Hope Lies in the Proles

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George Orwell and the Left

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‘Until They Become Conscious They Will Never Rebel’: Orwell and the Working Class

In *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, Winston Smith, while pondering the overthrow of Big Brother, inevitably confronts the dilemma that all socialists who believe in the agency of the working-class have sooner or later to face up to. The moral case for democratic socialism is overwhelming. Certainly, the only worthwhile political objective, as far as Orwell was concerned at the time he wrote the book, was the establishment of a classless society where the ruling class, whatever its particular make-up, had been overthrown, deprived of its wealth and power forever, and the working-class was ‘in the saddle’. This would make possible the introduction of a real democratic system rooted, as it had to be, in the achievement of genuine social equality. The working-class were oppressed and exploited, ground down both at work and at home, the victims of a system of privilege and of the most gross, indeed positively obscene, social inequality. And yet they had the strength to bring that system crashing down if only they recognised their situation, embraced the socialist cause, and acted in concert to remedy it. Nothing could stand in their way. Not even Big Brother. But they don’t act. The problem, as Smith puts it, was that ‘Until they become conscious they will never rebel, and until after they have rebelled they cannot become conscious’. Smith is clearly speaking for Orwell here, rehearsing problems that he confronted himself. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* does not, of course, resolve the dilemma. Indeed, before his arrest, Smith goes through moments of both hope and despair. As he puts it: ‘ . . . if there was hope, it lay in the proles. You had to cling on to that. When you put it in words it sounded reasonable: it was when you looked at the human beings passing you on the pavement that it became an act of faith’.[1] We shall return to *Nineteen Eighty-Four* and the working-class, but first: how did George Orwell, an

Old Etonian and a former colonial policeman, come to this commitment both to socialism and to the working-class as agency?

Looking back on his teenage years, Orwell remembered himself as a public school radical in the immediate post-war years. This was a period when, as he puts it, 'the English working class were in a fighting mood'. He describes himself as being 'a Socialist' at this time, but only 'loosely', without 'much grasp of what Socialism meant, and no notion that the working class were human beings'. He was both 'a snob and a revolutionary' whose knowledge of the working class came from books such as Jack London's *The People of the Abyss*. He could 'agonize' over the sufferings of the poor, but 'still hated them and despised them when I came anywhere near them'. As he puts it, 'I seem to have spent half the time in denouncing the capitalist system and the other half in raging over the insolence of bus conductors'.[2] How this schoolboy radicalism would have developed if he had gone on to University from Eton, we can only conjecture, but instead, he took a different path and joined the colonial police. This was, of course, a pretty decisive repudiation of even the loosest idea of socialism. He sailed for Burma in October 1922. He was to spend the next five years in the service of the Empire.

On his own testimony, when he gave up his career as a colonial policeman and returned home from Burma in the summer of 1927, he came back bearing 'an immense weight of guilt that I had got to expiate'. In Burma, he had been a 'part of the actual machinery of despotism' and still had 'a bad conscience' about it. He had faithfully served the interests of British Imperialism, one of those charged with imposing British rule, by force when necessary, on the native population. He later recalled 'the women and children howling when their menfolk were led away under arrest' and 'the scarred buttocks of the men who had been flogged with bamboos'. And this violence was all-pervasive, inherent in the colonial relationship. He guiltily remembered 'the servants and coolies I had hit with my fists in moments of rage' at their clumsiness and supposed laziness. He had come home ridden by guilt and determined 'to submerge myself, to get right down among the oppressed, to be one of them and on their side against their tyrants' as a personal recompense. It was at this point that 'my thoughts turned to the English working class'.[3] This particular trajectory is, of course, dependent on Orwell's own testimony. Nevertheless, it does identify a concern to both take the side of and to be accepted by the working class that remained with him for the rest of his

life. With whatever reservations and doubts for George Orwell, 'if there was hope, it lay in the proles!'[4]

