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Orwell – Paterfamilias or Big Brother?

If we are to measure George Orwell's success in the durability of his two later novels, *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* then what we need to examine is his projection of Big Brother – the modern authoritarian state.

Big Brother has become *the* metaphor for the modern state, and, although its success is formidable, since the term has become part of our political vocabulary, it is also a problem. Orwell's state is not just a spectre of secrecy and surveillance, because the whole thesis also depends on a notion of absolute power which depends on the condition of mass powerlessness. In this context it is significant that Orwell feels comfortable in the temperate climes of English capitalism before the Second World War, only decades after the working class had won the franchise and before it was a major power in the land.

It is post-revolutionary power which inflames his nightmare of the future state – his critique of the modern state is unmistakably directed against the socialist state. But Orwell's equally nightmarish vision of absolute powerlessness derives not from some future defeat, but his own feelings about the working class who were his contemporaries. The horrors of *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* extend not only to the misuse of state power, but to the failure of politics itself. That failure derives from Orwell's big-brotherly view of the working class.

I want to argue, as Raymond Williams has in his excellent book *Orwell*, that the problem with Orwell is his representation, or rather misrepresentation, of the working class. More

than that, there is also a problem in the way that masculinity, femininity and the family feature in his representations of class.

While Orwell's invincible edifice of the state may seem modern, his view of the working class isn't – it's the quaint, old-fashioned chronicle of a self-confessed snob. Despite his wish to invest his revolutionary optimism in the people, what he feels for the common people edges on contempt. Actually, he thinks they're dead common. He may *think* the working class is the revolutionary class, but he doesn't *feel* it.

Nowhere in Orwell do the working class *make* history. And in his quest for an authentic English socialism it is not the working class, but a sort of hybrid southern suburban species which becomes the revolutionary class – not because of its capacity to struggle, but because in some way it fits Orwell's notion of quintessential Englishness.

Throughout *Nineteen Eighty-Four* the off-stage appearances of the working class are remarkably resonant of *The Road to Wigan Pier*. The power of the state in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* seems perpetually stabilised in its very instability – but the instability is only a chimera. There is no real challenge to the state from its own people, and particularly not from the proles.

George Orwell's life and times with the proletariat began with *The Road to Wigan Pier* when, in keeping with a long tradition of English literature, the quest for the 'state of the nation', he set off on an expedition into the natural habitat of the working class. The tradition itself depends on a relation of otherness to this class. In the first place, normally such journeys could only be undertaken by people with the time and money to make them, in other words with resources not possessed by the working class itself. But more importantly, that relationship always inscribes the author in a relation of exclusion from the working class. The odd thing is that this quest for Englishness necessitates the discovery of that working class, as if it were hidden and mysterious. And of course, coming from Orwell's class position, that is exactly what they were. And remained. In *The Road to Wigan Pier*, Orwell depended on the activists for his access to the working class. But as Williams shows, Orwell insists on a separation between the working class and its activist intelligentsia. He cannot conceive of the working class itself as a *thinking* class with its

own history, with a history of making itself. The result is the representation of a class which is thoughtless and leaderless, a class in its natural state.

Again, as Williams shows, Orwell's omission of working-class activists and organisations leaves him with the slate clean for his own observations. What Orwell brings to his journey is primarily himself, an observer who takes no counsel, an author with all the arrogance of innocence. Insofar as he is concerned with working-class politics as an organised force, he represents it as showing a flair for organisation but not for thinking. This separation is achieved because Orwell kidnaps working-class thinkers out of their class: 'I think, therefore I am' apparently doesn't apply to the proles; to think is to become middle class. It is this which enables us to track a continuity between *Wigan Pier* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. It is as if the documentary material of *Wigan Pier* provided him with his source material for *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: the proles are the same in both.

In *Wigan Pier*, Orwell seeks to sum up the working class in the archetypal proletarian group – the miners. For all that his description of miners' labour and their poverty is sympathetic, it is hardly radical. How does he describe these archetypal proletarians, and why did he single out the miners?

Orwell's graphic description of the work of miners facilitates his representation of workers as elemental creatures, work-horses. Williams reminds us that this is how they appear in *Animal Farm*, and so it is again in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. As I have argued in *Wigan Pier Revisited*, I think Orwell's choice of miners is significant. As the misogynist he is, it is not surprising that he has chosen the most masculinised profession.

