intellectual tolerance and the rule of law. Of the people who had joined the Communist Party in the 1930s, Orwell (1968f, p565) maintains that very few had any real experience of 'purges, secret police, summary executions, imprisonment without trial'. Especially significant in this respect, was Orwell's (1968f, p566) criticism of Auden's poem 'Spain' that he felt was too casual about 'necessary murder'. It was this brand of 'amoralism' that was evident on the totalitarian Left that was all too happy to do murder at a distance. What concerned Orwell was an atmosphere where intellectuals were seen to sacrifice the lives of others to the cause of communism. Such an atmosphere could not produce significant works of art or literature. At this point Orwell claims that there had been virtually no literature of any value since the 1930s. The unorthodox ideas required for arresting literature was not really possible where authors had subjected themselves to self-censorship. If English intellectuals had assumed themselves to be at war with fascism since the 1930s the consequence of this was a form of self-policing that sneered at anyone not being critical enough of the fascist enemy. The reason that Henry Miller was significant in this respect

was both that his account was individualistic, but also politically neutral and disengaged. Miller had effectively retreated ‘inside the whale’ away from the world of political commitment and responsibility. Here Orwell is referring to the biblical tale of Jonah who is popularly understood to have been swallowed by a whale. Orwell (1968f, p571) imagines that this retreat from the world of power politics and totalitarian thought control is ‘very comfortable, cosy, homelike’. Orwell makes it clear that given the dominance of totalitarian thought, Miller’s disengagement from politics is both a necessary move, and one that is doomed to failure; that the move ‘inside the whale’ is both important to preserve freedom, but at the same time will not survive a future of barbed wire and camps. Orwell (1968f, p576) pessimistically concludes that the ‘autonomous individual is going to be stamped out of existence’.

A few years later, Orwell (2001) published in the *Manchester Evening News* a number of articles on the importance of intellectual freedom for the coming decades. Orwell was especially concerned about the growth of the centralised state and the threat this poses to liberty. If intellectuals since the 1930s had proved to be unreliable in terms of the defence of human freedoms, then we need to ensure that this becomes a value shared by many ordinary people. Not for the first time Orwell wondered whether ordinary people would come to cherish intellectual freedom given their lives were dominated by the struggle for economic survival. Orwell often returned to these themes during the 1930s and 1940s. Despite the ‘common decency’ of the English, Orwell was concerned that the understandable quest for economic security by working-class people could lead to the neglect of liberal freedoms.

Orwell (1937/2001, p197) argued that ‘the Fascist attitude of mind’ had largely been incubated by the anxiety of unemployment and threat of poverty. Socialism, on the other hand, seemed unattractive and had become ‘the plaything of cranks’ (Orwell 1937/2001, p204). Within this Orwell meant (despite the insulting language) that if socialism was not to become a meaningless abstraction, it needed to be rooted in the daily lives and the struggles of the working-class population. Like feelings of patriotism it needed to become a form of second nature for the working-class. In Spain, Orwell had witnessed the necessity of a form of popular socialism that was not based upon reformist politics; what Rucker (2004, p59) calls ‘the elementary school of socialism’ emerged out of the capacity of ordinary people to take work and places in which they live into their own hands. After Orwell had come to the conclusion that the kind of popular socialist revolution he had experienced in Spain was not going to happen in Britain he began to adopt a politics more consistent with mainstream liberalism.

John Newsinger (2018, p109) notes that after Orwell had aligned himself with the Labour party his criticism of the government and support for the working-class was progressively curtailed. While it is true that he was directly involved in the setting up of the Freedom Defence Committee (which included prominent anarchists like Herbert Read and George Woodcock) he was also involved in a shameless collaboration with the security services. This had involved reporting on fellow intellectuals, many of whom had clearly seen themselves as friends of Orwell. Further while Orwell did not necessarily see the post-war Labour government as especially radical, he clearly expected them to abolish the House of Lords and public schools (Newsinger 2018, p130). During this period what mattered was that individual freedom become a common experience and valued by the working class as a whole. For Orwell (2001, p437) 'the more educated people are – assuming that education does not just mean training in technological skills – the more they become aware of their individuality and the less will the structure of society be organised like a beehive'.

