

Orwell and Englishness: The Dialogue with British Marxism

Philip Bounds



George Orwell

Although George Orwell is often described as a “pioneer” of Cultural Studies, his essays, articles and broadcasts on cultural themes have rarely been analysed in much depth. One of the reasons for this is that he tends to be perceived as an out-and-out maverick whose writings had nothing in common with those of other cultural critics. The purpose of the following article, which has been adapted from my forthcoming book *Orwell and Marxism* (I.B. Tauris, 2008), is to challenge Orwell’s status as an intellectual outsider by relating his work to broader trends in the radical culture of his day. The main argument of the book is that there are some startling parallels between Orwell’s cultural writings and those of the young literary intellectuals who were either members of, or closely associated with, the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) in the 1930s and 1940s.¹ The present article explores

¹ These writers had a major influence on English literary culture in the ten years or so after 1935 and were studied extensively by Orwell. The most famous were probably Alick West, Ralph Fox, Christopher Caudwell, Edgell Rickword, Jack Lindsay, and T.A. Jackson, though there were perhaps

some of these parallels by focusing on Orwell's ideas about the nature of "Englishness," primarily as they took shape in his two short books *The Lion and the Unicorn* (1941) and *The English People* (1947). These books are arguably the most important works of cultural criticism which Orwell ever wrote, since they go a long way towards his explaining his admiration for the English working class — and hence his reasons for becoming a socialist.

As is well known, Orwell's decision to write about English identity was a direct consequence of the outbreak of the Second World War. After opposing the "drive to war" in the late 1930s, Orwell concluded in August 1939 (allegedly as the result of a dream) that Hitler's Germany would have to be met by force in the event of it attacking England.² Yet his attitude towards the war was different from that of practically everyone else on the British left. Unlike the communists (who opposed the war between 1939 and 1941 and supported it enthusiastically thereafter) and his former comrades in the Independent Labour Party (who opposed the war outright), Orwell argued that Hitler could not be defeated unless Britain immediately took the path of socialist revolution: "A capitalist Britain cannot defeat Hitler; its potential resources and its potential allies cannot be mobilised. Hitler can only be defeated by an England which can bring to its aid the progressive forces of the world — an England, therefore, which is fighting against the sins of its own past."³ It was this highly idiosyncratic perspective (pro-war and pro-revolution at the same time) which accounted for the basic themes of *The Lion and the Unicorn*, Orwell's first major statement of English patriotism. On the one hand, as a supporter of the war, Orwell wished to make a straightforward case for the importance of loving one's country:

twenty others who also made an important contribution to English Marxist cultural theory. My argument is that their influence on Orwell was so profound that his cultural writings can in one sense be interpreted as a sort of a dialogue with them. Aware that the communists had achieved what turned out to be a temporary dominance of English cultural life, Orwell produced a body of critical writings which implicitly addressed their main concerns and provided a fresh perspective on their main ideas. I am not suggesting that Orwell was any less anti-communist than he is usually regarded as being, nor that the British communists were the only important influences on his cultural thinking. What I *am* suggesting is that English cultural Marxism provides an essential context (perhaps even the most important context of all) in which his work must be read. For a history of this generation of communist critics, see Philip Bounds, *British Communism and the Politics of Literature, 1928-1939* (Swansea: University of Wales PhD thesis, 2003).

² Orwell described the circumstances in which he changed his mind about the war in "My Country Right or Left", *Folios of New Writing*, No. 2, Autumn 1940. Reprinted in *The Complete Works of George Orwell, Volume 12: A Patriot After All 1940-1941*, edited by Peter Davison (London: Secker and Warburg, 2000) [hereafter CW 12], pp. 269-272.

³ George Orwell, "Our Opportunity," *The Left News*, No. 55, January 1941. Reprinted in CW 12, p. 346.

“One cannot see the modern world as it is unless one recognizes the overwhelming strength of patriotism, national loyalty . . . as a *positive* force there is nothing to set beside it.”⁴ On the other hand, as an advocate of immediate revolution, Orwell also wished to prove that a distinctively left-wing form of patriotism had now become possible. This explains why so many of his patriotic writings were given over to a lyrical tribute to the qualities of the working class. At bottom, Orwell’s implied argument was extremely simple. Since the common people *already* possess an outlook which inclines them towards socialism (or at least to a muscular form of populist libertarianism) it is perfectly rational for the left to forge a new form of patriotism around its support for the working class. Instead of insisting that “workers have no country”, socialists should realise that it is precisely because of the workers that England is worth loving in the first place.