Undoubtedly, his celebration of the miners was in part an attempt to restore them to a respected place in the ranks of the working class. He challenges the denigration of miners as noble savages because they are dirty by describing the conditions of their work and their bathless homes, and by establishing trenchantly the necessity of their work. For it is coal, he says, that makes the world go round. And at the same time he, too, casts them in the role of noble savages by his panegyric on their physique. He loves their lean, supple, black bodies. And so his celebration of the miners is both an

affectionate discovery of their heroism *and* their masculinity – their work is a *manful* struggle down there in the dark and dangerous abdomen of the earth. It is of course essentially physical work, and what Orwell is not concerned with is the history of that masculinisation of the work of miners. Mining is only men's work because women were banned from the work of hewing coal in the nineteenth-century struggle to expel women from hard physical labour. The feminisation of women demanded that expulsion. But that feminisation had an answering echo in the masculinisation of men. This is important for several reasons. The selection of the miners in this way as the most exotic martyrs of the working class is itself part of the process of masculinising the history of the working class.

Orwell visited Wigan in the 1930s when it was still one of the outposts of women's work in the mines. After the expulsion of women from the underground in 1842, there were campaigns throughout the late nineteenth century to purge women from the pit top, where it was believed by some that they were de-sexed by their strength. The campaign failed in Wigan, where women were only finally pushed off the pit top in the 1950s after nationalisation and a deal between the National Coal Board and the National Union of Mineworkers. Wigan was famous for its 'pit brow lasses'. Not as you'd know from *The Road to Wigan Pier*.

Wigan was also as much a cotton town as it was a coal town. Indeed, it is significant that Orwell spent a substantial part of his journey in Lancashire around the cotton belt, towns which employed women in the mills, towns which were the crucible of the English industrial revolution, towns where the history of the English industrial revolution, towns where the history of the English industrial revolution cannot be written other than as the struggles between men *and* women and capital. Not as you'd know that from *The Road to Wigan Pier* either.

So, women do not appear as protagonists in Orwell's working class. And neither does capital. And what we are left with is a sense of a class which suffers, but not of a class which struggles. And certainly not a class which wins. It's a class summed up in the anthem of the washerwomen in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*:

They sye that time 'eals all things,
They sye you can always forget;

But the smiles an' the tears across the years
 They twist my 'eart strings yet!

True to the tradition of such representations of the working class, the imagery contains pathos, isolation, inertia, defeat: it incites pity and philanthropy rather than protest and politics. The washerwoman in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* has her parallel in *Wigan Pier* in a solitary image of an exhausted, but noble, woman, poking a stick down a drain. Both figures are used by Orwell to gather and focus his fondness for these poor people. But they are silent women, even when they are singing. They are sad, but above all they are solitary. And Orwell is about to entrench them in their solitude: in *Wigan Pier* he sees her as he is on his way, leaving town. In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* he discovers his affection for his washerwoman just before Winston is about to be arrested. The isolation of these figures in their proletarian landscape is about to be completed in both cases by the observer's departure. The only feelings we can be left with are grief and impotence.

Among the middle class and the upper class, women are targets of his acidic class contempt, expressed in the same vein as the mother-in-law joke. It's the 'Brighton ladies' and rich women lolling around in Rolls Royces whom he can't abide, presumably because they are the quintessence of the idle rich. They're an easy target, of course, given their unstated but enforced idleness as women.

It is women whom he identifies as the fifth column of the upper classes. In *Wigan Pier* Orwell briefly considers the lack of political solidarity among the middle class, not as a function of its dominance – for the upper classes are organised in a web of political associations of which there is no account in Orwell – but as an expression of women's backwardness.

You cannot have an effective trade union of middle-class workers because in times of strikes almost every middle-class wife would be egging her husband on to blackleg and get the other fellow's job.

The unity of the working class, on the other hand, is assumed and cemented in the unity of the family, 'the fact that the working class combine and the middle class don't is

probably due to their different conceptions of the family.' Orwell is clearly innocent of the tension within working-class households in precisely the case of that litmus test of intra-class solidarity, the strike.

The history of the working class is, however, a minefield of negotiated settlements between men and women, not least in the classic case of the strike. Men's strikes have always carried the proverbial risk of the complaining wife who was never consulted – it is classically represented in *Salt of the Earth*, an American film of a Mexican-American miners' strike in which the women's communal demands were never given political priority by their men. The men's strike is lived by women as an economic hardship that they were never consulted about. But when the women propose taking over the picket line after the coalowners take out an injunction against the striking miners, the men balk; the men vote against it, but the women – having first fought for their right to vote – all vote for it. The women's tenacity becomes the source of the strike's survival, demanded from them initially as individuals and yet opposed when it takes the form of a collective intervention. Individual solidarity, of course, is always in the service of the men. Collective action among the women always carries the threat of an organised power beyond the men's control. Orwell's observations about class loyalty between the genders are just another example of his unsubstantiated sentiments.