The Road to Socialism

Although Orwell was to later claim that he only really became a socialist sometime around 1930, there is evidence of an earlier commitment when he lived in Paris in 1928–29 and wrote a number of articles for the left-wing press. Moreover, according to Gordon Bowker, at this time, his aunt, Nellie Limouzin and her partner, Eugene Adam, became, informally at least, 'his political tutors'.[5] Adam was a former communist, now fiercely hostile to the Stalinist takeover of both the Russian Communist Party and of the Communist International. Orwell argued the issues of the day with him, with Orwell actually defending the Soviet Union at this time, and he provided Orwell with contacts on the French left, including Henri Barbusse. Certainly, Orwell's time in Paris gave him the opportunity to experience, if only briefly, life at the bottom of the employment market, experience that he duly recounted in *Down and Out in Paris and London*, but he also encountered a left-wing culture that is missing from that book although he acknowledged it elsewhere. In a review that he wrote for *The Adelphi* magazine and that appeared in May 1932 (before *Down and Out* was published), he described a massive demonstration he saw in Marseilles when on his way home to England from Burma. There was 'an immense procession of working people . . . bearing banners inscribed "*Sauvons Sacco et Vanzetti*."'[6] This was 'the kind of thing that one might have seen in England in the eighteen forties, but surely never in the nineteen twenties'. Britain had experienced 'a century of strong government' that now kept public disorder in check. Whereas in Britain, public protest 'seems an indecency . . . in France everyone can remember a certain amount of civil disturbance, and even the workmen in the bistros talk of la revolution – meaning the next revolution, not the last one'.[7] He chose not to explore this particular aspect of French working-class life. Instead, he tells the reader of his reluctance to write for the Communist press in France for fear of the police. A detective had seen him coming out of the office of a Communist newspaper on one occasion and this had caused him 'a great deal of trouble with the police'. They were 'very hard on Communists, especially if they are foreigners'. Other than that his account covers only some ten weeks of his time in Paris, the period during which he was near starvation, working as a

plongeur,[8] and, of course, this is the experience that he set out to explore in the *Down and Out*.

Back in Britain, Orwell had famously gone on the tramp. He had first begun these explorations in late 1927 and 1928, before moving to Paris, and continued them after his return to Britain in 1930–31. What they show is his determination, not just to sympathise with the poor and destitute but to actually get some first-hand experience of how they experienced life and to get to know them as individuals. He was going to show his middle-class readership, to the best of his ability, what their lives were like from the inside. His intention was to turn the tramping poor from a faceless mass who were to be both pitied and feared into human beings; to humanise them, acknowledge them as individual men and women. To be able to do this he had to become one of them. What even the well-meaning middle class had to realise is that the only real difference between them and the poor is income. As he puts it, the average millionaire is only 'the average dishwasher dressed in a new suit'.[9]

For Orwell himself, of course, there was more to it than just humanising the poor for a middle-class readership. It was all part of expiating the guilt that he felt at having been part of an oppressive Imperialist system in Burma. Identifying with the poor, being one of them, even if only temporarily, was something that was to concern him throughout his life and that his middle-class friends often commented on. One moment that captures this is when he ventures out dressed as a tramp in Lambeth. He sees another tramp walking towards him and then realises it is himself reflected in a shop window. Already he looks dirty, indeed it seems as if dirt leaves you alone 'when you are well dressed, but as soon as your collar is gone it flies towards you from all directions'. Now that he is dressed as a tramp, everyone he passes responds differently. And then there is a moment of epiphany: 'I helped a hawker pick up a barrow that he had upset. "Thanks, mate", he said with a grin. No one had called me mate before in my life – it was the clothes that had done it'. Of course, as soon as he spoke Orwell's accent was to identify him as someone well-to-do who was, for whatever reason, down on their luck, but such individuals were common enough for this to not occasion too much surprise or cause suspicion from the other tramps. The same was not true when he ventured into working-class communities in the North of England. There he was always an outsider.