If the political background to Orwell’s writings on Englishness is comparatively well known, the same cannot be said for the cultural and intellectual circumstances in which they took shape. The consensus among Orwell scholars is that the shift towards patriotism was something wholly exceptional, a sort of intellectual quirk which distinguished Orwell from an inter-war left that was somehow more “internationalist” in perspective. But the consensus is wrong. As Orwell knew perfectly well, an attempt to transfigure socialist politics with an infusion of English patriotism had been absolutely central to the left-wing culture of the 1930s. The most distinguished exponents of the new form of “radical patriotism” were a group of intellectuals in and around the Communist Party, all of whom linked their concern with Englishness to the CPGB’s attempt to build a “People’s Front” against fascism. The purpose of the rest of this section is not merely to show that Orwell’s writings on Englishness were often strikingly similar to those of the communists; but also to suggest (though no absolute proof is possible) that texts such as *The Lion and the Unicorn* can reasonably be interpreted as a critical response to the communist orthodoxy. After briefly surveying the most important communist writings on Englishness, I will concentrate on three themes which bind the two bodies of work together: (1) the idea that there was a complex mixture of liberal and socialist elements in the political outlook of the English workers, (2) the assumption that the English workers were instinctively suspicious of theory, and (3) the idea that sections

⁴ George Orwell, *The Lion and the Unicorn: Socialism and the English Genius* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1941). Reprinted in CW 12, p. 392.

of the middle class were now ripe for conversion to the left. Although I will mainly refer to *The Lion and the Unicorn* and *The English People*, Orwell's most sustained expressions of radical patriotism, I will also bring in other writings which help to clarify their themes.

British Communism and the "English Radical Tradition"

The idea of Englishness became an obsession for British communists after the Seventh Congress of the Communist International in 1935. (The Communist International or "Comintern" had been established in Moscow in 1919. Its function was to determine the policies of the various pro-Soviet Communist Parties which came into existence in the wake of the October Revolution.) Meeting at a time when Hitler's Germany and Mussolini's Italy posed an increasingly obvious threat to international order, the Seventh Congress was primarily important for determining communist strategy towards the growth of fascism. The most important speech was delivered by the Bulgarian communist Georgi Dimitrov, newly appointed President of the Comintern, who had become a hero throughout the world movement after being acquitted by a Nazi court on charges of burning down the Reichstag (Germany's parliament) in 1933. After defining fascism as "the open, terrorist dictatorship of the most reactionary, most chauvinistic and most imperialist elements of finance capital,"⁵ Dimitrov insisted that communists should now give priority to defending established democratic institutions against the fascist attempt to overthrow them. This could best be done by uniting all anti-fascists, including those whom the communists had previously dismissed as "bourgeois" (e.g. liberals and even progressive conservatives), into nationally based "People's Fronts."⁶ By insisting that fascism could only be rolled back by the disciplined co-operation of virtually everyone who opposed it, Dimitrov thus inaugurated a period in which the defence of "bourgeois democracy" proved far more important to communist politics than the pursuit of socialist revolution. The point we need to understand here is that the CPGB's interest in Englishness was a sort of secondary consequence of the strategy which Dimitrov

⁵ Georgi Dimitrov, *The Working Class Against Fascism* (London: Martin Lawrence, 1935), p. 10.

⁶ It goes without saying that Dimitrov saw no role in the People's Front for Trotskyists. For Orwell's account of the baleful consequences of Soviet anti-Trotskyism during the Spanish Civil War, see George Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia* (London: Penguin Books, 2003 [1938]).

had outlined. In a passage of his speech devoted to cultural matters, Dimitrov argued that fascist parties had gained an advantage over the left by seeming to embody the most powerful characteristics of the national traditions to which they happened to belong. One of the reasons for this was that they had consistently posed as the natural inheritors of the great heroes of their respective national pasts. Mussolini's fascists had come to seem quintessentially Italian by invoking the example of Garibaldi; French fascism had been ingenious enough to link itself to the tradition of Joan of Arc; while even the British fascists (in an example which Dimitrov did not mention) had claimed to be resurrecting the glorious traditions of the Tudor state under Queen Elizabeth.⁷ Dimitrov's point was that Communist Parties could only outflank the fascists by launching a sort of parallel project from the left. Instead of acquiescing in the idea that fascist values had deep roots in the history of every country, member parties of the Comintern had to persuade people of the precise opposite — that national traditions were actually continuous with the politics of communism. More precisely, Dimitrov called on the communists to draw people's attention to the existence of rich traditions of popular revolt in their respective countries — traditions which had gone a long way towards shaping the established forms of national identity:

