

# **SOCIALIST ITINERARIES AND ABYSMAL IMAGININGS: RE- VISITING GEORGE ORWELL'S LATER POLITICS**

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## *Abstract*

This article offers a survey of Orwell's political development from the time of his endorsement of the Independent Labour Party in the wake of his participation in the Spanish Civil War to his final consecration – in the late 1940s – as the pre-eminent polemicist against and fictional interpreter of, the totalitarian phenomenon. The first area of analysis is the version of political quietism espoused by Orwell in the period 1939-40 as a crucial stage in the ethical reconfiguration of a true revolutionary politics untarnished by Stalinism. The article then examines the construction of an “abysmal” vision of human devastation in his late dystopias and attempts to re-inscribe it within a general strategy of ethico-political reorganization.

*Keywords:* George Orwell, totalitarianism, liberalism, socialism, equality, utopia/dystopia, *homo sacer*.

## *Resumen*

Este artículo hace un recorrido por el desarrollo político de Orwell desde el momento de su afiliación al Partido Laborista Independiente tras su participación en la Guerra Civil Española hasta su consagración final –a finales de los años 40– como el principal polemista e intérprete novelístico del fenómeno totalitario. El artículo analiza en primer lugar el quietismo político abrazado por Orwell en el período 1939-40 como una fase crucial en la reconfiguración ética de una verdadera política revolucionaria alejada del Estalinismo. En segundo lugar se analiza la visión “abismal” de devastación humana dibujada en sus distopías tardías y se intenta reinscribir esta última en una estrategia general de reorganización ético-política.

*Palabras clave:* George Orwell, totalitarismo, liberalism, socialism, igualdad, utopía/dystopia, *homo sacer*.

## 1. THE POLITICS OF WITHDRAWAL

The revolutionary process which Orwell had witnessed in Spain in 1937, combined with the traumatic experience of Communist totalitarian methods and the blinkered response offered by the mainstream left, had placed him on the tracks of revolutionary socialism and in open conflict with the opportunism of the Popular Front strategy. Upon his return to Britain, Orwell joined the Independent Labour Party (ILP), the POUM's British counterpart, and indeed the party which he now regarded as the only repository of relatively unsullied socialist credentials within the British left.

The ILP provided the ideological security and moral high ground of an uncompromising political vision which had come to embody, in a historical context of Labour and Communist Party betrayals, the best traditions of the British Labour Movement. It granted a salutary resistance to the unholy alliance between the "gangster and the pansy" –as Orwell (in)famously labelled the kind of corrupt collusion between an increasingly dogmatic and immoral left intelligentsia and the regimes of brutality which the Popular Front was prone to foster: "Somebody in eastern Europe 'liquidates' a Trotskyist; somebody in Bloomsbury writes a justification of it" (1998a:244). And finally, it provided the springboard for an intellectual withdrawal from the corrupt injunctions of official politics.

The fictional outcome of this phase in Orwell's political thinking and of the general mood of disillusionment in which it was inevitably steeped was the equally pessimistic novel *Coming Up for Air*. As Michael Levenson has pointed out, what makes this book "Orwell's most deliberate novel of the 1930s is that it owes so much to a coherent body of thought that also informs the important essay 'Inside the Whale'" (2007:71). The critical position which Orwell articulates in 'Inside the Whale' represents both the intellectual summation and literary corollary of his break with the Popular Front mentality, as well as an attempt to account for his own disaffiliated and marginal stance in specifically aesthetic terms. 'Inside the Whale' is a defence of the political quietism espoused by Henry Miller as well as a survey of the historical sequence which had seen the "amoral" leftist orthodoxy of the Auden-Spender generation substitute for the earlier "tragic sense of life" of Joyce, Eliot, Lewis, Pound, Lawrence et al. According to this account, the stifling political atmosphere of the Popular Front years, with its climacteric of purges and disavowal of revolution, had provided the ideological ferment on which numerous middle-class conversions to the Communist faith were secured: it was precisely during the comparatively conservative phase of anti-fascism and commitment to liberal democracy of the years 1935-39, rather than in the preceding leftist "Class-against-

Class” or “Third” Period of the 1930s, that Communism had truly become appealing to broad layers of the liberal intelligentsia.

Orwell explains this as a natural consequence of the deracination which plagued intellectual and moral life around 1930. With the collapse of earlier faiths – “patriotism, religion, the Empire, the family, the sanctity of marriage, the Old School Tie, birth, breeding, honour, discipline” – the need for substitute attachments followed, giving rise to a series of manic defections to holistic and equally uncompromising worldviews. In a somewhat premonitory intimation of what was to be his own development in the following months, Orwell asks: “But what do you achieve, after all, by getting rid of such primal things as patriotism and religion? You have not necessarily got rid of the need for *something to believe in*” (1998b:102).