Previously in Spain, Orwell had experienced a very different kind of socialism. Orwell's (1962, pp9-10) account of the Barcelona of 1936 was deeply significant in this respect as there 'was no unemployment, and the price of living was still extremely low; you saw very few conspicuously destitute people, and no beggars except the gypsies. Above all there was a belief in the revolution and the future, a feeling of having emerged into an era of equality and freedom. Human beings were trying to behave as human beings and not as cogs in the capitalist machine'. In Spain Orwell directly experienced ordinary working-class people not only dispensing with the rituals of class hierarchy and conformity, but cherishing more communal freedoms. Crucially for Orwell, the Spanish civil war was a struggle to locate freedom within the common life of the community. Orwell (1962, p244) sums this up as '(e)nough to eat, freedom from the haunting terror of unemployment, the knowledge that your children will get a fair chance, a bath once a day, clean linen reasonably often, a roof that doesn't leak, and short enough working hours to leave you with a little energy when the day is done'. In the trenches of Spain, Orwell (1962, p29) discovered something he called 'complete equality' which was a world without the usual routines of class hierarchy and privilege that operated as a 'working model of the classless society'.

Especially significant was Orwell's discovery of anarchism less as an ideology to be learned but as a practical way of living. For Orwell (1962, p61) 'Communism and Anarchism are poles apart. Practically – i.e. in the society aimed at – the difference is mainly one of emphasis, but it is quite irreconcilable. The Communist's emphasis is always on centralism and efficiency, the Anarchist's on

liberty and equality'. Orwell (1962, p61) goes on to explain that the crucial difference is that whereas 'Anarchism is deeply rooted in Spain', Communism is mostly dependent upon Stalin's foreign policy and is likely to wither away after the war. Orwell's intense dislike of communism was a direct result both of his rejection of what he saw as abstract intellectual debates and the power politics of the state that sought to contain the growth of a genuinely popular and patriotic rebellion amongst the people.

George Woodcock (1970, p138) a long-time friend of Orwell writes that Spain had offered Orwell the 'comradeship of working men' that he 'had always desired'. As Woodcock (1970) speculates it is Orwell's experience as a hunted man for being a member of POUM by the Communists that was to later influence his writing in *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen-Eighty Four*. This makes Orwell's fascination with Miller's lack of interest in active forms of political commitment even more interesting. For Woodcock (1970, p143) despite what Orwell says about Miller and the pessimistic conclusions he draws about the future his own actions are more complex. Woodcock (1970, p144) suggests that while fascinated by the stance of Miller this did not prevent Orwell from actively seeking to support the war effort at home during the Second World War or indeed from fighting in Spain. Further Woodcock (1970, p198) dismisses the idea that the English literary intellectuals of the 1930s were all unpatriotic communist sympathisers as a fairly typically exaggeration on the part of Orwell. Indeed many English literary intellectuals supported the war less out of patriotism, but more out of a pragmatic disposition that they did not wish to be ruled by a Nazi state (Woodcock 1970, p199).

Looking back on his Spanish experiences in 1942, Orwell mostly focuses upon the power politics that had come to betray the revolution (Orwell 1968i). Orwell at this point is especially exercised as to why Britain and France did not supply arms to help defend the Republic thereby mirroring aid given to the fascists by Germany and Italy. Orwell (1968i, p301) struggles to decide whether this was because the British ruling class were 'wicked or merely stupid'. The other feature of his retrospective writing was the ordinary brutality of war and its deep inhumanity. Notable by their absence are the more vivid aspects of his earlier account where he had clearly been moved by witnessing a genuinely socialist libertarian revolution. Of course we cannot know whether Orwell would have returned to these ideas if he had lived longer, but after the start of the Second World War they become increasingly marginal in his thinking.

After Orwell (1968j) declares his support for the war against Nazism, the other intellectual strain Orwell attacks is pacifism. Pacifism and communism, Orwell (1968d) argues shares similar characteristics with nationalism. If commu-

nism is a form of transformed nationalism that substitutes the need for power on the part of the host nation to support for Russia, then pacifism is largely based on a hatred of Western forms of democracy. Orwell noted that most pacifists tend to be acutely aware of the failings of the West and would simply end up subordinating themselves to totalitarianism. Orwell (1968k) perceives pacifism as lacking a sense of worldliness. Commenting upon Tolstoy, Orwell (1968k, p344) argues that his 'saintliness' was an attempt 'to get away from this earthly life and find eternal peace'. Similarly, Orwell (1968l, p526) viewed Gandhi along with anarchists and pacifists as exhibiting an 'anti-humanist tendency' built on a form of perfectionism. The lack of worldliness of anarchism and pacifism was ultimately a retreat from taking responsibility for the world. For Orwell, a responsible person needs to be 'prepared in the end to be defeated and broken up by life, which is the inevitable price of fastening one's love upon other human individuals' (Orwell 1968l, p527).