By the time Orwell went north, under contract to Victor Gollancz to write a book on his experiences and investigations, he had been associated

for some time with *The Adelphi*, a literary magazine that had moved to the left under the impact of the Great Depression and the collapse of the Labour government in 1931. It was edited by John Middleton Murray, assisted by Richard Rees, Max Plowman and the working-class novelist Jack Common, with all of whom Orwell became friendly. After the collapse of the Labour government and the break away of the left-wing Independent Labour Party (ILP) from the Labour Party, Murray had joined the ILP. *The Adelphi* was to become to all intents and purposes the ILP's theoretical journal. It reduced its price to 6d so that in the words of an editorial written by Richard Rees, 'we may reach the greatest possible number of socialist readers'. And according to one account it did succeed in building up 'a regular following of working-class people' in the Midlands and the North.[10] Orwell wrote for it regularly and was very much under its influence. From this point of view *The Road to Wigan Pier* can be seen as a product of his interaction with the more radical and revolutionary elements within the ILP. As we shall see further on, this was particularly true of the book's determined rejection of the politics of the Popular Front.

Orwell kept in touch with Jack Common by letter during his visit to the North. On one occasion, he mentioned how he had visited the Adelphi offices in Manchester where there were what he described as 'fearful feuds and intrigues'. A fortnight later, safely back down South, he again wrote to him, explaining that one of the reasons for the squabbling seemed to be people from different parts of the North 'declaring that theirs is the only genuinely distressed area and the others don't know what poverty means'. One suspects this was a Yorkshire – Lancashire dispute! There were also problems between the magazine's working-class and middle-class supporters, with working-class people complaining of the 'patronising airs' put on by some of the middle-class socialists.[11]

More seriously, towards the middle of April 1936, he wrote to Common about how 'this business of class-breaking is a bugger'. He blamed the problems on the middle-class socialists who gave him 'the creeps'. Not only don't they want to eat with a knife, but they were 'still slightly horrified at seeing a working man do so'. Many of these people were of 'the sort of eunuch type with a vegetarian smell who go about spreading sweetness and light and have at the back of their minds a vision of the working class all T. T., well washed behind the ears, readers of Edward Carpenter or some other pious sodomite and talking with BBC accents'. He thought working-class people were 'very patient' under

all this provocation and in his own case he 'was never once socked on the jaw and only once told to go to hell, and then by a woman who was deaf and thought I was a rate-collector'.[12] Orwell was, of course, to discourse at some length on the problems caused by some middle-class socialists in the second part of *The Road to Wigan Pier*, something to which we shall return.

What of *The Road to Wigan Pier*? It was written very much as a political act, intended to show middle-class readers in the South, where economic recovery was underway, that there was still considerable unemployment in the North with all that entailed in terms of human misery and that this was being forgotten. It was also a political statement in support of the miners who were only now beginning to recover from their defeat in the Great Lockout of 1926. This was particularly important because the miners were still the decisive force within the labour movement. It was also a political act in another more personal sense because it saw Orwell nailing his colours to the socialist cause in a way that he had not so far done. This was particularly the case once Gollancz decided to publish *The Road* as a Left Book Club choice.

In the book, Orwell celebrates the work of the miner. They did an essential job: one that he thought would have killed him off in a couple of weeks, and yet they were underpaid and subjected to humiliating and dangerous conditions at work. One in six miners suffered a serious accident every year and one in 900 was killed. It was a casualty rate equivalent to a small war. They did the most dangerous job in the country. Watching them at work, he wrote, 'you realise momentarily what different universes different people inhabit'. Indeed, the whole world of the 'superior person' like himself rested on 'the poor drudges underground, blackened to the eyes, with their throats full of coal dust, driving their shovels forward with arms and belly muscles of steel'. He singles out one particular instance of petty injustice to exemplify the position these men found themselves in: a disabled miner 'kept waiting about for hours in the cold wind' for his pension, an afternoon wasted, completely helpless in the face of the arbitrary whim of the company, even though the pension was his by right. As Orwell points out, not even 'a down-at-heel' member of the bourgeoisie like himself would have to put up with such treatment.