Communists who do nothing to enlighten the masses on the past of their people . . . in a genuinely Marxist spirit, who do nothing to link up the present struggle with the people's revolutionary traditions and past . . . voluntarily hand over to the fascist falsifiers all that is valuable in the historical past of the nation.⁸

The CPGB only had limited success in its efforts to build a People's Front in Britain. Although the Party played a central and honourable role in the struggle against Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists (and although many British communists made a heroic contribution to the Republican side in the Spanish Civil War), it never persuaded the majority of democratic forces in Britain that a united movement against fascism was indeed urgently required. Limited co-operation from

⁷ For a brief account of the way that British fascists invoked the Elizabethan age as a means of legitimising their political ambitions, see Richard Thurlow, *Fascism in Britain: From Oswald Mosley's Blackshirts to the National Front*, revised edition (London: I.B. Tauris, 1998), pp. 120-121.

⁸ Dimitrov, *op cit.*, p. 70.

the leading figures on the Labour Left (Stafford Cripps, Harold Laski, Aneurin Bevan), maverick liberals (Richard Acland) and even Tory members of the landed aristocracy (the Duchess of Atholl) scarcely compensated for the resounding indifference of the major democratic parties. But what was not in doubt was the Party's extraordinary success in taking up Dimitrov's challenge to redefine the idea of Englishness along radical lines.⁹ From 1935 onwards, in a flurry of intellectual activity, many of the CPGB's leading writers made a sustained effort to excavate the history of what was usually called the "English radical tradition." The body of work which they produced can broadly be divided into two categories. On the one hand there was a series of writings which traced the history of plebeian revolt in Britain since the Peasants' Rising of 1381. These were supplemented by a more extensive (though perhaps not so influential) group of works which explored the influence of radical ideas on a selection of Britain's most famous writers — Shakespeare, Milton and Dickens among them. Our concern in this article is with the assumptions about the nature of the English character which underpinned the writings on popular revolt. I have examined the writings on English literature elsewhere.

Although the communist historians of the 1930s wrote a series of monographs on particular aspects of English radicalism, their first priority was to survey the entire history of popular revolt since the close of the Middle Ages. The most influential works were probably A.L. Morton's *A People's History of England* (1938) and Jack Lindsay's pamphlet *England My England* (1939), each of which assumed that the tradition of popular radicalism had begun in 1381 with the Peasants' Rising, renewed itself with the various early rebellions against enclosure (e.g. the Midlands Rising of 1609) and then extended forwards through the English Civil War, Chartism and the birth of modern socialism. These works were supplemented by an anthology of extracts from English radical literature which Lindsay co-edited with Edgell Rickword and which appeared in the space of less than a year under two different

⁹ For the cultural dimension of the People's Front policy in Britain, see, *inter alia*, Philip Bounds, *British Communism and the Politics of Literature 1928-1939*, especially Chapter Six; James Klugmann, "The Crisis in the Thirties: A View from the Left" in Jon Clark, Margot Heinemann, David Margolies and Carole Snee (eds.), *Culture and Crisis in Britain in the Thirties* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1979); Margot Heinemann, "The People's Front and the Intellectuals" in Jim Fyrth (ed.), *Britain, Fascism and the Popular Front* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1985); Margot Heinemann, *Left Review, New Writing and the Broad Alliance against Fascism* in Edward Timms and Peter Collier (eds.), *Visions and Blueprints: Avant-Garde Culture and Radical Politics in early Twentieth-Century Europe* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988); Mick Wallis, "Heirs to the Pageant: Mass Spectacle and the Popular Front" in Andy Croft (ed.), *A Weapon in the Struggle: The Cultural History of the Communist Party in Britain* (London: Pluto Press, 1998).

titles: *Volunteers for Liberty* (1939) and *A Handbook of English Freedom* (1940). It was the latter volume which contained the most succinct summary of the communist understanding of popular radicalism, specifically in Rickword's important "Introduction" entitled "On English Freedom." Rickword's starting point was the implied argument that the English people had always been the *real* custodians of liberal values by virtue of their unswerving commitment to communism. Whenever the masses had risen up against their rulers, or so it was argued, they had invariably been motivated by the dream of a communist society. The immediate causes of popular rebellion had varied from century to century, ranging from exasperation with feudal hierarchies to a hatred of enclosure, low pay and factory discipline, but the ultimate goal of the people had always been the establishment of a classless society based on common ownership: ". . . [the people have basically been asserting] a common human right which can only find satisfaction in social equality, the demand so to modify the state system that the way will be clear for free and equal collaboration in the productive life of the community."¹⁰ The twist in Rickword's argument was a startling assertion about the *political* consequences of popular radicalism. Although the people had not yet succeeded in establishing a communist society in Britain, their struggles against the ruling class had been almost wholly responsible for the emergence of democratic institutions and liberal values. Because they realised that the ultimate purpose of the state was to defend the property owners against pressures from below, the people had no choice but to supplement their fight for economic justice with a demand for such things as parliamentary government, trial by jury and freedom of speech. The strategic importance of this argument was clear. By insisting that "English liberty" was essentially the by-product of a broader struggle for a communist society, Rickword was trying to prove that the modern communists could be relied upon to defend "bourgeois democracy" against fascist attack — not something which everyone took for granted.