Despite the sympathetic portrait that Orwell drew of Henry Miller he was not prepared to live 'outside the whale'. Orwell's humanistic socialism is less driven by an ideological set of commitments than it is to the value of all human life and a sense of connection to family and nation. The so-called saintly pacifism of Tolstoy and Gandhi is ultimately the attempt to 'escape from the pain of living, and above all from love, which, sexual or non-sexual is hard work' (Orwell 1968l, p528). Our humanity is sustained through a sense of connection and responsibility towards other human beings. These commitments would unfortunately sometimes mean the use of force and violence. Orwell (1968l, p528) is explicitly critical of pacifists who are not prepared to use force to defeat the Nazis and ultimately to halt the extermination of Jews. More intellectual commitments like Marxism or nationalism (rather than patriotism) will inevitably insulate us from awkward questions that the attempt to live a more worldly set of commitments will bring about. Part of Orwell's critique of ideology was not that the responsible intellectual should have no political commitments, but they should not become overly doctrinaire. Many of the libertarian socialists after Orwell were to make similar observations especially in relation to the way that Marxism had become: a means for obscuring the complexity of the modern world. Robert Colls (2013) points out that in taking a stance against pacifism, Orwell is criticising a position that he himself had previously adopted, arguing Britain should keep out of what was to become the Second World War. Colls (2013, p134) explains this through Orwell's own suffering in Spain. For Orwell, the position of rejecting war at all costs would ultimately mean that pacifists would become complicit with totalitarian rule from above. Orwell clearly felt it was his duty as an intellectual, democratic socialist and patriot to fight

fascism. However as I have already indicated Orwell's blanket dismissal of those who sought to critique state violence during the Second World War can also be seen in terms of his abandonment of libertarian socialist politics. While it is true Orwell never became an anarchist, it was the stance he took on the war and his growing pessimism about the possibilities of more genuinely democratic forms of politics that influenced his account.

ORWELL AND THE NEW LEFT

During the 1950s and 1960s, as I have indicated, the figure of George Orwell cast a long shadow over the New Left. Indeed a 'reckoning with Orwell' could be seen as a central preoccupation amongst male intellectuals of the post-war period (Campbell 1984; Jardine and Swindells 1989). Many feminist writers have rightly expressed deep reservations about the battle over Orwell. They argue this has further entrenched intellectual strands that neglect to analyse the power that normalised masculinity has over the imaginary of the Left. Especially significant in this respect is Orwell's disregard of the complexity of women's experience and his overt masculinism. Similarly other Left critics have taken aim at Orwell's classism. For Williams (1979b, p18) Orwell's class 'does most of the writing, which not only directs its own but most other institutions, and which, travelling abroad, is known to the world as "the English"'. Williams argues that Orwell ultimately does not go far enough in seeking to question the privileges of the class-based society that helped form him as an intellectual. It is Orwell's class position that allows him to dismiss the ideas and perspectives of others with such aplomb. These are both important lines of criticism fostered by the New Left and have been more fully developed elsewhere. Here however I am more concerned to critically outline a debate about the consequences of Orwell's shift to a more overtly statist form of politics.

E.P. Thompson felt that Orwell's liberalism and endorsement of political quietism had impressed a form of Cold war conformism. For Thompson (1978a) Orwell's intellectual legacy served a Cold War agenda that had led to the silencing of critical intellectuals. Disillusionment with communism had led many intellectuals into a form of apathy. It was not that state socialism had failed, but the quest for a liberated and classless society had failed to come to fruition (Thompson 1978a, p11). Orwell's essay 'Inside the Whale' represented for many on the New Left the apathetic mood of many post-war intellectuals. For Thompson (1978a, p15) the problem was that Orwell is 'sensitive – sometimes obsessively so – to the least insincerity upon his left, but the inhumanity

