

- Vol.7, no.2, pp.85-95. Frank Tilsley made the same connection between patriarchy and fascism, domestic and European politics in *Little Tin God*, London, 1939.
- 47 G. Orwell, 'Not Counting Niggers', *Adelphi*, July 1939, *CEJL*, Vol.I, p.434.
- 48 Letter to Geoffrey Gorer, *ibid.*, p.318.
- 49 'Inside the Whale', *ibid.*, p.563. For an excellent discussion of Orwell as an ultra-leftist and as a propagandist see C. Fleay and M. Sanders, 'Becoming a Dragon: George Orwell and Propaganda', Middlesex Polytechnic *History Journal*, Vol.1 No.4, supplement spring 1984.
- 50 E.P. Thompson, *op.cit.*
- 51 G. Orwell, 'Arthur Koestler', *Focus*, 2, 1946 (*CEJL*, Vol.3, pp.271-2).

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Conjuring Leviathan: Orwell on the State

Orwell was a representative, as well as a controversial, figure – just as *Nineteen Eighty-Four* became a 'representative' as well as a prophetic book. Both came to 'stand for' something significant in the political and intellectual life of the age. This is not surprising. Though Orwell was only forty-six when he died, he lived through tumultuous times, was personally involved in events which became turning points in twentieth-century history, and engaged directly with themes and questions which have dominated much of our political thinking since. He saw, at first hand, the 'twilight of Empire' (in the Burma police), the 'Hungry Thirties' and the Depression. He witnessed the rise of fascism and made the archetypal anti-fascist response – he went to fight in Spain. He also saw at first hand the grim impact of Stalinism on the socialist movement in Europe. His political outlook was deeply shaped by the Second World War, and then by the 'Cold War'.

In addition to 'being there', Orwell also wrote about these events in that direct, plain-spoken, self-expressing 'documentary' style which became characteristic of him and of his period. Through this witnessing of events, he helped to *define* what those events meant as political experiences – giving each the stamp of his peculiarly 'English' point of view. In trying to come to terms, now, with what those events 'really meant', we are obliged to reckon, one way or another, with Orwell. That is why we keep asking, 'Was Orwell right?' A hopeless approach, since he was so often right *and* wrong, sometimes in succession,

more often in the same moment. Despite the claims on moral clarity and political honesty which his style makes for him, his political writing was shot through with ambiguities and, in the final analysis, deeply contradictory. For example, the best case of these 'boiled rabbits of the left' who are hesitant about sinking their differences with the right simply because they are both against fascism (and whom Orwell excoriates in that inexcusably casual brutalist phrase, 'My Country Right or Left') is, of course, none other than Orwell himself, writing in exactly that sceptical vein about the dangers of sinking differences only a few months earlier in 'Not Counting Niggers'. He was almost always partial: but the parts he saw, he saw *into* with an astonishing penetration. Even when wrong, he makes us think again about our certainties. That is why there are so many 'Orwells'. There were so many to choose from. In addition, there are those we have felt obliged to make up for ourselves. It now seems wholly wrong to read Orwell for his 'correctness'. We read him for his contradictoriness, for his vulnerability, his gift of exposure. Of the mountain of critical observations, favourable and dismissive, which exists about Orwell, the one observation which in my view comes closest to the truth is that of Raymond Williams:

Instead of flattening out the contradictions by choosing this or that tendency as the 'real' Orwell, or fragmenting them by separating this or that period or this or that genre, we ought to say that it is the paradoxes which are finally significant.¹

That, at any rate, is the approach adopted in this sketch of the evolution of Orwell's ideas about the state, which eventually found such powerful expression in the nightmare vision of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

Despite his socialism, Orwell was instinctively an *individualist*. He held independent, sometimes idiosyncratic views; he was always 'his own man'. George Woodcock, his anarchist friend, called him 'an iconoclast'. He fought with others for causes he believed in – but always in his own way. He hated to be told what to do, bossed around, regimented or made to toe the party line. He belonged to the *libertarian* socialist, rather than the collectivist socialist, tradition. This

had consequences for his instinctive attitudes towards authority, discipline and power – and hence for his view of the state. What he hated about the fellow-travelling, left-wing intellectuals was their willingness to subordinate themselves to the party line and to give up thinking for themselves. What he loved about Catalonia was the spirit of radical egalitarianism: 'no military ranks ... no titles or badges, no heel-clicking and no saluting.'² One of the greatest strengths of the English, he argued, was the weakness of its militarist tradition: the sergeant-major was a universally hated figure. 'Fascism' and 'totalitarianism' came to signify the jackboot, the torture chamber and the rubber truncheon: the iconography of naked, violent, unqualified state power, with the individual at its disposal – the basic structure of imagery in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The proles are unable to become the basis of the opposition to tyranny, and Winston and Julia go down alone, holding aloft the flickering candle of individual liberty, private emotion and personal dissent. Orwell's individualism gave him a basic orientation to politics which was fundamentally alien to the statist notion of 'bringing socialism to the masses' through the imposition of state dictatorship and, indeed, to the whole tradition which identified socialism with collectivism and state control. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* owed a great deal to Orwell's instinctive libertarianism.

Orwell also had a very independent political formation *as a socialist*, which distinguished him from the majority of intellectuals who turned to the left in the 1930s. For whereas they fell under the orbit of the Communist Party and the Popular Front, Orwell's formation was mainly in the orbit of the ILP, an independent party of the left, opposed to the statism of both the Labour Party and Stalinism: 'the only British party ... which aims at anything I should regard as Socialism';³ which Crick describes as 'left-wing, egalitarian, a strange mixture of secularized evangelism and non-Communist Marxism'.⁴ His route to Spain was via his ILP contacts – which is how he came to join POUM rather than a Communist battalion. He came to accept the ILP line that Stalin had betrayed the revolution and was holding back the pace of the social revolution in Spain. When he returned from Spain, he briefly joined the ILP in 1938, though he was an inveterate

non-joiner. Though he admitted that, in England, there was only one socialist party that 'really mattered' in a mass sense – the Labour Party – he never wrote or spoke of it seriously as a political vehicle which could bring about a fundamental shift of power.⁵ It was to the short-lived Commonwealth Party that he looked for leadership of the popular movement he thought was developing during the radicalizing years of the war.