Orwell would, of course, be completely unsurprised by the workings of the benefits system in Britain today. He would recognise it immediately for what it was. He would also have immediately recognised the

zero-hours economy for what it is and the role of employment agencies, indeed in *The Road*, he actually discusses the vicious impact of casualisation on the working class. He singles out a Professor Saintsbury who recommended casualisation as 'the very secret and safety-valve of a safe and sound labour system generally'. He thought unemployment a positive good, helping to discipline the workers, but 'only so long as the unemployed are made to suffer as much as possible'. As far as the Professor was concerned the dole was both 'demoralising' and 'ruinous' for the unemployed worker who, as Orwell observes, he presumably thought should either 'sleep in the street' or go into the workhouse. Anyway, the government, according to Saintsbury, was under no obligation to ensure the 'continuance of life' of the unemployed. A lot of people thought as much, but once again, as Orwell observes, it took 'a lot of guts to be openly such a skunk' as Saintsbury. Why did working people tolerate these attitudes and put up with these conditions? It was the inevitable lot of a working class that had been defeated. Orwell goes on about how this whole business of 'petty inconvenience and indignity . . . is inherent in working-class life'. He wrote of how, 'a thousand influences constantly press a working man down into a passive role. He does not act, he is acted upon. He feels himself the slave of mysterious authority and has a firm conviction that "they" will never allow him to do this, that, and the other'. He recalled how when he was hop-picking, he had asked his fellow workers why they did not form a union to demand better wages and conditions and was told that 'they' would never allow it.

He looked at the plight of the unemployed, praising the efforts of the National Unemployed Workers Movement (NUWM). This was 'a revolutionary organisation intended to hold the working class together, stop them blacklegging during strikes, and give legal advice against the Means Test'. He had seen a lot of the NUWM, built from nothing by the efforts of the unemployed themselves and 'I greatly admire the men, ragged and underfed like the others, who keep the organisation going'.[13] In the diary he kept of his time in the North, he was less complimentary. On one occasion, he heard Wal Hannington, the NUWM leader speak at a meeting and dismissed him completely unfairly, it has to be said, as 'though a Communist entirely bourgeois'. Indeed, as far as he could see 'as soon as a working man gets an official post in the Trade Union or goes into Labour politics, he becomes middle class'. Orwell went round collecting membership dues door to door with the NUWM collectors who were very keen to help him with his book. It was on one of these

occasions that he saw a young woman kneeling in the gutter in the bitter cold trying to unblock the drain with a stick. This image is one of the most powerful that he incorporates into *The Road*, although he changes the context in which it occurred for the book.

Despite all the efforts of the NUWM though, he does not see any evidence of revolt in the making. Once again in the diary he describes attending an NUWM social in support of the German communist leader, Ernst Thaelmann. Most of the people at the social are women, 'young girls and shapeless middle-aged women' (we shall return to Orwell's sexism in Chapter 8) but they are, he supposes, 'a fair cross-section of the more revolutionary element in Wigan. If so, God help us . . . There is no turbulence left in England'.[14] He comes back from the North deeply pessimistic and argues that unless there is another war there are almost certainly several million men who will 'never have another job this side of the grave'. While he criticises the working class for being strong on organisation but weak on leadership, his own proposal of providing the unemployed with allotments hardly seems an answer to the situation! As it is, the working class have neither turned revolutionary nor lost their self-respect. He certainly acknowledges the demoralising impact that unemployment has, but argues that working-class communities in the North have in the main come to turns with their situation, adapted to it and above all remained human.

Why did the unemployed and the underpaid not rebel in these circumstances? First of all, it is important to note that he was of the opinion at this time that 'attempted insurrections' would have been counter-productive in a 'strongly governed country' like Britain, resulting only in 'futile massacres and a regime of savage repression'. In reality, of course, a more likely response was reforms and concessions combined with repression. Nevertheless, the main reason for the avoidance of either complete despair or revolutionary outbreaks is, Orwell argues, the availability of 'cheap luxuries'. This post-war development has been 'very fortunate for our rulers'. The unemployed and the low-paid have survived at a 'fish-and-chip standard'. Indeed, 'fish-and-chips, art-silk stockings, tinned salmon, cut-price chocolate (five two ounce bars for sixpence), the movies, the radio, strong tea and the Football Pools have between them averted revolution'.

Before we move on to discuss the second part of *The Road to Wigan Pier*, it is worth noting that Orwell comments on the difficulty of what he called 'class-breaking' in his correspondence with Jack Common.

