

GEORGE ORWELL – THE SOCIAL DEMOCRAT

Mihaela Gazioglu

PhD Student, "Al. Ioan Cuza" University of Iași

Abstract: George Orwell's writings are mainly based on the experience he sought by deeply getting involved in the economic, social, political, and historical problems of his time. As a post war era writer, he shows almost instinctively a mood for revolt against the existing order of ideas and of facts. His strong determination is to be sincere to the degree of being brutal and cruel on subjects such as war politics, social values, the ruling and the working classes or language. He displays an outstanding desire for an acute, uncompromising analysis of the society he was living in and he achieves his purpose by boldly tackling issues regarding socialism, education or even the role of the English intelligentsia. He does all these on the condition that he can create awareness and in order to correct injustices, to support the truth and to warn others about the imminent dangers to their freedom.

Keywords: working class, politics, class distinction, language, socialism

George Orwell made himself central and deeply immersed recorder of the social, political and historical problems of the age. He had known poverty and pain, challenged social identification, and came to speak not only for the unemployed and deprived of Depression Britain but for the new life of thirties British suburbia with all its respectable constraints and limitations. The mixture of fiction, documentary and autobiography in his works has made Orwell's whole experience contribute to the impression of his integrity.

Politics and Language

Orwell sees the falsification of truth as an evil way of realizing totalitarianism. Whenever there is a discrepancy between the official view and the reality, the state distorts the facts so as to make them conform to the official one. Orwell brings up this matter in various places in his writings, but totalitarianism and the distortion of facts through controlling language and extensive propaganda are the main themes of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

He notices the abuse of language to veil the truth: “the Hitlers and the Stalins find murder necessary, but they don’t advertise their callousness, and they don’t speak of it as murder; it is “liquidation”, “elimination” or some other soothing phrase (...) To write in plain, vigorous language one has to think fearlessly, and if one thinks fearlessly one cannot be politically orthodox.”¹

In order to understand Orwell’s idea and his concerns related to language, it would be proper to remember his famous essay *Politics and the English Language*.

He discusses the bad condition of English discourse and exposes the prevalent diseases that afflict it: “Modern English prose consists less and less of ‘words’ chosen for the sake of their meaning, and more and more of ‘phrases’ tacked together like the sections of a prefabricated hen-house.”² In *Politics and the English Language*, Orwell catalogues and analyzes various types of rhetorical “swindles and perversions,” concluding that “the enemy of clear language is insincerity. When there is a gap between one’s real and one’s declared aims, one turns, as it were, instinctively to long words and exhausted idioms, like a cuttlefish squirting out ink.” He continues: “Political language- and with variations this is true of all political parties, from Conservatives to Anarchists- is designed to make lies truthful and murder respectable, and to give appearance of solidity to pure wind. In our time, political speech and writing are largely the defense of the indefensible. Thus, political language has to consist largely of euphemism, question begging, and sheer cloudy vagueness.”³

To him the reason why English gets corrupted is that: “A man may take to drink because he feels himself to be a failure, and then fail all the more completely because he drinks. It is

¹Orwell, George. *Shooting an Elephant and Other Essays*, Penguin Modern Classics, London, 2003, p.341

²Orwell, George. *Politics and the English Language*, Penguin Classics, London, 2002, p.56

³ Ibid. p.62

rather the same thing that is happening to the English language. It becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts.”⁴

Intellectual liberty

Orwell’s insistence on the freedom of thought is prevalent in all his writings. If abuse of language is one reason for the loss of intellectual liberty, the other is restrictions imposed upon the writer from outside. According to Orwell, intellectual liberty is threatened by two enemies: totalitarianism and, together, monopoly and bureaucracy.