On his return from Spain, the anarchists tried to recruit him, but he never formally joined them. However, undoubtedly, his experiences in Spain strengthened the natural 'anarchism' of his politics and this, too, carried with it implications for his attitude towards the state. Catalonia remained with him as a radical, egalitarian utopia. POUM's brand of oppositional communism and anarcho-syndicalism, and the egalitarian working-class character which Barcelona assumed under its inspiration, strongly appealed to him. It was the destruction of POUM and the imprisonment of anarchists and others, including many of his ILP friends, which conclusively demonstrated to him the consequences of the Stalinist betrayal of the revolution. These events deepened his anti-Communism. But they also set in motion one of the most powerful themes in Orwell's thinking (and in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*): the idea of the growing convergence between the fascist and the Stalinist dictatorships, and of totalitarianism as the basis for a new type of state formation.

When he tried to tell the truth about Spain as he saw it, once he had returned to England, he encountered a wall of silence and hostility: the left did not want to hear. It preferred to believe what he saw as a falsification of history. This is why, in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the question of ideological control (the control of thought and language), the erosion of historical memory, the falsification of records and the re-writing of history are so basic to his view of the essential mechanisms of the totalitarian state. It is why Winston – when he drinks a toast – puts 'the past' above all else. Subordination to the party could make intelligent people accept ludicrous ideas. But under 'totalitarianism' *doublethink* became a necessary way of life: '2 + 2 = 5'.

Were Orwell's views on the state 'Trotskyist'? The Spanish communists and the Comintern labelled POUM 'Trotskyist'.

When T.S. Eliot politely advised Fabers not to publish *Animal Farm*, he labelled Orwell's viewpoint 'Trotskyite'. Warburg, who did publish it, was incorrectly described as 'the Trotskyite publisher,'⁶ Yet Orwell was never a member of the Trotskyite movement, had little connection with its sects and, though impressed by some of Trotsky's writings, expressed doubts as to whether things would have been radically different had Trotsky's opposition to Stalin succeeded. Goldstein's 'testament' in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is clearly modelled on Trotsky's writings, as indeed was its dialectical style of argument and the description of Goldstein himself – 'long, thin nose, near the end of which a pair of spectacles was perched'. But Goldstein and his testament are composite creations, with elements of the American anarchist Emma Goldman, and the testament of the POUM leader Andrés Nin, as well as Trotsky himself. Goldstein's position in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Orwell's attitude to him remain ambiguous.

Though Orwell did not become a Trotskyist, he did take up, at different times, positions not dissimilar from some of those held by Trotskyists. One example of this is his wavering adherence to the thesis that the defeat of Franco and the deepening of the revolutionary process in Spain had to go hand in hand – a position which he later transposed into an argument about the war against Hitler, and the development of an English socialism.

Orwell's thesis about the growing convergence between East and West and the emergence of a new kind of state based on the rule of a powerful élite and a collectivized group – what he called at first 'oligarchical collectivism' – has many similarities with the theories of 'bureaucratic collectivism' which some Trotskyists later used to explain what had happened in the Soviet Union and to define the character of the Soviet state. For example, in the 1960s, a leading American ex-Trotskyist and Trotsky's translator and literary executor, Max Schachtman, published *The Bureaucratic Revolution* in which he tried to analyse the deformation of the Stalinist state using the theory of 'bureaucratic collectivism'. Even more directly influential for Orwell were the views of James Burnham who, in the 1940s, left the American Trotskyist movement and produced *The Managerial Revolution*, a book which depicted the drift

towards a system of managed collectivism which, he argued, pointed up the growing similarities between Hitler's Germany, Stalin's Russia and Roosevelt's New Deal.

Much of this reflected the evolution of Trotsky's thinking about the character of the Soviet dictatorship. After his exclusion from power, Trotsky had described the Soviet state as 'degenerated' through the growth of a privileged bureaucracy which found its political representative in Stalin. Economic backwardness, shortages and the isolation of the Russian revolution had produced, not a new type of capitalist ruling class but a bureaucratic caste. The state was drawn by the need to extract forced surpluses for modernization to exploit and coerce its own class. But from 1939 onwards (Schachtman gives as a critical reference Trotsky's 'The USSR in the War', published in the *New Internationalist* in November) Trotsky advanced the proposition that the Stalinist dictatorship was not, as he had supposed, a workers' state which had suffered temporary bureaucratic 'degeneration', but rather 'the first stage of a new exploiting society' which, on the basis of the nationalization of property, the party and state bureaucracy had become a new exploiting and dictatorial 'ruling class'. Splits between the different Trotskyist sects depended in part on which of Trotsky's theories were thought to be correct.