Take a look at the gender breakdown in voting patterns. The gender gap is dramatic within the working class. It is among middle and upper-class voters that there is a remarkable political symmetry. The fact is that the upper class is united across gender and class in ways that the working class isn't. It is conventional wisdom that the reason for this is that the labour movement and the Labour Party have faced women with a contradiction: it demands their class solidarity while it sanctions their sexual subordination.

Part of the problem is that Orwell's eye never comes to rest on the culture of women, their concerns, their history, their movements. He only holds women to the filter of his own desire – or distaste. We've already seen how he makes women the bearers of his own class hatred. In his avowedly political work the snarling innuendo he reserves for his 'Brighton

ladies' and 'birth control' fanatics is rarely directed towards the figures of *real* power in capitalist societies – the judges, the parliamentarians and the capitalists. In fact, you are left with a sense of a society run, not only by the national family's old buffers, but of a society run by a febrile femininity, an army of doddering dowagers.

The point is that given his own centrality, and that of masculinity in Orwell's work, women are congratulated only when they stick to their men. The sexual filter surrounds all his female personae.

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four* we have working-class women represented by poor Mrs Parsons and a prole washerwoman. Mrs Parsons is a 'woman with a lined face and wispy hair, fiddling helplessly with the waste pipe', an infuriating person, always in the slough of a housewife's ruinous mess. And then there is the washerwoman whom Winston discovers during his fugitive flights into proletaria. He only begins to reflect on her with any respect when he inexplicably discovers the revolutionary potential of the proles. Her 'indefatigable voice' sings on, as she endlessly hangs out her washing. He watches her 'solid, contourless body, like a block of granite', quietly admiring 'her thick arms reaching up for the line, her powerful mare-like buttocks protruded.' She's as strong as a horse, an image which has echoes in *Animal Farm*, where as Raymond Williams reminds us, 'the speed of his figurative transition from animals to the proletariat is interesting – showing as it does a residue of thinking of the poor as animals: powerful but stupid.'

As Orwell's Winston watches the 'over-ripe turnip' of a washerwoman reach for the line 'it struck him for the first time that she was beautiful.' Her 'rasping red skin, bore the same relation to the body of a girl as the rose-hip to the rose. Why should the fruit be held inferior to the flower?'

So we start with the strong but stupid work-horse and move to a vision of a woman in labour: both as she labours solitarily and stoically, and as a symbol of fertility. As Winston muses on how he and his lover Julia will never bear children he reflects on this washerwoman-mother: 'The woman down there had no mind, she had only strong arms, a warm heart and a fertile belly.' Just like Orwell's panegyric on the miners, all brawn

and no brain, this quintessential proletarian woman is all belly and no brain. She has no culture and no consciousness worth contemplating.

His image of this woman echoes his more poetic representation of the miners as the archetypal proletarians, but there is more: her labour is solitary. Like the miners, her labour is elemental, basic: it is a fundamental, natural force. There is in these accounts no representation of subtlety, of craft and the consciousness associated with workers' combination. This representation of heroic manual labour is consonant with his celebration of her biology. It is only a short step from this to his formation of Julia's rebellion. Julia is Winston's sleeping partner in sedition. Her rebellion is essentially sexual. She's promiscuous, she's had hundreds of men and her subversion is sealed in an equation between corruption and sexuality. 'I hate purity, I hate goodness! I don't want any virtue to exist anywhere,' shouts Julia. That's the extent of her opposition to totalitarian puritanism. 'I'm corrupt to the bones.' Winston loves that, not merely her capacity for love, 'but the animal instinct, the simple undifferentiated desire: that was the force that would tear the party to pieces.'

In a curiously sexual politics, he counterposes Julia's revolutionary rapaciousness with his former wife Katherine's puritanism. Her party loyalty is expressed in her frigidity. Julia's delicious revolt is consummated in her illicit collection of make-up: throwing off the uniform of the party she dons the mantle of femininity.