Deprived of an anchoring moral structure and exclusively equipped with an abstract urge to belong, Comintern socialism supplied “a church, an army, an orthodoxy, a discipline” and therefore a convenient loophole from the challenge of experience (indeed from the sort of “experience” which Orwell sought to place at the root of his own commitments –all the way from Burma, the London and Paris underworlds, Wigan and Spain). Thus “the ‘Communism’ of the English intellectual” was a perfectly natural, if morally debased, expression of contemporary angst: “It is the patriotism of the deracinated” (1998b:103). This moral deficit was nevertheless the precise backdrop against which a comparative appreciation of political defeatism or acquiescent irresponsibility à la Miller is to be countenanced. It simply represented the state of decay into which opportunism, combined “with a sense of personal immunity” (1998b:104),<sup>1</sup> had managed to hijack the “public-spiritedness” which literature demanded in the Orwellian conception.

The alternative represented by an author like Miller conjured up a definite suggestion of political detachment yet also –and here Orwell found a priceless counter to the vituperative doxa of official “commitment”– an honest assertion of unmediated individual existence. Whilst fully aware of the historical dynamic which surrounded him, Miller’s attitude towards those external forces was one of acceptance and withdrawal, one of sincere disengagement from the burning issues of the day. Orwell evokes the image of Jonah in the belly of the whale (which Miller applied to fellow novelist and lover Anaïs Nin) as one accurately descriptive of his own stance. For indeed, the inside of the whale represents “a cushioned space that exactly fits you, with yards of blubber between yourself and reality, [enabling

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<sup>1</sup> Orwell notes that these writers could “swallow totalitarianism *because* they have no experience of anything except liberalism” (1998b:103).

you] to keep up an attitude of the completest indifference, no matter *what* happens [...]. Short of being dead, it is the final, unsurpassable stage of irresponsibility” (1998b:107). What this conscious acceptance betrays is not the possibility of change itself, but the intrinsic immorality (or amorality, even) of political ascription and *parti pris* within the sphere of creative writing.

Orwell draws the conclusion that “from now onwards the all-important fact for the creative writer is going to be that this is not a writer’s world. That does not mean that he cannot help to bring the new society into being, but he can take no part in the process “as a writer”. For “as a writer” he is a liberal, and what is happening is the destruction of liberalism” (1998b:111). This extreme declaration may appear to radically contradict the course of Orwell’s own trajectory, seemingly undermining the foundations upon which his engagement “as a writer” rested. ‘Inside the Whale’ culminates a phase of growing disillusionment with established political affiliations and a corresponding breach of confidence in his role as a committed writer. The retreat represented by *Coming up for Air* is in that sense a sort of “contribution to the ‘school of Miller’” (Levenson 2007:72). In other words, the political and ethical self-effacement operated by its protagonist George Bowling does not imply a wholesale rejection of “commitment” per se, but rather a critical – and it could be argued, tactical – withdrawal from available formulae of power worship. With this character, Orwell approximates a conscious embrace of anarchism (which is no longer the embryonic and impressionistic “Tory anarchism” of his earlier years) and a consequent rejection of hegemonic parameters of intervention. The first-person narrative draws a nostalgic trajectory of recovery prizing a foregone world and worldview, an impossible yet by no means superfluous quest for meaning rooted in the attachment to simple earthly pleasures and organic rhythms. These are metonymically signified as a particular time-frame invested with a retroactive phantasmatic quality –an intimation of loss bound up with a vision of utopia: “Before the war it was always summer [...]. The stillness, the green water, the rushing of the weir! It’ll never come again. I don’t mean that 1913 will never come again. I mean the feeling inside you, the feeling of not being in a hurry and not being frightened” (2000a:105-107).