Orwell's thinking did not follow the intricate twists of these internal sectarian debates. But he began to envisage a 'new type of social system', with its roots in, but by-passing, its revolutionary and democratic origins, which would continue to exploit the masses on the basis of collectivized property and the oligarchical rule in a repressive state of a dictatorial élite. The lineaments of this system were clearly discernible in his description of Oceania in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

There is another way in which Orwell related to the question of 'Trotskyism'. In order to secure his rule, Stalin obliged the left opposition groups to confess that they had acted in ways which were 'objectively' inimical to the Soviet Union or were actually agents of Western capitalism. In Stalinist language, the term 'Trotskyite' became synonymous with 'enemy of the state': and the assault against these enemies within was exported into the Communist parties and movements throughout Europe – including Spain where Orwell

encountered it at first hand. Professor Crick in his biography records that Alba, a historian of Catalan Marxism, reported that three days before the POUM leader Andrés Nin was expelled from the Republican government (the beginning of the drive against POUM), the Soviet newspaper *Pravda* announced that, 'In Catalonia the elimination of Trotskyites and anarcho-syndicalists has begun. It will be carried out with the same energy as it was carried out in the Soviet Union.'⁷

In a remarkable passage on the manipulation of political language, which carries echoes down to our own day, Orwell reflects on how this particular syllogism – Trotskyist = revolutionary socialist = traitor – has been reworked by the left (as later the term 'Trotskyist' was to be mercilessly worked over by the right):

And what is a Trotskyist? This terrible word – in Spain at this moment you can be thrown into jail and kept there indefinitely, without trial, on the mere rumour that you are Trotskyist – is only beginning to be bandied to and fro in England. We shall be hearing more of it later. The word 'Trotskyist' (or 'Trotsky-fascist') is generally used to mean a disguised fascist who poses as an ultra-revolutionary in order to split the left-wing forces. But it derives its peculiar power from the fact that it means three separate things. It can mean one who, like Trotsky, wished for world revolution; or a member of the actual organization of which Trotsky is head (the only legitimate use of the word); or the disguised fascist already mentioned. The three meanings can be telescoped one into the other at will. Meaning No. 1 may or may not carry with it meaning No.2, and meaning No. 2 almost invariably carries with it meaning No. 3. Thus 'XY has been heard to speak favourably of world revolution; therefore he is a Trotskyist; therefore he is a fascist.' In Spain, to some extent even in England, *anyone* professing revolutionary socialism (i.e. professing the things the Communist Party professed until a few years ago) is under suspicion of being a Trotskyist in the pay of Franco or Hitler.⁸

Orwell thought that the Depression and the war had demonstrated the rottenness of capitalism and the need to plan. The war not only made the case for planning: it had

advanced it practically. Many did see, in rationing and production for the war effort, the emergence of a sort of 'war socialism'. Planning, however, was not a straightforward question for Orwell, because of its overtones of regimentation and state control.

This may explain why so many of the stark images of the Oceania landscape in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* reflect, not some grim Soviet future, but 'the drabness and monotony of the English industrial suburb, the "filthy and grimy and smelly" ugliness ... the food rationing and the government controls which he knew in war-time Britain.'⁹ The picture of society given in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Julian Symons noted in his review in the *Times Literary Supplement*,

has an awful plausibility. In some ways life does not differ very much from the life we live today. The pannikin of pinkish-gray stew, the hunk of bread and cube of cheese, the mug of milkless Victory coffee with its accompanying saccharine tablet – that is the kind of meal we very much remember ...¹⁰

This has the effect, as Symons noted, of involving us more directly, since so much of it is only an extension of familiar things: a 'near future'.

But was it only the stylistic requirements of naturalism which made Orwell express the totalitarian nightmare through the imagery of Britain's war-time rationing, planning and controls? It may not be far-fetched to see this in the context of a deeper ambiguity in the novel – the position he ascribes in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* to INGSOC, whose sacred principles are 'Newspeak, doublethink, the mutability of the past': even though INGSOC is clearly an acronym of 'English Socialism' – the term used very positively in 1940 for the kind of socialism which Orwell himself evoked so positively in *The Lion and the Unicorn*.

There is also the question of how much *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was a caricature of Soviet totalitarianism, and how far it is pointed at totalitarian tendencies latent in all the superstates, including Western capitalism. Orwell himself, in the statement he dictated to Warburg to clarify his intentions about *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, not only gives the latter reading his positive

warrant, but links it with the final elements in the chain of ideas which went into the making of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and his 'last thoughts' about the state. This final phase was dominated by the descent into the Cold War, the division of the world into the armed superstate blocs, each with their spheres of influence, the state of 'permanent war' generated between them as a requirement of their survival, the dependence of each on the arms race, and the frozen postures imposed by the advent of atomic weapons. Here Orwell is on the edge of a theory of 'exterminism' – to use E.P. Thompson's phrase – where the military complex has acquired a sort of autonomous, self-sustaining impetus of its own within the superstates.

George Orwell assumes that if such societies as he describes in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* come into being there will be several super states. This is fully dealt with in the relevant chapters of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. It is also discussed from a different angle by James Burnham in *The Managerial Revolution*. These super states will naturally be in opposition to each other or (a novel point) will pretend to be much more in opposition than in fact they are. Two of the principal super states will obviously be the Anglo-American world and Eurasia. If these two great blocs line up as mortal enemies it is obvious that the Anglo-Americans will not take the name of their opponents and will not dramatize themselves on the scene of history as Communists. Thus they will have to find a new name for themselves. The name suggested in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is of course Ingsoc, but in practice a wide range of choices is open. In the USA the phrase 'Americanism' or 'hundred per cent Americanism' is suitable and the qualifying adjective is as totalitarian as anyone could wish.¹¹

Clarification of this kind was necessary because even Warburg, when he first read the draft of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* – and unknown to Orwell – had gained precisely the impression which Orwell was so anxious to avoid:

The political system which prevails is Ingsoc = English Socialism. This I take to be a deliberate and sadistic attack on socialism and socialist parties generally. It seems to indicate a final breach

between Orwell and socialism, not the socialism of equality and human brotherhood which clearly Orwell no longer expects from socialist parties, but the socialism of Marxism and the managerial revolution. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is among other things an attack on Burnham's managerialism; and it is worth a cool million votes to the Conservative Party; it is imaginable that it might have a preface by Winston Churchill after whom its hero is named. *Nineteen Eighty-Four should be published as soon as possible, in June 1949.*¹²