Class difference made intimacy impossible, he found. When even working-class men who were members of the Communist Party could not help but call the ex-public school socialist, who wanted to know about their working, living and housing conditions, 'sir', what hope was there? There was a plate glass of class difference separating him from them so that they could see each other but never actually touch. The intimacy that had been possible, indeed inevitable, on the tramp was not possible in working-class communities where outsiders from another class were treated with a mixture of suspicion, hostility and subservience. Which brings us to the allegation, for many years propagated by the Communist Party, that Orwell's politics were defined by his disgust at the smell of the working class. This was prompted by Orwell's assertion in *The Road* that middle-class people were actually bought up to believe that the working-class smell. As he makes absolutely clear in the book, he no longer had 'feelings of that kind'. It was Harry Pollitt himself who successfully attached this particular slander to the book in a review he wrote for the *Daily Worker.* As Bernard Crick has pointed out, the very fact that the CP leader himself felt compelled to go after the book was 'a sign of the importance he attached to it'. Orwell put this slanderous attempt to discredit him, almost certainly correctly, down to the fact that he was fighting in the ranks of the semi-Trotskyist POUM at the time the book came out and consequently as far as the CP leadership was concerned any method of attacking him was permissible. Indeed, they would have regarded his death in Spain at the hands of the Russian secret police as something that was perfectly legitimate, although they would, of course, at the same time have strenuously denied that any such thing had taken place. Orwell threatened legal action, among other things, if the slander continued.[15]

The Smell of Crankishness

It is the second part of *The Road to Wigan Pier* that was the most controversial, however. Here Orwell put on display his considerable prejudices against the middle-class left. The primary target was without any serious doubt some of the middle-class socialists around *The Adelphi*. He asks why it is that while existing social conditions cry out for socialism ('every empty belly is an argument for Socialism'), the socialist movement is so weak. Rather than identifying the appalling performance of the Labour government of 1929–31, leading up to the effective defection of Prime

Minister Ramsay MacDonald and Chancellor of the Exchequer Philip Snowden to the Conservatives as the main problem, he places the blame on the secret teetotallers 'with vegetarian leanings' who inhabit the left and alienate the working class. The left attracts all the cranks and just to be helpful in identifying the culprits he provides a quite extensive list: those to blame are the 'fruit-juice drinker, nudist, sandal-wearer, sex-maniac, Quaker, "Nature Cure" quack, pacifist and feminist'. The 'smell of crankishness' has to be dispelled. As for the middle-class Fabians, they don't really object to the misery capitalism inflicts but more to its untidiness. They don't see themselves as part of any movement of the masses, but rather as clever people imposing reforms from above on 'the Lower Orders' for their own good. Not that the manual working class escape their share of the blame. He states quite categorically that 'no working man grasps the deeper implications of Socialism'. For a lot of working-class people all that socialism amounted to was 'better wages and shorter hours and nobody bossing you about'. It was 'present society with the worst abuses left out'. As far as he was concerned socialism 'cannot be narrowed down to mere economic justice' but would involve change of such a 'magnitude' as to 'work immense changes in our civilisation'. He deals with those workers who actually do recognise the scale of the change socialism will involve, 'the more revolutionary type', by a convenient sleight of hand whereby they are no longer considered as being 'genuine' workers. And with somewhat throwaway phrases, he ensured the unforgiving hostility of the CP by both dismissing 'the stupid cult of Russia' and referring to Soviet Commissars as being 'half gangster, half gramophone'. Understandably, Orwell himself felt it was necessary to insist at one point that readers should 'please notice that I am arguing for Socialism, not against it'.[16]

Many of the problems to do with the struggle for socialism that Orwell was grappling with, not too successfully it must be said, in *The Road to Wigan Pier* were to be answered as far as he was concerned in Spain. He left to fight in Spain before the book was even published.

'The Working Class Was In The Saddle'

In *The Road to Wigan Pier*, Orwell was writing about a working class that had suffered massive defeats and was still on the defensive. The 1926 General Strike had ended in defeat and mass victimisation and the Great Miners' Lockout had ended with the strongest section of the working class