This temporally displaced utopia supplies an alternative logic to the ritual deprivations of modern life; above all it signifies “a feeling of continuity”, an integral sense of security afforded by people who “didn’t know [...] that the order of things could change” (Orwell 2000a:110). In the face of an undifferentiated and increasingly impersonal existence, perpetually perched on the brink of destruction (and in which everything is “slick and streamlined, everything made of something else”), the sheer immediacy and permanence of a simple activity like fishing provides a necessary, and purposeful, counterblow to the brutal injunctions of the 1930s. George Bowling puts it curtly yet symptomatically: “fishing is the opposite

of war” (2000a:24, 85). Fishing emblematises the logic of resistance put forward in *Coming up for Air*. It expresses both an impossible attachment to a lost world of experience (a longing for organicity) and a wholesale indictment of the spurious modern substitutes.<sup>2</sup>

The sentimental world of Lower Binfield (a world in which “it was always summer”) is not, however, concocted in a vacuum. On the contrary, George Bowling’s exercise in nostalgia is prompted by a sense of contextual urgency, by a biting need to respond to the alienations imposed upon him, rather than by an indiscriminating acquiescence. Prominent among these alienations stands the mechanical insistence on commitment fostered by the “real” world of impending war, muffled suburban life, and Left Book Club meetings. Orwell’s strategy of rejection weaves a binding thread through these contradictory positions of consciousness (from petty bourgeois self-delusion to alleged leftist enlightenment), exposing a common lie and degraded moral stance in which the demand for “commitment” ultimately betrays a dishonest reverence for naked, brutal power. This frightful collusion of destructive passions (with fear as the bottom-line)<sup>3</sup> conspires to push history down the bleak road of a totalitarian future: “The world we’re going down into, the kind of hate-world, slogan-world. The coloured shirts, the barbed wire, the rubber truncheons” (Orwell 2000a:157). Anti-fascism, in this context, merely provides a hate-driven excuse for the general exercise of ever-expanding oppression.

This summary diagnosis consequently necessitates, in Orwell’s opinion, a militant (not an unaware or in any way frivolous) response which may well, given the circumstances, don the paradoxical form of “irresponsibility”. Thus the call for disengagement expressed in ‘Inside the Whale’ is by no means incompatible with a political endorsement of revolutionary pacifism or indeed of a revolutionary purism which would salvage the embodied meaning of equality from the Aragonese trenches and street barricades of Barcelona. On the contrary, it complements a political analysis rooted in radical disillusionment with an aesthetic determination to avoid submission or collaboration with the dehumanising forces of history (whether these are called capitalist, fascist or socialist). In that sense, the “destruction of liberalism” bemoaned by Orwell in his commentary is predicated on a particular experience of hope and its subsequent repression under the devastating forces of modern history. It does not contradict a belief in or even a passionate hankering for, the radical transformation of liberalism’s social structures; rather, it signifies a

<sup>2</sup> As Levenson points out, “Fishing in *Coming up for Air* is what sex was in *Tropic of Cancer*” (2007:73).

<sup>3</sup> “Fear! We swim in it. It’s our element. Everyone that isn’t scared stiff of losing his job is scared stiff of war, or Fascism, or Communism, or something” (Orwell 2000:15-16).

fatalistic recognition of this transformative will's gradual decay at the hands of bureaucratic whim and power grubbing.

If the endorsement of the ILP stance had been arrived at as a result of a painful yet revealing journey of political conversion, with distinct effects, as we have seen, on his conception of imaginative writing, the articulation of a fully satisfactory answer to the challenge of political life and its recurring intersections with the literary craft remained an unfinished task. From the bitter consciousness evinced by Orwell in 'Inside the Whale' to the revised emphases of his programmatic 'Why I Write', there lies a critical phase in his development which, as we shall examine in what follows, would mark both a fundamental shift in his idiosyncratic formulation of socialism, and a notable contribution to the radical debates of the wartime left.

'Why I Write' presents a further stage in Orwell's ongoing efforts, since his experiential breakthrough in Spain, to reconcile an unremitting sense of historical rootedness and political answerability to the social and aesthetic specificities of literature. The temporary compromise-cum-disengagement attained in 'Inside the Whale' was finally transmuted into a willing acceptance of "commitment" as an integral approach defining his entire trajectory:

Everyone writes of [political subjects] in one guise or another [...]. And the more one is conscious of one's political bias, the more chance one has of acting politically without sacrificing one's aesthetic and intellectual integrity [...]. What I have most wanted to do throughout the past ten years is to make political writing into an art. My starting point is always a feeling of partisanship, a sense of injustice. When I sit down to write a book, I do not say to myself, "I am going to produce a work of art." I write it because there is some lie that I want to expose, some fact to which I want to draw attention, and my initial concern is to get a hearing. (Orwell 1998c:319)

The provisional security afforded by Orwell's revolutionary "withdrawal" of 1939 against the tragic realisation of impending totalitarian hegemony was soon abandoned for a brand of Socialism which seemed to adapt the primal scene of revolutionary experience –Spain– to the specific circumstances of wartime Britain. From a sense of national redefinition of the initial premise, on the domestic front of 1940, a reconstructive and revisionist history of personal purpose would arise with a future claim to the new challenges and accomplishments of the post-1945 period. Thus, Orwell concludes, "[e]very 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" (1998c:319).