Warburg was by no means alone in interpreting *Nineteen Eighty-Four* in this way. Sillen, in the American Communist journal *Masses and Mainstream*, might have been expected to gloss *Nineteen Eighty-Four* an 'anti-socialist polemic'. But more sympathetic critics, like Diana Trilling in *The Nation*, did see *Nineteen Eighty-Four* as 'an assimilation of the English Labour government to Soviet communism', documenting the thesis that 'by the fourth decade of the twentieth century all the main currents of political thought were authoritarian. Every new political theory ... led back to hierarchy and regimentation.' Golo Mann, the German historian, tried to separate Orwell from the charge of crude anti-communism – since *Life*, *Reader's Digest* and other American magazines had 'pounced upon *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and given the book the widest possible publicity as an anti-Communist pamphlet.' Shortly before his death, Orwell was obliged to clarify his intentions again to the United Automobile Workers, who wanted to recommend *Nineteen Eighty-Four* to their members. In the press release quoted above Orwell had emphasised that the book was a *warning* rather than prophecy: 'The moral is ... *Don't let it happen!*'¹³

Orwell hated everything to do with fascism from the beginning. Everything in his life to that date predisposed him to do so. After the emergence of Stalinism in the Soviet Union, the purges and the Moscow Trials, he came to hate everything that Stalinism stood for, too. He became convinced that the 'reign of terror, forcible suppression of political parties, a stifling censorship of the press, ceaseless espionage and mass imprisonment without trial' which he had seen perpetrated by both the fascists and by some Communists in Spain meant that,

paradoxically, Communism too had become 'a counter-revolutionary force'.¹⁴ His concept of 'totalitarianism' was born out of this equation: the growing similarities in the tendencies and character of types of state which appear superficially to belong to different species.

Orwell knew that fascist Germany and Stalinist Russia had different economic, political and ideological systems and subscribed to totally opposed political philosophies: the record of anti-fascist struggle by Communists throughout Europe in the 1930s was well documented. Orwell argued that the two societies had begun to reveal striking similarities at the level of their *underlying tendencies*. Later, he came to include Western-style monopoly capitalism as belonging to the same 'family' of states, exhibiting the same underlying dynamic. It therefore became possible to speak of 'totalitarianism' as a general historical movement towards a distinctive, new, terrifying *type* of state.

For Orwell, 'totalitarianism' was a loose, general concept: more a political image than an analytic construct. Yet it is interesting that when he reviewed a book about the Soviet Union called *Assignment in Utopia* by Eugene Lyons (a United States Agency correspondent), Orwell began with what he now regarded as the difficult but key question: 'Is it socialism or is it a peculiarly vicious form of state capitalism? ... The system that Mr Lyons describes does not seem to be so very different from fascism.'¹⁵ This statement, however, did not lead Orwell on to an analysis of the similarities and differences in economic, social and political structures between the three types of state. The discussion pivots instead around a set of images dominated by a single element: the repressive character and the reign of terror on which totalitarian states are founded. 'If you want a picture of the future of humanity imagine a boot stamping on a human face – for ever.'

Another indication of the drift of his thinking is found in his reviews of the work of Franz Borkenau. In July 1937 he reviewed Borkenau's justly famous book, *The Spanish Cockpit*, very favourably because it matched his own experiences in Catalonia. At that time he thought Borkenau was simply a distinguished observer of the international scene. In fact he was an Austrian Communist who had been a Comintern agent.

Borkenau's history, *The Communist International*, which Orwell reviewed in 1938, documents the impact and working out of Comintern policy on other European parties, including the Spanish. Orwell's review of Borkenau's *The Totalitarian Enemy* (1940) explored a new set of themes: the 'striking resemblance between the German and Russian régimes', the friendships between opposites 'cemented in blood' (the Hitler-Stalin pact), and the fact that 'The two régimes, having started from opposite ends, are rapidly evolving towards the same system – a form of oligarchical collectivism.'¹⁶ One of the main forces driving these two régimes towards one another, he added, is the 'socialistic' effect of preparing for war.

'Oligarchical collectivism' is a term which belongs to a 'family' of concepts which were used, especially in Marxist debate, to define the character of the Soviet Union and, sometimes, other types of social system. 'Oligarchical' refers to the fact that power is held in and wielded by a small, compact but powerful *élite*. 'Collectivism' signifies the 'corporate', planned, centralized and integrated nature of the economy, and the massive and direct involvement of the state in a much expanded role in the economy and society. 'Collectivism' was, historically, an ambiguous concept, linked with but by no means identical to 'socialism'. It was assumed that 'socialist' states would be planned, centralized and integrated, with expanded state regulation, and therefore they would be 'collectivist' in character. But historical 'collectivism' had also been at the turn of the century a programme for national regeneration sponsored by the social-imperialist right as a way of integrating the classes into an organic conception of the nation, and as an alternative to both classical *laissez-faire* and redistributive, egalitarian socialism.

At the turn of the century, imperialists and tariff-reformers, as well as the Fabians, were collectivists without being egalitarian or democratic. Many believed that the need to make society more efficient, followed by the need to organize for war and to achieve national mobilization, were the factors which most powerfully shifted the old *laissez-faire* capitalism in a 'collectivist' direction.

The term 'oligarchical collectivism' thus raises a number of questions about Orwell's ideas about the state at this time. For

in addition to characterizing the Soviet state, it refers to the proposition that 'advanced' or 'monopoly' capitalism could move, at the planning/collectivist level, in the direction of socialism and yet preserve its most 'capitalistic' features, e.g. the exploitation of waged labour; and that so-called 'communist' or 'socialist' societies could similarly become state-collectives and planned in character without delivering socialism, in the sense of ending the exploitation of the masses.