of the right rarely provoked him to a paragraph of polemic'. This comment is of course not without foundation and yet quite misleading of someone who fought for a libertarian cause in Spain, supported the setting up of the welfare state and criticised Britain's colonial past. Despite the oppositional nature of Thompson's argument there were considerable areas of continuity between Orwell's position and prominent New Left intellectuals. If Orwell was concerned that the intellectuals of the 1930s were engaged in a form of power worship with little interest in the lives of ordinary people, E.P. Thompson felt that much academic work displayed similar sentiments. Thompson's (1978b) critique of structuralism and less grounded historical forms of analysis continually returns to the neglect to take account of the complex sensibilities of 'ordinary' historical actors. Both Orwell and Thompson remained committed to a certain version of English patriotism that they perceived could become a more radical force in the future. In this respect, Thompson was a life-long Marxist revolutionary whose life was less determined by the events of 1917 (or indeed the Spanish Revolution of 1936) than the revolutions of 1956 and 1989.

Previously Thompson (2014) had expressed his disgust at the reaction of the British Communist Party to the crushing of a popular revolt in Hungary in 1956 that sought to bring society under more popular forms of democratic control. The problem was that Marxism in the hands of Stalin had ossified into a doctrine that emphasised the supremacy of the party, the silencing of discussion and the unquestioning loyalty required by Communist Party members. At this point, however, Thompson seeks to defend the ethical core of communism against the way that it had become corrupted by historical practice. For now Thompson (2014, p40) wrote that 'I know very well that the knots tied by Stalinism cannot be untied in a day. But the step on the road back to the Communist principle is that we tell the truth and show confidence in the judgement of the people'. The tragedy of Hungary in 1956 was not only to be found in the repression of a popular uprising, but in a party organisation that had turned its back on its own beliefs in a grubby world where power all too often triumphs over principle. What was significant about 1956 was the possibility of relatively autonomous forms of self-government without the controlling influence of a political party. While Thompson writes as a disillusioned former Communist, many of his themes relating to the authoritarian nature of the party and its ability to distort truth in the interests of power politics can all be traced back to Orwell.

At the end of Thompson's (1978c) long letter to Leszek Kolakowski (where he seeks to prompt and question a Marxist fellow traveller back into the fold) he ends by reminding them of their common struggle. Notably the best way to do

this was to recall the ‘moment of common aspiration’ symbolised by the struggles of 1956 (Thompson 1978c, p187). That this moment still burned brightly in 1973 when Thompson originally published the letter, spoke of his unwillingness to give up on the idea that Eastern European socialism may at some point be reformed. If Kolakowski, in Thompson’s eyes, had become too accommodating to the hawks of the Cold War, he was not yet willing to give up on the idea that Eastern European state socialism could be democratised from below. Raymond Williams (1980/2005) sought in similar fashion to address the ‘practical possibility’ of reform along more libertarian and democratic lines, within Eastern Europe. Instead of giving up on a commitment to Marxism and communism, there was still a possibility that socialism could be renewed. For Williams (1980/2005, p262) what became necessary during this period was a recovery of the self-management tradition and more internal forms of democracy. These arguments are suggestive of the idea that disquiet with Orwell was not simply for the reasons stated, but could also be connected to the relentless criticism he aimed at communism during the 1930s.

ORWELL AND ANARCHISM

If Orwell remained a problematic figure for those more closely associated with the politics of state he was mostly given a more positive reception by the anarchist writers of the post-war period. David Goodway (2006) argues in this respect that Orwell’s fight in Spain, defence of anarchists on the grounds of intellectual freedom, recognition of the common decency of ordinary people and intense dislike of the authoritarian tendencies of the state meant he was viewed more sympathetically. Similarly Nicolas Walter (2012, p8) argues that part of the appeal to anarchists was that of the English dissenter who rebelled against the conformity of his own class background and the assumptions of many of the socialists and communists of his own time. However above all what attracted Walter (2012, p10) was the unpredictability of Orwell’s arguments and positions that he took up along with his rejection of more conformist arguments. For Walter (2012, p10) Orwell’s humanism is most evident within his rejection of dogmatic thinking and his sympathy with the downtrodden. Similarly Colin Ward’s (1998) essay on Orwell recognises that he is not so much an anarchist (although he was on occasion given to defending them) but more of a humanist who liked to make up his own mind. For Colin Ward (1973, p33) many anarchists were not only concerned about the growth of the state in the welfare social democratic era but sought less ‘to gain power, than to erode it, to drain it away’. Colin Ward’s anarchism sought to argue