He is rightly concerned about the press being controlled by a group of people. As a writer who relies on his mental labour, he hates being checked on by someone who will impose him to modify his thoughts, his writings so as to conform with the wishes of the rich owner of the media. On the one hand he has to earn his living on selling his brain-works, on the other, he has to remain loyal to his own beliefs and convictions. In his essay *The Prevention of Literature* he defines the writing job done solely out of concern for making a living as “hackwork”: “Any writer or journalist who wants to retain his integrity finds himself thwarted by the general drift of society rather than by active persecution. The sort of things that are working against him are the concentration of the press in the hands of a few rich men, the grip of monopoly on radio and the films, the unwillingness of the public to spend money on books, making it necessary for nearly every writer to earn part of his living by hackwork (...) which help the writer to keep alive but also waste his time and dictate his opinions.”⁵

His insistence on freedom of thought and his objection to the concentration of the press in the hands of a few rich men reveal his attitude toward Marxism. Although he was a socialist in the sense that means of production is owned by the state, and every individual should have a decent, humanly living without being enslaved by another individual. As he puts it he is a socialist in his own way. It is his strict adherence to freedom of thought that made him a convict in the eyes of orthodox Marxists.

⁴ Ibid. p.63

⁵ Orwell, George. *Shooting an Elephant and Other Essays*, Penguin Modern Classics, London, 2003, p.335

Classes of people

George Orwell deals with the society in terms of socialist tenets. Accordingly he points to the distribution of wealth among the individuals. That is why the society is divided according to the yearly income. Therefore the society is partitioned as high, middle, low classes. The high class consist of those who control the means of production such as capital, land or mines, and these people resist to the changes taking place around them: "The higher commanders, drawn from the aristocracy, could never prepare for modern war, because in order to do so they would have to admit to themselves that the world was changing." *The Lion and the Unicorn*⁶

The middle class are those who are specialized in a skill necessary for the production such as engineers, managers or doctors. He describes these people as an indeterminate class, who lose their former class distinctions: "To that civilization belong the people who are most at home in and most definitely of the modern world, the technicians and the higher paid skilled workers, the airmen and their mechanics, the radio experts, film producers, popular journalists and industrial chemists. They are the indeterminate stratum at which the older class distinctions are beginning to break down." *The Lion and the Unicorn*⁷

The low class are the workers with no qualifications doing only manual work. They hire their labour in return for payment. In various places in his writings, especially in *Down and Out in Paris and London*, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, his criterion is the wage. For instance, talking about best-seller novels in his *Boys' Weeklies*, he points to the level of income: "but the novel is aimed almost exclusively at people at the 4 pounds –a - week."⁸

Working class

In agreement with his socialist view his writings fiction, non-fiction alike, are full of discussions of working class. According to the dialectic materialism of Marx, the society will eventually come to a phase when the worker will overthrow the tyrants who exploit the labour. All ideas related to working class people contained in Orwell's works reflect this main prediction of Marx's in *Manifesto*. In his view it is this bulk of low class people that saved England from

⁶Orwell, George. *Essays*, Penguin Modern Classics, London, 2000,p. 158

⁷ Ibid. p.164

⁸ Ibid. p.85

disasters, and who will fight against Fascism. As they do not have anything to lose, and have a lot to gain by standing united if they are conscious of what they are fighting for: "In the long run – it is important to remember that it is only in the long run – the working class remains the most reliable enemy of Fascism, simply because the working class stands to gain most by a decent reconstruction of society. Unlike other classes or categories, it can't be permanently bribed." *Looking Back on the Spanish War*⁹

Orwell's social order outlined in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, and the following division shows a great similarity. The order from apex to the bottoms is The Nazi Party, the German people, Europeans, and the coloured people: "The Nazis aim, in effect, at setting up a kind of caste system, with four main castes corresponding rather closely to those of the Hindu religion. At the top comes the Nazi Party, second come the mass of the German people, third come the conquered European populations. Fourth and last are to come the coloured peoples, the 'semi-apes' as Hitler calls them, who are to be reduced quite openly to slavery." *The Lion and the Unicorn*¹⁰

This similarity is not meaningless: his criticism of Stalin and the model of society established in his time is associated with the model allegedly foreseen by the Nazi Party.