In his BBC broadcast 'Literature and Totalitarianism', Orwell remarked that 'When one mentions totalitarianism one thinks immediately of Germany, Russia, Italy, but I think one must face the risk that this phenomenon is going to be world-wide'.¹⁷ This is the second part of the equation on which the 'totalitarianism' thesis was based: the proposition that fascism, Stalinism and capitalism in its monopoly phase all belonged to a new and distinctive species of totalitarian state. One of the places where this line of argument is most fully developed is in Orwell's essay on James Burnham's *The Managerial Revolution*, a book premised precisely on such a thesis. Orwell thought that Burnham had greatly exaggerated some things but that, in his identification of basic trends and tendencies across the globe, Burnham was broadly correct. (Orwell did not, of course, share Burnham's affirmative attitude towards the growth of 'managerialism'.) Orwell summarized Burnham's thesis as follows:

Capitalism is disappearing, but socialism is not replacing it. What is now arising is a new kind of planned, centralized society which will be neither capitalist nor, in any accepted sense of the word, democratic. The rulers of this society will be the people who effectively control the means of production: that is, business executives, technicians, bureaucrats and soldiers, lumped together by Burnham under the name of 'managers'. These people will eliminate the old capitalist class, crush the working class, and so organize society that all power and economic privilege remain in their own hands. Private property rights will be abolished, but common ownership will not be established. The new 'managerial' societies will not consist of a patchwork of small, independent states, but of great super-states grouped round the main industrial centres ...¹⁸

Burnham himself gave an account of the evolution of the managerialism thesis in his Preface to *The Managerial Revolution*. He had been a member of a Trotskyist organization in the 1930s – the ‘Fourth International’ – and originally subscribed to the analysis of the character of the Soviet state which at that time carried Trotsky’s imprimatur. This was that, though Stalinism represented a bureaucratic dictatorship, the Soviet Union was still a ‘degenerated workers’ state or proletarian dictatorship, and therefore the Soviet régime still had to be defended by those who wished to preserve the victories achieved by the Bolshevik revolution. Burnham says that the thesis began to disintegrate for him as soon as he attempted to fit the formulas to reality. For the workers, as far as he could see, were as far away from wielding power as they had been under the Tsar, the country was ruled by a dictatorial party apparatus backed by the police, and the country did not appear to be moving in a socialist direction. How, then, were Marxists to understand and analyse the nature of the Soviet state?

In classical Marxist terms, there could only be two possible types of state in the modern industrialized world: a capitalist/bourgeois state or socialist/workers’ state (leading eventually to communism and the withering away of the state). Burnham came to the conclusion that, since the Soviet Union was neither of these, there must be in embryo a ‘new form of society’, perhaps combining features of both but representing a novel line of development. This he christened ‘managerialist’. Once established, there was no reason to restrict its application to the Soviet Union. It became possible

to interpret long-term structural developments in other major nations as moving, though by different paths, towards the same or a similar form. The analogies were especially convincing in the case of Nazi Germany and New Deal America. I thus arrived at a general hypothesis that world society is in the midst of a major social transformation that may be called ‘the managerial revolution’.¹⁹

The most novel aspect of this formulation is that Burnham considered Roosevelt’s New Deal to be also a very primitive

movement in the ‘managerial’ direction. By the end, ‘The future of the US’ (as his final chapter was called) had become the centrepiece of Burnham’s preoccupations.

This therefore connects the debate, and Orwell’s thinking, not only with attempts to understand the evolution of the exceptional fascist and communist states, but also with the analysis of the developed capitalist industrial system. Within Marxist circles this debate began with Lenin’s attempt, in his theory of the ‘imperialist’ stage of capitalist development, to establish Marxist terms for analysing the post *laissez-faire* phase of monopoly capitalism, drawing on such works as Hilferding’s studies of finance capital, Bukharin’s thesis concerning the fusion of state and private capital, and Hobson’s study of capitalism and the imperialist system.

The phrase ‘state capitalism’ was not, of course, restricted to this analysis of twentieth-century capitalism. Lenin had favourably characterized his New Economic Policy – a partial retreat from full collectivization in the Soviet Union after 1921 – as ‘state capitalist’, on the model of the German state’s superintendence of private capital in the interest of the nation during the First World War. But the Menshevik critics who believed that the phase of capitalist development could not be short-circuited in the Soviet Union used the term to describe the Bolshevik system as such; and later Trotskyists also appropriated the concept. (Tony Ciff’s view that after 1928 capitalism had been restored in the Soviet Union through the state’s role in forcing through industrialization is one of the most elaborated of these appropriations.) The concept therefore progressively acquired a critical edge.

The debate, however, was not restricted to Marxist circles. With the growth of an economy dominated by large-scale corporate enterprises, and the development – in the period of the ‘New Deal’ under Roosevelt – of much greater state intervention and federal regulation of the economy as a remedy for recurrent economic crises, there also developed amongst ‘bourgeois’ economists and theorists a debate about the character of modern capitalism. The principal ways in which corporate capitalist economies were said to differ from the ‘classic’ *laissez-faire* model were in a) the extent of state intervention; b) the decreasing role of the private capitalist

entrepreneur and of the 'private ownership' of industrial property; c) the growth of 'corporate' property, sometimes including the state ownership of basic industries; and d) the separation of 'ownership' from 'control'. The *effective* control, it was argued, now rested not with the capitalist class as such but with the *managers*, who may or may not own large chunks of corporate property, but who have a massive stake in the long-term accumulation of capital, the strategic management of corporate policies and enterprises, who derive immense wealth, privilege and power from their control of the means of production, and who share a 'collectivist' and 'capitalist planning' ideology with their counterparts in the expanding state bureaucracy with which they are increasingly connected.