At a time when the CPGB was having considerable success in attracting middle-class intellectuals into its ranks, Rickword was quick to point out that the people's struggle for communism had always won the support of a large number of writers, philosophers and other cultural workers. If these "gifted individuals" had

¹⁰ Edgell Rickword, "Introduction: On English Freedom" in Edgell Rickword and Jack Lindsay (eds.), *Spokesmen for Liberty: A Record of English Democracy Through Twelve Centuries* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1941), p. xi.

never achieved a position of genuine leadership in the popular movement (in the sense that popular struggles had always been started by the people themselves), they had nevertheless played an important role in clarifying the people's objectives and imbuing them with a sort of visionary lustre: ". . . we recognise in the combinations of recalcitrant journeymen, in the staunch bearing of farm-labourers in the felon's dock, the seed of all the formulations of the rights of man and the rhapsodies of the poets on the theme of liberty."¹¹ Rickword even came close to suggesting that the alliance between the intellectuals and the people had been a decisive influence on the development of modern rationalism. Whenever the intellectuals had given their support to the people, or so it was argued, they had tended to articulate an optimistic world-view which emphasised the ability of human beings both to understand the world around them and to impose their will on it. It was only during periods of intellectual elitism that modern thought had been plunged into irrationalist gloom. The obvious problem with Rickword's vigorous brand of radical patriotism was that it raised difficult questions about the origins of national character. Anxious to avoid the taint of biological determinism, Rickword tried to show that the people's communist sympathies resulted from their historical experience and not from some mysterious genetic inheritance. The origins of popular radicalism lay in the "communal nature of labour" under both feudalism and capitalism — the fact that ordinary people had worked so closely together that they naturally regarded each other as comrades and equals.¹² Moreover, radical movements had been sustained over centuries by powerful political myths which held that a communist society had already existed in England, specifically in the period between the departure of the Romans and the arrival of the Normans. And if the common people's "independent turn of mind" had now been raised to the level of an instinct, it was surely because their "innate" responses had been conditioned by centuries of class struggle: "The plain necessity of having to work and fight through long centuries for advantage has fixed the strain, and has ingrained the deep suspicion of the bosses which Froissart noted as making us a nation very difficult to rule."¹³ Yet it was not always possible for Rickword to avoid a suggestion of English exceptionalism. In an extremely important passage whose significance I will return to later, he argued that the English idea of freedom

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. viii.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. xii.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. ix.

had always been marked by a salutary suspicion of unworldly theorising. The people had always campaigned for “some specific form” of freedom and been relatively unconcerned with “freedom in the abstract.”¹⁴ As we shall see, this insistence on portraying the English people as radical particularists concealed a highly unorthodox impulse which gave Rickword’s socialism more than a passing resemblance to Orwell’s.

Liberals into Socialists

Books and pamphlets such as *A People’s History of England*, *England My England* and *Spokesmen for Liberty* sold an enormous number of copies in the years before the war, though there is no direct evidence that Orwell read them. What we do know is that Orwell reviewed a number of communist writings on the radical tradition in the period after he returned from the Spanish Civil War in 1937, including Neil Stewart’s *The Fight for the Charter* (1937) and Christopher Hill’s *The English Revolution 1640* (1940).¹⁵ He also referred on a number of occasions to C. Day Lewis’s symposium *The Mind in Chains* (1937), which contained Rickword’s important essay “Culture, Progress, and English Tradition.”¹⁶ It is therefore unsurprising that there were so many many similarities between the communist interpretation of Englishness and the one which Orwell advanced in books such as *The Lion and the Unicorn* and *The English People*. Let us begin with the crucial issue of the relative balance of liberal and socialist elements in the political outlook of the common people. Whereas Rickword had effectively claimed that the English people were good liberals because they were also good communists, Orwell took a more historically nuanced view. Instead of claiming that the people had somehow been socialists since the late Middle Ages, he insisted (at least implicitly) that the characteristics which had previously inclined them towards liberalism now made them sympathetic to the idea of socialist revolution. More precisely, he believed that the

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. ix.