that the need to handle the conflict between authoritarianism and liberty was an on-going feature of being human (Goodway 2011). These were of course all themes carefully explored by Orwell. The difference being that for Ward the task of post-war anarchists was to make people aware of the difference between society (based upon self-help, families, voluntary associations) and the authoritarian relationships instituted by the state (Di Paola 2013). Like Orwell, Ward was concerned that a Marxist style revolution would simply instil a new set of authoritarian leaders. This is not to argue that Orwell was an anarchist, but that his concern about the authoritarian nature of the state struck a chord. While many (if not all) of the post-war anarchists had given up the revolutionary strategy calling for the overthrow of the state, they remained deeply concerned about the effect that hierarchical structures had on moulding conformist citizens and the on-going need to search for more libertarian solutions.

Despite Orwell's critical writing on the state some of the positions he occupied during the war years deservedly received sharp criticism from some anarchists. If part of the intellectual legacy of Spain and Orwell was that '[n]ew worlds are not born in the vacuum of abstract ideas, but in the fight for daily bread' there were other features of his legacy that are more problematic for anarchists (Rocker 2004, p33). Especially significant is the contribution of Alex Comfort who was openly critical of Orwell's patriotic defence of the British state's militarism during the Second World War. Especially concerning to Comfort, and many others dismissed by Orwell as 'pacifists', was the bombing of the civilian population in Germany. Further the British navy had imposed blockades which led to famine and starvation thereby eroding a distinction between the military and civilian populations (Laursen 2019, p31). For Comfort such extreme measures employed by the state suggested that informed citizens had a duty to disobey the state in such circumstances. Despite Orwell being remembered as a critic of state power he not only worked producing propaganda for the BBC during war time, but refused to engage with those whom he saw as being overly critical of the war. In a letter to George Woodcock he summed up his stance as 'it is chiefly a question of whether it is more important to bring down the Nazis first or whether one believes doing this is meaningless unless one achieves one's revolution first. But for heaven's sake don't think I don't see how they are using me' (Orwell 1968m, p307). Despite Orwell's awareness of being 'used' this does not make his stance any less problematic. This is especially evident in Orwell's (1968n) comments on Vera Brittain's pamphlet *Seed of Chaos*. In it Brittain (2005) charges the British with a lack of imagination when it comes to thinking about the pain of others. This would include the suffering caused by slavery, child labour and factory work, all of which received a much delayed moral

response. In the pamphlet she makes a similar case in respect of the ‘speeded-up’ slaughter evident in the mass bombing of the German civilian population (Brittain 2005, p96). Orwell’s response (1968n, p96) was to dismiss the idea that there could be a moral war, and that in any case there was not necessarily a great difference between civilians and combatants. Orwell’s refusal to take pacifism seriously or indeed a more qualified approach to the war is a painful read for those who seek to unproblematically champion Orwell as a critic of state power. Chomsky (2014, p22) argues that historically the intellectual is often ‘caught between the demands of truth and power’. If it is part of the mission of the intellectual ‘to oppose injustice and oppression’ this can only be done consistently outside of the machinery of the state (Chomsky 2014, p23). Orwell by effectively embedding himself in the state had compromised his ability to criticise. As Chomsky (2014) argues, a more liberated future depends less upon the ability of the state to impose solutions from above, but for the mass of the population to be actively involved in the construction of a more egalitarian and democratic society. Orwell’s move to liberalism had become detached from this viewpoint. In this respect, intellectuals are like social movements seeking to educate and organise from below (Chomsky 2014, p25). What is problematic is less that Orwell supported the war, but that he was willing to become an active propagandist while dismissing those who sought to ask thorny questions about the state violence used by ‘our’ side.