In support of his rather speculative and 'Machiavellian' propositions. Burnham developed another important aspect to his theory: namely, a critique of the classic argument that ownership of capital and property – capitalist 'property-rights' – is the sufficient guarantee of a capitalist system; and that, therefore, the abolition of those property rights is a sufficient guarantee that the society is becoming socialist. Burnham argues against this syllogism. It is possible, he says, for property rights to be abolished – as they have been in the Soviet Union and in those parts of capitalist economies with large, nationalized or state-owned sectors – and yet for the *control* over the means of production to continue to be concentrated in the hands of a small élite, with no passage of power to the working class.

Another intriguing aspect of Burnham's case is how he deals with the 'New Deal'. For, though the New Deal did mark an important transition point in the development of American capitalism, it clearly differed radically from the line of development of either Nazi Germany or the Soviet Union. He recognized the New Deal as 'the most primitive and least organised' of the managerialisms. But, he argued, there was a historical bond, even if not a formal identity, between Stalinism, fascism and 'New Dealism', in their common movement away from competitive capitalism, their reliance on planning and the state and their corporate, managerialist, 'anti-capitalist' ideologies. Above all, he argued, 'the direction is what is all-important; and New Dealism points in the same

direction as the others.'²⁰ This may seem far-fetched in retrospect. But it may not be so clear to us now, after decades of 'mixed economies', 'welfare capitalism', corporatist bargaining and Keynesianism, just how radical a departure the New Deal was, and how distinctive were the corporate and political ideologies which cohered around it. It was the first real attempt to set Keynesian theories to work in a practical way, in a large-scale advanced capitalist economy, as a remedy against recession, unemployment and slump. Its planning and collectivist ideology was a radical modification of the 'liberal-free-enterprise' ideology which has always been so strong in the US. It did appear to be a sort of half-way house between capitalism and socialism or, like Keynesianism itself, the reforms required by the system to prevent and forestall more wide-ranging structural changes. The difference is that whereas, according to the latter view, the New Deal was a 'historic compromise' between two fundamentally alternative systems – a compromise sealed by the evolution of the new corporate capitalist forms – Burnham saw such a hybrid not as reverting to one or other of the fundamental models, but rather as *going forwards* to the evolution of a new type, a new stage.

When Orwell came back to Burnham, in 1947 (in a review of his *The Struggle for the World*), it was to note and reflect on a major development of the 'managerialist' or 'totalitarian' thesis.²¹ For in that book, Burnham projects his speculative theses about the state on to the world stage. It concerns the world of rival armed blocs, of East vs West, the Cold War, above all the shadow of atomic weapons and the arms race. Again, it parallels, to some extent, the direction of Orwell's own thinking, though he continued to have a quite different attitude towards the developments which Burnham described. Burnham's argument here – a familiar doomy prediction amongst the Cold War converts – was that world Communism was well on the way to world domination. This would mean 'not so much conquest by Russia as conquest by a special form of social organization' – a system which is 'technically collectivist, but concentrates all power in a very few hands, is based on forced labour and eliminates all real or imaginary opponents by means of terrorism.'²²

It does not take a moment to see that the managerial/totalitarian society, which Burnham was predicting as the future of all major societies, has now been conveniently assigned to Communism *alone*; and that, unpredictably, Burnham has – as Orwell wryly noted – under the pressure of the Cold War, reverted to the position of ‘champion of old-style democracy’ which he believes has somehow survived all the transitions he described and is still alive and well in the United States. Indeed, ‘old-style democracy seems somewhat optimistic a description, because Burnham, with his characteristic intemperateness, now recommends that the only option open to the US is to seize the initiative and establish ‘what amounts to a world empire now’; the first move of which should be a pre-emptive nuclear strike against the Soviet Union. It was a strange and unpredictable place for the theory of ‘managerialism’ to end. It must be added that a number of ex-Trotskyists, whose anti-Communism became their whole political *raison d'être*, coupled with their overwhelming antipathy to and hatred of the Soviet Union, did, under the multiple pressures of the Cold War, tread a very similar path, and end up on the extreme right of the American political and strategic-policy spectrum.

Orwell did not go in Burnham’s direction in this respect. He reported that he had heard many conversations in Britain about the division of the world between two camps dominated by the USA and the USSR, which ended with the reluctant admission, ‘Oh well, of course, if one had to choose, there’s no question about it – America.’ He himself moved increasingly into the position of feeling trapped between these alternating and competing world systems, with much that he believed in crushed out of existence by both. This is another way of saying that Orwell remained more faithful to the pessimistic conclusion that there might be very little to choose between ‘Eurasia’ and ‘Oceania’. That is what ultimately defined the structure of thought, the play of concepts and the deep pessimism which underpinned *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The novel was predicated on the stark proposition: ‘what if totalitarianism is the future of all societies?’

The centre-piece of this conception of a general totalitarian form of the modern state was the concept, not of class, but of

power. Power came to have *two* principal dimensions for Orwell: terror and torture – the apparatus of organized violence and ‘thought control’ or what Orwell called in his review of Bertrand Russell’s *Power*, ‘the huge system of organized lying upon which dictators depend’.²³ In another review on Soviet government, Orwell concluded a discussion of aspects of Russian modernization and the standard of living of the average Soviet citizen with a very strong emphasis on ‘something entirely unprecedented’ about modern dictatorships:

The radio, press-censorship, standardized education and the secret police have altered everything. Mass suggestion is a science of the last twenty years and we do not yet know how successful it will be.²⁴

The ideological dimension thus played an increasingly important role in Orwell’s use of the totalitarian concept. It was also, subsequently, elaborated in theoretical terms by other writers of whom, at this stage, Orwell seems to have had little or no knowledge. Theorists of the neo-Marxist ‘Frankfurt School’, such as Herbert Marcuse or Theodor Adorno, for example, who were expelled from Germany by the Nazis and emigrated to the USA, argued later that the manipulation of propaganda and the exploitation of the mass mentality by powerful élites had been substantially enhanced by the new media of propaganda and communication. The Nazis particularly had brought the art of mass propaganda to a high pitch of development. But, they argued, this danger was also present, if in a different form, in the mass culture of Western capitalist societies like Britain and the USA. This argument also drew attention to the concentration of power in the hands of a small élite, the breakdown of older, class-based social systems into new kinds of division between ‘élites’ and ‘masses’, the power of élites in manipulating mass consciousness through the use of authoritarian symbols – like the Fuehrer, Stalin, or ‘Big Brother’.