But of course, the consequences of this reduction of Julia to her corrupt biology are to render her rebellion as something seething below the threshold of political consciousness. It is spontaneous only, and only so because it is only sexual. She's not interested in politics as such, even though she'll lay down her life for her revolt. When Winston finally gets his hands on Goldstein's bible of dissidence, he tells her urgently that they must read the forbidden text together. What does she do? She tells him to read it to her. And when he does? She falls asleep.

Women are akin to the proletarian man in Orwell's work, they are rendered natural rather than skilful, almost infantile in their unconsciousness rather than alert and organised. This

facilitates the elision between work and politics – the workers work in their natural state and they have their social existence still in a kind of natural state. The working class is pre-conscious, tasteless and mindless, child-like in its quest for immediate gratification. Yet for some reason, which Orwell never explains, the working class is the material of revolution. Perhaps because of some quasi-religious notion that the meek shall inherit the earth. The people store in their hearts, muscles and bellies the power to change the world. All body but no brain – and yet without the collective brain of politics, the Machiavellian ‘prince’ of the party, how is their strength to turn into consciousness? This is perhaps the greatest lacuna in Orwell’s work: Williams declares that ‘in a profound way, both the consciousness of the workers and the possibility of authentic revolution are denied.’ There is no sensitivity to the repertoire of tactics and strategies which the working-class movement, despite its many weaknesses, has deployed. The very absence of the problem of ideology and consciousness produces an assumed leap from brute strength to the power of the *will*.

That leaves him without anything to say about working-class politics as such, and its metamorphosis into revolutionary culture – you are always left with the feeling of contempt for ‘the masses’ and for the left intelligentsia. A thinking worker is never allowed to remain a member of the working class. It leaves him with insuperable contradictions – the workers are the revolutionary class and yet they aren’t. Thinking workers are part of the intelligentsia and therefore irrelevant. It’s as if, like so many members of his class, he can’t forgive the working-class thinkers for their capacity to think. For all that Orwell in *Wigan Pier* owns up to the partiality of his class perceptions, he never shares the privilege of *thought* with his new class allies.

If the working class are the material of revolution, they are never the makers of revolution, despite his rhetoric. And so he compromises. Slumped in his own contradictions, he gives the middle class the ticket. They’ve been elbowed out of their revolutionary credentials by pansy intellectuals on the one hand and by their rough neighbours on the council estates on the other. They become the radical Englishness, WASPs to the

last, moderate in all things. Not surprisingly, Orwell’s revolutionary transition is a remarkably banal, anglo-saxon prospectus. Looking now at his Six Point Programme in *The Lion and the Unicorn*, it is hard to see how it really differs from militant social democracy. English socialism, he says, will nationalise, it will equalise incomes, it will have its own catchy tune, it will leave the Christians alone, it will be sensible. What his programme doesn’t have, however, is any sense of *struggle*. The working class have created programmes like these, of course, but in Orwell’s scenario they haven’t produced his. At least, though, it would ‘give the working class something to fight for.’ He excludes the working class from history and fails to give it any place in the revolutionary cast, other than the supporting role, the proverbial extras.

In *Wigan Pier*, having exploited the services of the movement’s activists, Orwell thanks them with:

The English working class do not show much capacity for leadership, but they have a wonderful talent for organisation. The whole trade union movement testifies to this; so too the excellent working men’s clubs – really a sort of glorified co-operative pub, and splendidly organised ...

Elsewhere in *Wigan Pier* Orwell muses on the contradictions in English culture, between its polite respectability and its boozy, bawdy post-card culture. It all works towards an image of working-class men at play, training pigeons, swearing and gambling. Orwell thus summarises the working-class culture of ‘the warm-hearted, unthinking socialist, the typical working class socialist’ in a kind of bar talk. It produces a vision of the future, he says, ‘of present-day society with the worst abuses left out, and with interest centring on the same things as at present – family life, the pub, football and local politics.’

The roots are already in *Wigan Pier* for Winston’s shocking discovery of and disappointment in – the proles in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* when he sees a clutch of men peering at a newspaper, talking earnestly. Something must be up, thinks Winston. But no, they’re only looking for the lottery results.