Here my argument is that part of the legacy of the Spanish civil war is the possibility of constructing a socialist society less upon state power, but on mutual aid, co-operation and community ownership. That despite liberalism’s defence of individual freedom this soon becomes ‘shipwrecked’ in a society ruled by economic exploitation and state power (Rocker 2004, p11). If anarchism and liberalism share the idea of individual freedom, they differ in terms of the recognition that the state and capitalism will continue to enforce hierarchical rule from above. Orwell seemingly had grasped this point in Spain but then as the prospects for an English revolution grew distant and, in the context of war, it was seemingly forgotten. The Spanish experience offers a vision of a decentralised and popular socialist revolution that had broken with the authoritarian relations of the past. Orwell’s pessimism enabled him to produce his best-known book, but it severely restricted his vision of alternative possible futures. Notably it is Alex Comfort (1950) who builds more consistently on the Spanish revolution recognising the dangers of a centralised and hierarchical state and the scope it can offer those who wish to persecute and terrorise members of the population. Especially significant in this respect was the ability of the state to override ordinary moral feelings of empathy as it sought to ensure the obedience of subordinates. The modern state

in this respect can utilise the 'legislature' to carry out the cruel fantasies of ruling elites 'without witnessing their effects' (Comfort 1950, p63). If Orwell's description of the totalitarian state has many of these features what is unsettling about Comfort's account is his recognition of these aspects within the liberal democratic state. The main barrier to the cruel state being 'the survival of individual standards' that are often threatened by the mutual effects of state propaganda and the desire for security (Comfort 1950, p63). Comfort argues that a more decentralised anarchist society would instead draw upon humanity's shared capacity for mutual aid and decisively reject the need for more hierarchical forms of control and conformity. These features are all missing from Orwell's late liberal pessimism.

THE LEGACY OF GEORGE ORWELL

Orwell is a more contradictory figure than some of the New Left (notably Williams and Thompson) were prepared to admit. For Thompson, Orwell remained the main ideologue of the Cold War and a system of power politics that made it difficult to give voice to a more substantively socialist politics of the good society. Thompson clearly misses the argument that this was less a reflection of Orwell, but more how his work was understood more broadly (Woodcock 1981). If Orwell's writing has been used to uphold the ideological oppositions of the Cold War he was concerned about the kinds of politics that were fostered by the atom bomb. The arrival of such an expensive and destructive piece of technology controlled by a few states was likely to give expression to 'the end of national sovereignty and of the highly-centralized police state' (Orwell 1968o, p26). It is Orwell's reputation as a critic of the politics of the state and of the importance of dissent (however contradictory he might have sometimes been) that was the most outstanding feature of his legacy. In his later writing Orwell (1968e, p209) became increasingly concerned about the centralisation of the state and its military, industrial and financial power compared to the more limited power of citizens. Orwell (1968e, p211) is especially important in pointing out that 'the lust for naked power' remains a significant motive for many people in a hierarchical society. He remains a significant public intellectual not only because he reminds us of this fact, but also because his legacy is suggestive of the idea that intellectuals should serve critical ends (Said 1994). However I have also argued his decision to more consciously support the politics of state and his active participation in war propaganda considerably undermines these important values.

We could also argue that Orwell has much to contribute towards more contemporary anarchist debates. Kristian Williams (2017, p194) points out that

Orwell disliked 'purism' and was keen to support practical socialist measures that made life better for the working-class. This would mean that radicals should be prepared to engage (albeit not uncritically) with struggles and movements that have their roots in the community. In the current context these could be a range of organisations from trade unions and community groups mobilising against austerity, feminist campaigns for safe streets and women's refuges and environmental movements seeking to develop low carbon cities and green spaces. These will inevitably be organised in different ways. Orwell would no doubt have been impatient with a form of anti-authoritarian politics that was more concerned with participants exhibiting the correct life-styles or that political practice always took place within 'perfected' organisations (Gordon 2008). In addition, Orwell would no doubt have found himself out of sympathy with more sophisticated theory-driven approaches represented by post-anarchism that gives up on Enlightenment values such as truth, rationality and humanism (Newman 2011). We may remember that the totalitarian societies of the 1930s sought to jettison a number of Enlightenment concerns with catastrophic consequences. In an age that is witnessing the rebirth of an anti-democratic populist nationalism along with concerns around fake news and ideological manipulation through the use of new technology we are likely to need Orwell's focus on state power and the need to constantly shift our intellectual horizons so we can stand up for more democratic and libertarian values. However if there is a need to be concerned about 'purism' there is an equal need to be careful about abandoning a critic of hierarchy and the politics of the state. James C. Scott (2012, p78) argues in this regard that the hierarchical and subservient nature of daily life often makes more principled talk of democracy sound empty. The need to survive in authoritarian settings has a direct effect upon shaping a sense of self-hood. We continue to live in a world that gives rewards to people who unquestioningly go along with the status quo. Colin Ward makes the point in a lengthy group interview with fellow anarchists that the 'direct-actionist is someone who shapes his own destiny while other people are victims of circumstances, of the whims of authority: things happen to them' (Boston 1970, p14). Ziga Vodovnik (2013) proposes that it is the anarchist tradition that has long recognised that violence is more often the result of conformism and pragmatism than people who are unwilling to simply do what they told by people in authority. As I have persistently argued part of the critical legacy of the Spanish revolution is the possibility of people forming a co-operative community without these features (Guerin 1970). Of course none of these arguments would have been lost on Orwell. It is simply that in responding to a rapidly changing and dangerous world, Orwell rightly recognised that fascism needed