Orwell wrote a great deal – and with insight – about popular culture. But when he expanded on the thought control aspect of ‘totalitarianism’ he did so less in relation to ‘mass culture’

and more in terms of rather more traditional themes: the place of the writer in a totalitarian world; the threats to the writer's individual voice; the corruption of political language; the falsification of historical records, the obliteration of the memory of the past and the ubiquitous presence of *doublethink*. His essay 'Looking Back on the Spanish Civil War' (1942) contained a lengthy reflection on the fact that 'the very concept of objective truth is fading out of the world' and 'the chances are that those lies, or at any rate, similar lies will pass into history'.²⁵ It toyed with speculation about a 'nightmare world' in which 'the Leader or some ruling clique controls not only the future but *the past*'.²⁶ By 1947, when Orwell's plans for *Nineteen Eighty-Four* were developing fast, the 'organized lying' is conceived as 'something integral to totalitarianism', which demands the 'continuous alteration of the past', and a 'schizophrenic system of thought, in which the laws of common sense ... could be disregarded' by some, and people would see nothing wrong in 'falsifying an historical fact'.²⁷ The idea of writing books by machinery which crops up again in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is already here – and on this occasion the description of totalitarianism steps over very easily into a caricature of contemporary culture in the West.²⁸ The distinctions – fascism, Stalinism, capitalism – were beginning to break down.

Interestingly, there was a passing encounter between Orwell and someone who did espouse a view close to that, not from the ex-Trotskyist right, but from a classic liberal position. The theme comes through very powerfully in Orwell's review of Hayek's *Road to Serfdom*, which appeared in 1944. This book, by the distinguished European liberal philosopher, was a vigorous denunciation of the drift into 'despotism' taking place in all directions, and an eloquent restatement and defence of *laissez-faire* capitalism and liberalism, which has become a *locus classicus* of modern neo-liberalism. In the 1970s and 1980s Hayek became one of the most powerful ideologues of the 'New Right' and a philosophical precursor of Thatcherism.

Orwell summarized his argument thus:

By bringing the whole of life under the control of the state,

socialism necessarily gives power to an inner ring of bureaucrats, who in almost every case will be men who want power for its own sake and will stick at nothing in order to retain it. Britain, he says, is now going the same road as Germany, with the left-wing intelligentsia in the van and the Tory Party a good second. The only salvation lies in returning to an unplanned economy, free competition, and emphasis on liberty rather than on security.²⁹

Underlying Hayek's argument is the premise that the freedoms of the individual (liberty) and free market competitive capitalism (the market) are identical, mutually interdependent and indivisible. Any movement away from them is a small step on the primrose path to totalitarianism. Hayek accepts the Orwell/Burnham thesis that fascism and communism have come to resemble one another more and more. But Orwell thought that it was Hayek's aim to show that the post-war attempt to introduce the welfare state and centralized planning into a liberal-democratic type of system also opens the floodgates to a totalitarian future.

Hayek argues that in order to ensure the wide consensus necessary for planning, the state will need to use the means of education and information to *create* a unity of purpose. As it replaces the hidden hand of the market – the ideal way of reconciling competing interest for Hayek – processes of planning will progressively spill over, from the strictly economic, into all other aspects of society. Planning must, for these reasons, become 'total' – and, pivoting, so to speak, on this double meaning of the word, Hayek says that democratic planning will thus become increasingly totalitarian. So, from the loftiest of motives, the attempt to supercede the market will have driven us slowly down the same path as the other 'totalitarianisms': 'The road to serfdom'. The similarities between this argument and Mrs Thatcher's charge of 'creeping state socialism' are obvious.

Orwell's response is to argue that there is little evidence of the old 'free market' existing, even if that were what we wanted, since the predominant trend in capitalist economies was *not* towards liberty, competition and choice but towards concentration and monopoly.

Considered in the way outlined here, we can see that

Orwell's ideas about the state evolved against a rich theoretical and political background, and engaged questions and issues which, more than ever, lie at the centre of contemporary preoccupations. This sketch of the evolution of his ideas should also help us to approach *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and Orwell's controversial position in the closing years of his life in a way significantly different from that which has become conventional wisdom on the left. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* was, of course, a work of imaginative fiction, a 'book of anticipations', not a text in political theory; and Orwell's characteristic mode was deeply antipathetic to anything overtly abstract, analytic or intellectual. (His overt anti-intellectualism is one of his most consistent, and least attractive qualities.) One cannot therefore expect to disinter fully-formed explanatory theories from Orwell's fictional and journalistic writing. On the other hand, Orwell was a deeply political animal and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, right or wrong, was no mere exercise in literary utopianism. He was always thinking about the big, troubling questions of his time, trying to record and explain the contradictory pressures of being alive as a certain kind of socialist at one of the cross-roads of history. His work, therefore, gives evidence not of theory but of *thinking*.

It is clear, for example, that although *Nineteen Eighty-Four* had deep roots in Orwell's anti-Communism, his experience of Stalinism and his conviction of the revolution betrayed, its central impetus is not exclusively an attack on Soviet Communism, or even the failure of the promise of socialism, but something else: a general historical tendency in modern states – the collectivizing impetus and its fateful consequences – which he regarded as well-advanced in Communist and post-liberal capitalist societies alike. This led him to depict, not a country or even a continent, but a whole world system in the inexorable grasp of a new type of authoritarian system. Also, if it is true, on the one hand, that Orwell was driven by his experiences to the very edge (and some would argue over the edge) of 'cold warriorism' as the world sharply polarized in the great freeze of the 1940s, he was also one of the first people to stare the grim realities of the modern arms race in the face, and one of the first to see how the Cold War would strengthen and underpin the authoritarian tendencies in *both* major camps as

an inevitable consequence of that mutual interdependence in the great dance of the dead we call deterrence.