## 2. TOTALITARIAN LINEAGES: NAVIGATING THE DOWNFALL

The strategic rapprochement between the Soviet Union and the West culminated, according to Orwell, a long process of adulteration of the egalitarian promise of socialist revolution. Perhaps the most significant step, in 1943, had been the dissolution of the Communist International –the unequivocal sign, in Orwell’s view, that the willed identification of the Soviet “pigs” (in the notation of *Animal Farm*) with their erstwhile oppressors, the capitalist powers, was well underway. As he observed in his London Letter of 23 May 1943 to *Partisan Review*: “One has got to consider the effect on the working class membership, who have a different outlook from the salaried hacks at the top of the party. To these people the open declaration that the International is dead must make a difference” (1998d:107).

Orwell’s famous political fable *Animal Farm* utilises a satirical lens to chart this gradual corruption of the foundational promise in the Soviet experiment: it allegorises developments from the October Revolution (the overthrow of Jones, the human master of the Manor Farm), through the Civil War (emblematised by the “Battle of the Cowshed” between the “Red Army” of the animals led by Snowball and the “White Army” of the farmers), the Kronstadt uprising (partly suggested by the short-lived hens’ rebellion), the Stalin-Trotsky split,<sup>4</sup> the subsequent Show Trials and executions of the Old Bolsheviks of the mid and late 1930s, the shifting policies of the Comintern (from the Third Period doctrine to the Popular Front, i.e. from isolationism to co-operation with the farmers), to the final alliance with capitalist powers and the suggestion of a rising “iron curtain” of distrust and escalating tensions. Most significantly, Orwell fused basic elements of the Trotskyist analysis (such as the opportunistic manipulation of a disarmed and increasingly alienated proletarian mass by the bureaucracy, in combination with a gradual dismantling of the revolutionary élite)<sup>5</sup> with a farther-reaching critique of the Bolsheviks’ avant-gardism and theory of the Party.

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<sup>4</sup> Complete with denunciations of Snowball’s “treachery” in a clear allusion to the anti-POUM campaigns of the Spanish Civil War: “Snowball was in league with Jones’s secret agent all the time. It has all been proved by documents which he left behind him and which we have only just discovered. To my mind this explains a great deal, comrades. Did we not see for ourselves how he attempted –fortunately without success– to get us defeated and destroyed at the Battle of the Cowshed?” (Orwell 1975:69).

<sup>5</sup> “The bureaucracy struck while the iron was hot, exploiting the bewilderment and passivity of the workers, setting their more backward strata against the advanced, and relying more and more boldly upon the kulak and the petty bourgeois ally in general. In the course of a few years, the bureaucracy thus shattered the revolutionary vanguard of the proletariat” (Trotsky 1937:92).

In his description of the self-appointment of the pigs as the new power group –indeed as a new class consolidated on the basis of new relations of production vis-à-vis the other animal “classes” (the configuration of the pigs as “brainworkers”)– Orwell hints at the analysis later popularised by the Yugoslav Marxist and dissident Milovan Djilas in his book *The New Class*. According to Djilas, what distinguished this new social class of bureaucratic revolutionaries was its *post hoc* genesis: “In earlier epochs the coming to power of some class, some part of a class, or of some party, was the final event resulting from its formation and its development. The reverse was true in the USSR. There the new class was definitely formed after it attained power” (1957:38). Similarly, the pigs’ rise to social hegemony results from their acquired role as intellectual and practical leaders in the original rebellion, the ensuing corruption of the egalitarian impulse therefore developing from, rather than contradicting, the shared position of privilege accorded to the revolutionary vanguard. In that sense, the stealing of the milk and apples by the pigs and the veil of deception with which this initial “qualification” of the principles of Animalism is covered (Orwell 1975:24, 32), plants the seeds of betrayal which will ultimately climax in the declaration (under Napoleon’s Thermidorian rule) that “all animals are equal but some animals are more equal than others” (1975:114).