to be defeated. But that in doing so he adopted a political stance that was a long way from the more libertarian view of freedom he had first encountered on the battlefields of Spain. If Spain is to be remembered more fully then it is not in a politics embedded less in 'the lesser evil', but in a practical grass roots politics that defends the social and political rights that have already been achieved while 'constantly widening the scope of these rights whenever the opportunity for this presents itself' (Rocker 2004, p74). This will require a form of criticism that offers an on-going critical account of the authoritarian power of the state and citizens willing to struggle for more authentic forms of freedom.

Nick Stevenson is a Reader in Cultural Sociology at the University of Nottingham. He is currently writing a series of articles on intellectual history and the critical legacies of Marxism and anarchism.

REFERENCES

- Boston, Richard (1987) 'Conversations about anarchism', in Ward (ed), *C.A Decade of Anarchy*, London: Freedom Press, pp11-23.
- Brittain, Vera (2005) 'Seed of Chaos: What Mass Bombing Really Means', *One Voice*, London: Continuum.
- Campbell, Beatrix (1984) *Wigan Pier Revisited*, London: Virago.
- Chomsky, Noam (2014) *Masters Of Mankind*, Chicago: Haymarket Books.
- Colls, Robert (2013) *George Orwell: English Rebel*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Comfort, Alex (1950) *Authority and Delinquency in the Modern State*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Crick, Bernard (1980) *George Orwell: A Life*, London: Penguin.
- (1988) 'Orwell and English Socialism', in Buitenhuis, P. and Nadel, B. (eds), *George Orwell: A Reassessment*, London: MacMillan Press, pp3-22.
- Di Paola, Pietro (2013) "'The man who knows his village": Colin Ward and Freedom Press', in Levy, C. (ed), *Colin Ward: Life, Times and Thought*, London: Lawrence and Wishart pp28-52.
- Goodway, David (2006) *Anarchist Seeds Beneath the Snow: Left-Libertarian Thought and British Writers from William Morris to Colin Ward*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.
- (2011) 'Colin Ward and the New Left', *Anarchist Studies* 19(2): 42-56.
- Gordon, U. (2008) *Anarchy Alive!*, London: Pluto Press.
- Guérin, Daniel (1970) *Anarchism*, New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Hobhouse, Leonard Trelawney (1964) *Liberalism*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Jardine, Lisa and Swindells, Julia (1981) *What's Left?* London: Routledge.
- Kenny, Michael (1995) *The First New Left*, London: Lawrence and Wishart.
- Laursen, Eric (2019) *The Duty to Stand Aside*, Oakland: AK Press.
- Lucas, Scott (2004) *The Betrayal of Dissent*, London: Pluto Press
- Mill, John Stuart (1974) *On Liberty*, London: Penguin.
- Milosz, Czeslaw (1981) *The Captive Mind*, London: Penguin.
- Newman, Saul (2011) 'Post-anarchism: a politics of antipolitics', *Journal of Political Ideologies* 16(3): 313-327.
- Newsinger, John (2018) *Hope Lies With the Proles: George Orwell and the Left*, London: Pluto Press.
- Orwell, George (1937/2001) *The Road to Wigan Pier*, London: Penguin.
- (1962) *Homage to Catalonia and Looking Back on the Spanish War*, London: Penguin.
- (1968a) 'Why I Write', *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell, An Age Like This, 1920-1940, Volume 1*, London: Secker and Warburg, pp23-32.
- (1968b) 'Politics and the English Language', in *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell, In Front of Your Nose, Volume 4*, London: Secker and Warburg, pp156-170.
- (1968c) 'Letter to Francis A. Henson', in *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell, In Front of Your Nose, Volume 4*, London: Secker and Warberg, p502.
- (1968d) 'Writers and Leviathan', in *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell, In Front of Your Nose, Volume 4*, London: Secker and Warberg, pp463-469.
- (1968e) 'James Burnham and the Managerial Revolution', *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell, In Front of Your Nose, Volume 4*, London: Secker and Warberg pp192-215.
- (1968f) 'Inside the Whale', *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell, An Age Like This, 1920-1940, Volume 1*, London: Secker and Warberg, pp540-580.
- (1968g) 'Notes on Nationalism', *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell 1943-1945, Volume 3*, London: Penguin pp410-431.
- (1968h) 'The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius', *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell, My Country Right or Left, Volume 2*, London: Penguin pp74-134.
- (1968i) 'Looking Back at the Spanish War', *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell, My Country Right or Left, Volume 2*, London: Penguin pp286-306.