What, then, of the general accuracy and cogency of his thinking on the question of the state? On a whole host of points Orwell's thinking can be shown to be interesting, insightful, even original, in some ways prophetic – but deeply flawed, one-sided, or just plain wrong. For example, convergence theory had its hey-day but quickly lost its explanatory power. Overemphasizing the common features arising from the process of technologically-advanced industrial development, it flattened out all pertinent the historical differences which are required to explain the linked but quite distinctive historical evolutions within the capitalist and communist 'families' of state.

Even more flawed was Orwell's isolation of the *power* principle from the whole complex of social relations which make up an actual, working social formation. Social relations have a reduced, abstracted, disembodied character in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The system works by the exercise of power and violence alone, as ends in themselves. This is a useful imaginative licence or exaggeration to make a polemical point, but of course it is not an adequate account of any society or state. Even the most totalitarian state we know is rooted in a complex of class and other social relations and cannot be adequately explained as a system of power alone. There is something, after all, to Isaac Deutscher's complaint of a lack of analytic or explanatory complexity in Orwell's thinking, in spite of the 'testament' – of a totalitarianism abstracted out of its embedding within a set of social relations or a well defined economic or class system. A criticism which led Deutscher, unfairly, to say that Orwell tells us 'how' totalitarianism works but not 'why' – an absence which leads, Deutscher argued, to a 'disembodied sadism'. This is something more than the usual, accurate complaint that, though Orwell used some of the language and concepts of Marxism, his analysis of the state was not deeply informed by it. The criticism of 'disembodied sadism' points to another, related, weakness: the concentration on *coercion* as the principle modality of the totalitarian state, and the absence of the equally puzzling and in some ways more lethal question of the consent of the masses to power under the

'normal' régime of the liberal democratic capitalist state.

All that and more having been conceded, one is also obliged – taking his thinking about the state in its wider context – to acknowledge how piercingly Orwell penetrates to the heart of some of the key questions for the left, not just in his time but in *ours*. The problem of the state and the linked questions of the disciplinary power of the state apparatuses and the bureaucracy is the great unsolved question both of actual-existing socialism *and* of democratic socialism itself. The great paradox remains: it is only through the intervention of the state that the great processes of capitalist accumulation and the market can be modified or transformed; but then the state itself becomes a weight of authority and power resting on the backs of the people, an instrument of their disciplining and exploitation, with a life of its own. The failure of the Soviet model, the disintegration of the reformist tradition and the monopolistic, corporatist and authoritarian tendencies within modern capitalism all, from their different and opposed points in the political spectrum, come back to rest on the unresolved enigma of the state.

Orwell may not have been correct to follow the line of thought which traced all these divergent paths to the same, mono-causal point of origin – totalitarianism; but at a less literal level he was not wrong in what he glimpsed of certain historical tendencies in the advanced societies of the world, and of the fatal incipient trend toward authoritarianism built deep into the very competitive process itself in post-liberal capitalist societies, which has become more, not less, apparent as the century advances. The *statist* character of socialism, in any of its actual-existing varieties – East and West – remains one of the greatest unsolved problems for the left, one of the greatest inhibitions to the renewal of socialism in our time – and the right's greatest, most persuasive weapon.

Orwell did not 'solve' the problem, either; but he pointed straight at it and hence enables us to learn from him – even, as Brecht put it, from his 'bad side'.

Notes

- 1 Raymond Williams, *Orwell*, London, 1971, p. 87.
- 2 Bernard Crick, *George Orwell: A Life*, Harmondsworth, 1982, p. 322, referred to hereafter as '*A Life*'. *Homage to Catalonia*, Harmondsworth, 1970, p. 29.
- 3 S. Orwell and I. Angus (eds.), *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, Vol. 1, Harmondsworth, 1970, p. 374, referred to hereafter as '*CEJL*'.
- 4 *A Life*, pp. 252-3.
- 5 *CEJL*, Vol. 2, p. 113.
- 6 *A Life*, p. 339.
- 7 Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 329.
- 8 'Spilling the Spanish Beans' in *CEJL*, Vol. 1, pp. 306-7.
- 9 Isaac Deutscher, *Heretics and Renegades*, London, 1955, p. 43.
- 10 In J. Meyers (ed.), *George Orwell: The Critical Heritage*, London, 1975, p. 252.
- 11 Part of the text of a clarificatory press release based on notes prepared by Orwell and issued by Secker & Warburg, quoted in *A Life*, p. 566.
- 12 Frederic Warburg in J. Meyers (ed.), *op.cit.*, p. 248.
- 13 *A Life*, p. 566.
- 14 *CEJL*, Vol. 1, p. 302.
- 15 *CEJL*, Vol. 1, pp. 369-70.
- 16 *CEJL*, Vol. 2, pp. 40-1.
- 17 *CEJL*, Vol. 2, p. 162.
- 18 *CEJL*, Vol. 4, p. 192.
- 19 James Burnham, *The Managerial Revolution*, London, 1960, p. vi.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p. 197.
- 21 *CEJL*, Vol. 4, p. 360.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 361.
- 23 *CEJL*, Vol. 1, p. 414.
- 24 *CEJL*, Vol. 1, p. 419.
- 25 *CEJL*, Vol. 2, p. 295.
- 26 *Ibid.*, p. 297.
- 27 *CEJL*, Vol. 4, pp. 85-6.
- 28 *Ibid.*, pp. 92-3.
- 29 *CEJL*, Vol. 3, p. 143.