What is at stake in this reading is the problematical political status of the Leninist paradigm of revolution and its theoretical and strategic dependence on the vanguard party. Orwell’s criticism seems to move on this particular point beyond a loosely Trotskyist criticism of the Revolution’s bureaucratic drift, towards a general consideration of the nature of political activity and the inherent pitfalls of a Bolshevik-style approach.<sup>6</sup> The initial co-optation of the state apparatus by an “advanced” social group implied a desertion of the field of politics itself through a monological inscription of power under a unitary sign (the Party). This overconcentration of power in the exclusive hold of a minority represents a critical step towards both the consolidation of arbitrary rule and the unremitting assault upon the egalitarian ideal which underpinned Orwell’s concept of Democratic Socialism.<sup>7</sup> As A. J. Polan (1984:3) has observed apropos of the political model delineated in Lenin’s *The State and the Revolution*, “[a] concept of politics as identical with the issue of the possession of state power must of course abolish politics as activity and replace it with politics as apparatus”.

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<sup>6</sup> As Philip Bounds has noted: “Orwell seemed largely unwilling to divide the history of modern socialism into a prelapsarian Leninist phase and a brutally degraded Stalinist phase” (2009:141).

<sup>7</sup> Indeed, as Morris Dickstein has pointed out: “Even at the height of his campaign against totalitarianism, Orwell never gave up his belief in the egalitarian socialism outlined by the old Major and briefly achieved at Animal Farm” (2007:139).

The problem of the simple state of Lenin's model, simply put, is that the fewer institutions there are that make up the body politic, the greater the proportion of the total sum of power that will be lodged in each institution. If these institutions are reduced to one, or to a set of institutions that are not significantly separated, power is unitary, not distributed. This, then, is the negation of the field of democratic politics (Polan 1984:3, 128).

Herein lies perhaps the conceptual link between the narrative imaginaries of *Animal Farm*, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and what could be defined as Orwell's positive programme for radical social transformation in his final years. This negation or desertion of the political is, properly speaking, the defining trait of the totalitarian situation: a radical move towards an undifferentiated sphere in which the conventional distinction between public and private collapses and where modern conceptions of the social are brutally dismantled (Halberstam 1999:156).

As Seyla Benhabib has pointed out, "[t]otalitarianism has no spatial topology: it is like an iron band, compressing people increasingly together until they are formed into one" (1996:73). The process of extreme isolation from the social body to which the individual is subjected under totalitarianism (and whose paradigm is the camp – "the true central institution of totalitarian organizational power") is correlated with a fundamental dismantling of autonomous (that is, extraneous to State control) social activity. The consequence of this dual process is the rise of an amorphous "mass" whose functional status is, as a result, abjectly contingent on the specific organisational role of the State. Hannah Arendt identified the two experiential marks of totalitarianism as being "loneliness" and "worldlessness":

Loneliness, the common ground for terror, the essence of totalitarian government [...] is closely connected with uprootedness and superfluosity which have been the curse of modern masses since the beginning of the industrial revolution and have become acute with the rise of imperialism at the end of the last century and the break-down of political institutions and social traditions in our time. To be uprooted means to have no place in the world, recognized and guaranteed by others; to be superfluous means not to belong to the world at all. (Arendt in Benhabib 1996:67)

Thus the operative principle of totalitarian rule is the destruction of the individual's moorings in the community: first, through the radical shattering of its "being-in-the-world" and second, through its reconfiguration within a disarticulated aggregate which can no longer recognise itself amongst the republican species of citizenship and *peuple*. In this particular sense, as Benhabib observes, "the mob" (that pre-political object of polemical representation) "is the precursor of the lonely masses of totalitarianism" (1996:66). The lack which these masses share with the pre-modern mob is one of public projection and articulate common experience. Yet in the later situation, the privation arises from a thoroughly deliberate assault upon

the fabric of political activity itself. In the words of Michael Halberstam, “[t]otalitarianism does not politicize all areas of life. It has no public sphere at all in which persons can encounter one another and, therefore, closes them off from a world of shared experience altogether” (1999:174).

This characteristically modern desertion or exhaustion of “experience” as such –a derivative, we could say, of totalitarianism’s renunciation of politics– is precisely what concerns Orwell in the passage from the didactic mode of *Animal Farm* to the eschatological universe of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. For indeed the world of Oceania, Ingsoch and Big Brother, is characterised, primarily, by a radical renunciation of experience at both the individual and collective levels.<sup>8</sup> The resulting effect has often been interpreted as one of “despair” or “disillusion” in a conditioned, and sometimes indiscriminating, reading of the author’s latter-day politics (Rai 1988). However, this overall effect (even if granted) cannot be disengaged from the more general reflection on totalitarianism as a specific challenge to Orwell’s idiosyncratic conception of socialism. The problem of experience features prominently in this conception as it centrally weaves the individual and collective dimensions of any possible blueprint for a liberated community. In that sense, the disabled life-world of Winston Smith and Julia (especially that of Winston) is a condensation of features pointing in the direction of experiential deprivation and therefore signalling the human end-products of a *completed* (and therefore hypothetical)<sup>9</sup> process of political, social, psychological and moral devastation.