- (1968j) 'My Country Right or Left', *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell, An Age Like This, Volume 1*, London: Penguin pp587-592.
- (1968k) 'Lear, Tolstoy and Fool', *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell, In Front of Your Nose 1945-1950, Volume 4*, London: Penguin pp331-347.
- (1968l) 'Reflections on Gandhi', *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell, In Front of Your Nose 1945-1950, Volume 4*, London: Penguin pp523-531.
- (1968m) 'Letter to George Woodcock', *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell, My Country Right or Left, Volume 2*, London: Penguin pp306-307.
- (1968n) 'As I Please', *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell 1943-1945, Volume 3*, London: Penguin pp179-181.
- (1968o) 'You and the Atom Bomb', *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell, In Front of Your Nose 1945-1950, Volume 4*, London: Penguin pp23-26.
- (2001) 'The Intellectual Revolt: Four Articles: Manchester Evening News', *Orwell and Politics*, London: Penguin pp415-438.
- Rocker, Rudolf (2004) *Anarcho-Syndicalism: Theory and Practice*, Edinburgh: AK Press.
- Said, Edward (1994) *Representations of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures*, London: Vintage.
- Scott, James C. (2012) *Two Cheers for Anarchism*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Stevenson, Nick (1995) *Socialism, Ideology and Culture*, Aldershot: Avebury.
- Taylor, David John (2004) *Orwell: The Life*, London: Vintage Books.
- Thompson, Edward Palmer (1978a) 'Outside the Whale', *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, London: Merlin Press pp1-34.
- (1978b) 'The Poverty of Theory: or an Orrery of Errors', *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, London: Merlin Press pp193-298.
- (1978c) 'An Open Letter to Leszek Kolakowski', in *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, London: Merlin Press pp92-192.
- (1979) 'Recovering the Libertarian Tradition', *The Leveller* (22 January 1979), pp20-22.
- (2014) 'Through the Smoke of Budapest', in Winslow, C. (ed) *E.P. Thompson and the Making of the New Left; essays and polemics*, New York: Monthly Review Press pp37-47.
- Vodovnik, Žiga (2013) *A Living Spirit of Revolt*, Oakland: PM Press.
- Ward, Colin (1973) *Anarchy In Action*, London: Freedom Press.
- (1998) 'Orwell and Anarchism', in Richards, V. (ed) *George Orwell at Home (and Among Anarchists)* London: Freedom Press, pp15-46.

- Walter, Nicolas (2012) *George Orwell: an accident in society*, Pamphlet, Stroud.
- Williams, Kristian (2017) *Between the Bullet and the Lie*, Oakland: AK Press.
- Williams, Raymond (1979a) *Politics and Letters: Interviews with the New Left*, London: Verso.
- (1979b) *Orwell*, London, Flamingo.
- (1980/2005) 'Beyond Actually Existing Socialism', *Culture and Materialism*, London, Verso pp252-274.
- Woodcock, George (1962) *Anarchism*, London: Pelican.
- (1970) *The Crystal Spirit: A Study of George Orwell*, London, Penguin Books.
- (1981) 'Orwell's Changing Repute' *Queen's Quarterly* 88: 250-255.