Orwell anchors his own anti-economism in a critique in *The Lion and the Unicorn* of the trade-union politics which dominate

English Labourism. In this he was hardly original, as socialists and Marxists have always been pre-occupied by this English disease. But in Orwell, anti-economism is associated with a sense of the working class as not only myopic but degenerate. Just as Orwell finds no point of resistance rooted in the working class itself in *Wigan Pier*, so is there none in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

There is more to say about the problem of economism, however. For Orwell is not alone in stumbling across it only to be mystified by it. As he eloquently suggests, for the working class men's movement, socialism is capitalism with the worst abuses left out. I have to confess that Orwell's own political prospectus, outlined in *The Lion and the Unicorn*, seems barely any different. What neither he, nor the men's movement on the left seem to have registered is that this problem of economism may be associated with the masculinisation of working-class politics, its reduction to a men's movement. Orwell is a participant in this because he, too, writes women out of working-class history and politics. It isn't because working men are thick that they're economic, as Orwell seems to suggest, but it may be that the historic settlement between capital and the men's labour movement over the role of women reinforces economic individualism and defuses the social dimensions of socialist struggle. Certainly, that economic individualism is associated with the economic subordination of women, and not surprisingly it produces a politics which evacuates the terrain of private life, on the one hand, and issues outside the parameter of the wage contract on the other.

Orwell argues for a cultural revolution as the necessary ignition to political revolution in England, and his great virtue is his attempt to anchor that vision in the continuity of commonsense culture. But far from that taking him towards the culture of those constituencies marginalised in the hierarchy of WASP socialism, he seeks to radicalise those components of consensus claimed by the right – the steadfast pillars of family and patriotism.

As Williams shows, Orwell's starting point is his quest to belong, a quest which leads him towards an attempt to produce a unity called England and Englishness. His metaphor for nationhood is the family, the collectivity in which all know

their place in relation to each other, in which all are intelligible to each other. In the family, as in the nation, we all share the same concerns, the same interests and the same language. It is in the working-class family, above all, that we all come home to rest:

you breathe a warm, decent, deeply human atmosphere which is not easy to find elsewhere ... His home life seems to fall more naturally into a sane and comely shape. I have often been struck by the easy completeness, the perfect symmetry, as it were, of a working class interior at its best ...

It hangs together, he suggests, as a middle class family does, 'but the relationship is far less tyrannical.'

It is only in the context of feminist politics that the critique of the family clarifies it as a site of contradiction between men and women, as a settlement, always negotiated between unequals. Orwell's suggestive symmetry is exactly the simmering, seething volcano which has always, explicitly or implicitly, fuelled movements for women's economic, social and sexual independence. Feminism falsified the Orwellian romance with the proletarian family as an institution. It is not that feminism seeks to damn the strong bonds and loves lived within the family, but rather the *conditions* in which men and women negotiate their encounter with each other, their children and the rest of the world, based as they are on the principle of dominance and subordination. If, for feminism, that institution is challenged, then whither Orwell's appeal to patriotism?

Britain, however, was, and now is more than ever before, a richly cosmopolitan society. Orwell's 'patriotism' is an appeal to just one of those 'families', the English working class. In the aftermath of the family outing to the Falklands there is no guarantee that this patriotism would have a progressive hue.

There is an easy equation in his social democratic programme between *giving* the workers something to fight for and his sentimental construction of nationhood within the parameters of the family. His thesis of progressive patriotism works because his view of the nation is that of the family, an essentially unified whole, speaking the same language, united

by kin, not divided by class. Because the socialist family would have the right people in control, the working class would presumably remain as they are – the children.

Deirdre Beddoe

Hindrances and Help-Meets: Women in the Writings of George Orwell

This essay examines Orwell's portrayal of women in his writings. The structure which I have adopted is firstly to scrutinise his fictional female characters, as portrayed in his five novels, and secondly to look at the women – where they can be found – in his documentary works. This division into fiction and fact is paralleled by another division, i.e. the separation of women along class lines: middle-class women are to be found almost exclusively in his fiction and working-class women, with a few exceptions, in his documentary writing.

Before turning to Orwell's representation of women, a few points need to be clearly stated. Firstly, a pervasive anti-feminism is evident in Orwell's writing. In 1934 he wrote to a friend, Brenda Salkeld,

I had lunch yesterday with Dr Ede. He is a bit of a feminist and thinks that if a woman was brought up exactly like a man she would be able to throw a stone, construct a syllogism, keep a secret etc. He tells me that my anti-feminist views are probably due to Sadism! I have never read the Marquis de Sade's novels – they are unfortunately very hard to get hold of.¹

Brenda Salkeld, a friend of Orwell from Southwold days, described his attitude to women in general very succinctly. 'He didn't really like women', she said in a Third Programme broadcast in 1960.²