The question of affect as articulated in the novel is perhaps most interesting as a paradigmatic expression of this total devastation. It has also been one of the prime targets of critics who have discerned, in the barren human world of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*’s interpersonal relations, a suspect exclusion of the more liberating

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<sup>8</sup> This desertion or renunciation is typically correlated, in the totalitarian situation, with an inducement to experience collectively and vicariously. The spectacularity of power under totalitarianism is characteristically offered as a mass-substitute for individual and interpersonal experience. As Aneurin Bevan observes: “[w]hen the ordinary man and woman is disenfranchised, as in the dictatorship countries, the emphasis on the public spectacle is still greater. Consumption by pageantry takes the place of private consumption [...]. The well-known bellicosity of dictatorships is therefore fed by a morbid desire for the enjoyment of vicarious power by the politically helpless masses. It is not only that coercion and bullying come easily to those who have climbed to power by these means and who maintain themselves there by similar methods: it is also because the whole social psychology of such communities is perverted by the horrible contrast between individual weakness on the one hand and the pomp of unbridled power on the other” (1978:201). Notice how the official orchestration, in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, of a daily “two minutes’ hate” directed against Big Brother’s arch-enemy, Goldstein, neatly illustrates Bevan’s point.

<sup>9</sup> It is necessary to insist that Orwell did not present his novel as a prediction, but as a warning against a possible development and corruption of the socialist idea.

alternatives inherent in ordinary affective attachments. Raymond Williams in particular has pinpointed this aspect of the novel as its deepest failure: “It is strange that Orwell could oppose the controls and the perversions with nothing better than the casual affair between Winston and Julia [...]. It is not the ordinary and continuing love of men and women, in friendship and in marriage, but a willed corruption or indifference [...] that is presented as opposed to [...] that joyless world” (1971:80-81). The mechanical ritual of sex between Winston and Julia becomes associated with an impoverished and essentially misogynistic conception of rebellion as debased compulsion. In this respect, the characterisation of Julia in particular is no doubt problematical: it suggests, even under conditions of extreme dehumanisation, a persisting sexual division of labour whereby the function of ideological opposition is placed under a gender differential. Cast in this light, Julia is essentially a rebel “from the waist downwards”, incapable of sustaining a discursive line of antagonism and eminently shallow in her generally “practical orientation.”<sup>10</sup>

It is nevertheless necessary to situate the particular elements of this broad characterisation within the purposive frame of the novel’s dystopian lesson. And in that sense, the moral frailty which is ultimately the defining trait of this human world amounts to the exhaustion of experience to which the Party subjects its outer members. The immediate effects of panoptical surveillance, linguistic distortion (through the “revolutionary” codification of thought in Newspeak), and the total deregulation of power (which becomes a tautological and self-serving aim) are channelled towards the complete annihilation of human experience qua moral intelligibility of the world. Viewed in this light, Winston’s negative resistance is waged in the only terms available to those who have been rendered inhuman through the normalisation of the “state of exception”. Refusal of experience and abolition of the ordinary affects of interpersonal relations, in the sense suggested by Williams, seem to be the only remaining strategies of physical continuity (perhaps the word “survival” is excessive in this context) for the inhabitants of this desecrated social space: “We are the dead. Our only true life is in the future” (Orwell 2000b:203-204). In the words of Giorgio Agamben: “When humankind is deprived of effective experience and becomes subjected to the imposition of a form of experience as controlled and manipulated as a laboratory maze for rats –in other words, when the only possible experience is horror and lies– then the rejection of experience can provisionally embody a legitimate defence” (2007:18).

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<sup>10</sup> “Throughout the novel the contrast is drawn between Winston’s attempt to understand his society and Julia’s purely practical orientation: She is cunning, capable, mechanically oriented [...] and hedonistic, unanalytical, opportunistic. Winston’s strenuous resistance to O’Brien’s torture is depicted in great detail, but we are told in passing that Julia had capitulated at once to O’Brien’s methods” (Patai 1984:245).