Ruling Class

Another recurrent theme concomitant with the working class is the question of who dominates the society, who dictates the rules by which the nation is governed. This is a basic question underlying the socialist movement. The aristocracy and the moneyed-class are the two determining factors in the manipulation of the society: "England is a family with the wrong members in control. Almost entirely we are governed by the rich, and by the people who step into positions of command by right of birth." *The Lion and the Unicorn*¹¹

Those who own the capital, that is, money, land, and other tools of production rule the nation. His views of the ruling class elaborated in *The Lion and the Unicorn* indicate that he is not so much hostile towards as expected from a socialist: "One thing that has always shown that

⁹ Ibid, p.232

¹⁰ Ibid, p. 167-168

¹¹ Ibid, p.170

the English ruling class are MORALLY fairly sound, is that in time of war they are ready enough to get themselves killed.¹²

While praising the English ruling class as morally sound to the extent that they get themselves killed in time of war, he cannot help noting that the wealthier run for their lives in their cars while the poverty stricken East Enders get stuck in their houses during bombing: “What is alarming is that those who control the capital have the instruments with which they control the common people lest they should be too intelligent to rip off power from their hands: because all the broadcasting that now happens all over the world is under the control of governments or great monopoly companies which are actively interested in maintaining the STATUS QUO and therefore in preventing the common man from becoming too intelligent.” *Poetry and the Microphone*¹³

Anti-authoritarianism

A hatred of muscle force is discernible in his writings. None of the heroes in his novels are depicted as figures having muscular strength. They are anti-heroes in all senses.

Orwell considers brute force as a means by which you exercise an unjust control over the weak. This hatred of authority goes far back as to his childhood. For instance, in his essay, *Such Such were the Joys*, he tells about his school days, when a robust body was appreciated as an indicator of authority. His hate of brute force, the force used to oppress the weak is obvious in the games: “At games for instance, I was hopeless. I was a fairly good swimmer and not altogether contemptible at cricket, but these had no prestige value, because boys only attach importance to a game if it requires strength and courage. (...)That was the pattern of school life – a continuous triumph of the strong over the weak. Virtue consisted in winning.”¹⁴

He counts imperialism as an institutionalized form of authoritarianism. He tells about his hatred of imperialism in *Shooting an Elephant*. Although aware of the fact that he, as the representative agent of British Imperialism, was not well received, accordingly he was insulted and booed, yet he accepts that imperialism is something to be hated. What’s more disturbing is

¹² Ibid, p.159

¹³ Ibid., p. 250

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 449

that he finds himself in an impasse: “All I knew was that I was stuck between my hatred of the empire I served and my rage against the evil spirited little beasts who tried to make my job impossible.”¹⁵

The other events left lasting impressions in his life: the advance of national socialism under the leadership of Hitler, and the Spanish Civil War. These events actually taught him where to stand: “Every line of serious work that I have written since 1936 has been written, directly or indirectly, AGAINST totalitarianism and FOR democratic Socialism, as I understand it.”¹⁶

Socialism and English Intelligentsia

Orwell is critical of the attitude displayed by the new scientific and philosophical figures of his time. He condemns the snobs who distance themselves from the common folk, he condemns the leftist intelligentsia of keeping aloof from the working class.

His objectiveness is evident in everything he has written. As a philanthropist, he has always been in pursuit of the ways to bring happiness to all human beings. If he is a socialist, this is because he believes that this would bring happiness to human beings. Even in his adoption of socialism, he does not take for granted everything proposed by the socialist thinkers. Therefore, he has his version of socialism. When he talks of socialism, the content of socialism diverges from that of widespread practice of socialism.

Socialism is usually defined as ‘common ownership of the means of production’. The State is the sole large-scale producer. He considers the possibility that capitalism may be better than socialism in some respects. This shows that he is not absolutist in his views: “It is not certain that Socialism is in all ways superior to capitalism, but it is certain that, unlike capitalism, it can solve the problems of production and consumption.” *The Lion and the Unicorn*¹⁷

He includes in the definition of socialism as “common ownership of the means of production, approximate equality of incomes, political democracy, and abolition of all hereditary

¹⁵Orwell, George. *Shooting an Elephant and Other Essays*, Penguin Modern Classics, London, 2003, p.25

¹⁶ Ibid., p.11

¹⁷Orwell, George. *Essays*, Penguin Modern Classics, London, 2000, p. 166

privilege, especially in education. These are simply the necessary safeguards against the reappearance of a class system”¹⁸

Conclusion

The gloomy, pessimistic mood prevailing in his novels and essays may be put down to several reasons: a fast changing social structure, destroyed ethical and religious values, industrialization coupled with urbanization, and finally his chronic lung disease. By the time of his death he was not only a well-known novelist, but also a journalist and essayist; a number of his books and essays standing alone as landmarks in the twentieth-century writing.

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¹⁸ Ibid., p. 161