The resilient consciousness which pits Winston against the colossal machinery of the Party –and which ultimately singles him out as the distinguished focus of O’Brien’s interest– is punctuated by the fundamental contrast between the caste of ex-humans to which he belongs and the allegedly unconscious mass of the proles:

They [the people of previous ages] were governed by private loyalties which they did not question. What mattered were individual relationships, and a completely helpless gesture, an embrace, a tear, a word spoken to a dying man, could have value in itself. The proles, it suddenly occurred to him, had remained in this condition. They were not loyal to a party or a country or an idea, they were loyal to one another. For the first time in his life he did not despise the proles or think of them merely as an inert force which would one day spring to life and regenerate the world. The proles had stayed human. They had not become hardened inside. They had held on to the primitive emotions which he himself had to re-learn by conscious effort. (Orwell 2000b:191)

By consigning hope (however vague and unrealised its promise in the final reckoning) to the proles as the legitimate representatives of an enslaved humanity still in possession of the moral ingredients of emancipation, the novel draws a dividing line between the projection of complete devastation (the finalised image of life after totalitarian victory) and the inexhaustible reservoir of potential inscribed in the living idea of equality. Again, equality provides both the redemptive horizon and the vehicle for a future resurrection of human life as obliquely suggested by the raw vital rhythms of the proles. Equality provides the *élan* for the final quoted passage of Goldstein’s book, posing the ever-recurring Orwellian question which, beyond the particular dynamics of Oceanian society as described in *The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism*, holds as a generally valid interrogation of principle: “*why* should human equality be averted? Supposing that the mechanics of the process have been rightly described, what is the motive for this huge, accurately planned effort to freeze history at a particular moment of time?” (2000b:225-226).

Equality, moreover, has a direct physical expression in the wasted figure of a proletarian woman who can have no claim on consciousness (on “mind” in the sense ascribed by Winston’s own tortured mind) yet whose sheer corporeality indicates a continuity which contains the seeds of a future renewal:

The woman down there had no mind, she had only strong arms, a warm heart and a fertile belly. He wondered how many children she had given birth to. It might easily be fifteen. She had had her momentary flowering, a year, perhaps, of wildrose beauty, and then she had suddenly swollen like a fertilised fruit and grown hard and red and coarse, and then her life had been laundering, scrubbing, darning, cooking, sweeping, polishing, mending, scrubbing, laundering, first for children, then for grandchildren, over thirty unbroken years. At the end of it she was still singing. (2000b:251)

“Where there is equality there can be sanity”, claims Winston. The kind of sanity vindicated by Winston in the figure of the proletarian woman is the precise reverse of the state of normalised exceptionality attained at the end of the novel, as well as the basis for the final duality underpinning its notion of politics. Winston’s ultimate characterisation of himself as the “last man in Europe” is attached to a corporeal expression of bare humanity, a degree zero of sanity with an unequivocal physical dimension. Winston’s entry into the realm of naked power and normalised exceptionality –into the world of O’Brien’s total rule, and the singular juridical space of which he is made out to be the absolute guarantor –marks the completion of a process begun with the symptomatic acceptance of the unbridgeable gulf between “them” and “us”, between Party slaves (denizens of a new world without equality) and proles (the residual bearers of a common humanity).

In his definition of the radical anomaly represented by this domain of exceptionality, Orwell approximates the paradigmatic theorisation of sovereignty as “state of exception”, and that of *homo sacer* as the modern archetype of “exceptional” humanity.<sup>11</sup> According to Agamben, under this new regime, “the norm becomes indistinguishable from the exception” (1998:170). Hence, the camp (that natural habitat of the state of exception, that total space of political annihilation) is revealed as the new “hidden matrix and *nomos*” of political space itself: “That is why the camp is the very paradigm of political space at the point at which politics becomes biopolitics and *homo sacer* is virtually confused with the citizen” (1998:171). Or, in the “didactic” mode mastered by O’Brien as he presents Winston with his own bare humanity after prolonged torture: “What are you? A bag of filth. Now turn round and look into that mirror again. Do you see that thing facing you? That is the last man. If you are human, that is humanity” (Orwell 2000b:312).

*Nineteen Eighty-Four* draws a falling trajectory of social life from the totalitarian dismantling of politics to the stasis of a “post-totalitarian” world. What is acknowledged in the process is the insoluble antagonism between “sovereign power”, understood as the normalisation or naturalisation of the state of exception, and equality as the conceptual basis of political activity as struggle and emancipation. It is worth conceding, at least partially, the point made by Williams in his overall characterisation of Orwell’s Socialism, when he claims that “Socialism was a general idea, a general name, against all these evils [fascism, imperialism and inequality]” (1971:55). Yet it is necessary to stress, especially in a

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<sup>11</sup> The *locus classicus* of the modern theory of sovereignty is, of course, Carl Schmitt. See Schmitt (2006 and 2007). See also Mouffe (2009:36-59).

discussion of his later work, the positive content that this nominal commitment to Socialism actually had.

## CONCLUSION: THE PROMISE OF EQUALITY

The singularity of Orwell's politics resides in an overarching moral commitment (which, after Spain, becomes *axiomatic*) to the egalitarian transformation of society in the face of both capitalist failure and the rise of new bureaucratic oligarchies masquerading as emancipatory social forces. This often resulted, as we have seen, in a tactical modulation of revolutionary or reformist emphases which typically led in apparently contradictory and opportunistic directions. Admittedly, the programmatic articulation of his political ideas underwent, in the temporal axis we have covered, a *substantive* shift from semi-Trotskyist positions to a more or less recognisably "Bevanite" or left-Labourite stance. But explanations of this evolution in terms of Cold War defection or even "hysteria" must be rejected instantly as they fail to pin down the actual interpenetration of moral priorities and contextual limitations, both of which derive from a fundamental sense of experiential immediacy (ultimately harking back to the Spanish Civil War).

Thus, the Socialist continuities in Orwell's work must be mediated, crucially, by the circumstances of lived history. His later preoccupation with totalitarian realities, and with a less defined and more intuitive notion of "equality" (especially when compared to the paradigm developed in *Homage to Catalonia*), is not post- or ex-Socialist, as Raymond Williams suggests (1979:390), but rather, consistent with his recognition of transformative possibilities in the egalitarian experiences of Spain and wartime Britain. After the replacement of the Fascist menace with the Iron Curtain, the contextual exigencies of the post-war period necessarily required, in accordance with the moral prioritisation of equality, a withdrawal from revolutionary tactics along the lines of a Democratic-Socialist enfranchisement of the popular majority. The practical tensions of this conjuncture are evident and indisputable ingredients of the doctrinal make-up of the later Orwell. Thus, the almost defensive tone of an article such as 'The Labour Government After Three Years', published at the critical moment of "consolidation" of Labour's reforms after the radical moves of the three preceding years (1998e), contrasts with the irrepressible utopian content of a piece like 'Towards European Unity' (1998f), with its integral Socialist vision premised on equality and committed, not to the

surrender of the political language of alternatives and possibilities, but to its principled projection and realisation.

‘The Labour Government After Three Years’ is, as John Newsinger has pointed out, “probably the closest we get with Orwell to a full-blooded endorsement of British Labourism and its reformist politics” (1999:138). In particular, it is an expression of obdurate “realism” –of politics as the “language of priorities”– deriving its strength of commitment from an overarching concern with the egalitarian fruits to be derived at every gradual step down the road towards Democratic Socialism. Yet if this provides the immediate practical horizon of social transformation in the Britain of the late forties, the position outlined in ‘Toward European Unity’ offers a principled projection of Socialism as both a general characterisation and a particular counter to the totalitarian menace. The only way of avoiding the devastating imaginings of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* “is to present somewhere or other, on a large scale, the spectacle of a community where people are relatively free and happy and where the main motive in life is not the pursuit of money or power. In other words, democratic socialism must be made to work throughout some large area” (1998f:164).

The historical limitations imposed upon an emancipatory project conjugated in the *moral* language of equality and possibility, as partially realised in the exceptional circumstances of libertarian Catalonia during the Spanish Civil War, are manifest in the Orwell of the late 1940s. An enduring loyalty to such a language is thus tempered by the strict constraints of the post-war British situation and crucially, by the unremitting onslaught of a menace internal to the Left –that of “oligarchical collectivism.”

The practical scope of this political realisation is thus, in a certain sense, fundamentally compromised (just as it had originally been fuelled) by its ascription to a narrow conjuncture. The *resources of possibility* –the imagination of radical social change– which had animated his initial engagement with Socialism are thus ultimately contained within topical forms (POUMism, the “spirit of Dunkirk”, Bevanism) which may potentially deprive them of a more general exploration of alternatives to the hegemonic system of relations. Thus, the alter-systemic possibilities inscribed even in the bleakest of dystopian narratives (as in *Nineteenth Eighty-Four*) are ultimately subordinated to a contextual dependency on the affirmations of Labour’s reformist programme. In other words, the utopian “obverse” to the world of Oceania is not the Cold Warriors’ American Empire, but the “third road” represented by the left wing of the Labour Party. And the limiting effects of this ascription are to be found in the narrowing-down of practical and symbolic references to the reduced scope of one such parliamentary option.

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