¹⁵ See George Orwell, Review of *The Problem of the Distressed Areas* by Wal Hannington; *Grey Children* by James Hanley; *The Fight for the Charter* by Neil Stewart, *Time and Tide*, 27 November 1937. Reprinted in *The Complete Works of George Orwell, Volume 11: Facing Unpleasant Facts 1937-1939* (London: Secker and Warburg, 2000) [hereafter CW 11], pp. 98-99; George Orwell, Review of Christopher Hill (ed.), *The English Revolution: 1640, The New Statesman and Nation*, 24 August 1940. Reprinted in CW 12, pp. 244-245. It is interesting to note that Orwell reviewed Hill’s book just before he began writing *The Lion and the Unicorn*.

¹⁶ See, *inter alia*, Orwell, “Inside the Whale” in CW 12, p. 108.

peculiarities of the English temperament had prompted ordinary Englishmen to embrace a number of relatively vague political principles, each of which could be bent to either liberal or socialist purposes. Writing in “England Your England,” the first and most compelling part of *The Lion and the Unicorn*, he famously argued that the two most essential features of English culture were its “gentleness” and its “privateness.”¹⁷ The people who thronged the streets of the big English cities, marked out by their “mild knobby faces, their bad teeth and gentle manners,”¹⁸ were undoubtedly the most pacific in the industrial world: “In no country inhabited by white men is it easier to shove people off the pavement.”¹⁹ Their instinct was always to shy away from “official” spaces and activities and to organise their culture around “the pub, the football match, the back garden, the fireside and the ‘nice cup of tea.’”²⁰ Their passion for privacy had even given them a shameless and decidedly un-European taste for life’s lower pleasures, exemplified by their frequent drunkenness, their obscene jokes and their prodigious swearing. When these temperamental traits expressed themselves in political terms, they primarily did so through an overwhelming belief that “might is not right.”²¹ The English people invariably took the side of the downtrodden and oppressed, even if their detachment from current affairs (a symptom of what Orwell had earlier called the “deep, deep sleep of England”)²² often meant that they were blissfully ignorant of gross abuses of power perpetrated by their own country — the obvious example being the treatment of the colonial peoples throughout the British Empire. A related aspect of the English suspicion of power was a deep hatred of militarism. Writing at a time when Winston Churchill was famously trying to rally the nation with his talk of “blood, toil, tears and sweat”, Orwell insisted that nearly everyone in England “loathe[d] from the bottom of their hearts . . . the swaggering officer type, the jingle of spurs and the crash of boots.”²³ If the British Army ever decided to adopt the goose-step, which Orwell regarded as a horrific symbol of untrammelled power, they would probably find that the common people laughed at them in the streets. Just as important was the people’s

¹⁷ Orwell, *The Lion and the Unicorn* in CW 12, pp. 394-395.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 392.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 395.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 394.

²¹ George Orwell, *The English People* (London: Collins, 1947). Reprinted in *The Complete Works of George Orwell, Volume 16: I Have Tried to Tell the Truth 1943-1944* (London: Secker and Warburg, 2001) [hereafter CW 16], p. 205.

²² Orwell, *Homage to Catalonia*, p. 187.

²³ Orwell, *The Lion and the Unicorn* in CW 12, p. 396.

deep respect for the idea of constitutional government. While recognising with one part of his mind that the legal system is skewed in favour of the rich, the ordinary Englishman nevertheless “takes it for granted that the law, such as it is, will be respected, and feels a sense of outrage when it is not.”²⁴ In a barely concealed dig at the great communist lawyer D.N. Pritt, Orwell wryly observed that the English respect for constitutional proprieties even extended to those “eminent Marxist professors” who protested so frequently against miscarriages of “British justice.”²⁵

Support for the underdog, hatred of militarism and the strong state, respect for due constitutional process — these were the political principles to which the English people tended to adhere. Orwell’s point was that none of these principles could realistically be pursued within the confines of bourgeois democracy. If the English people wanted to live in a society which fully reflected their identity, they had no choice but to abolish capitalism and opt for socialism instead: “By revolution we become more ourselves, not less.”²⁶ However, despite the fact that *The Lion and the Unicorn* and *The English People* shared this emphasis on the Englishness of the socialist ideal, Orwell’s understanding of the political situation in Britain changed significantly in the three years which separated the one book from the other.²⁷ As we have already seen, Orwell’s argument in *The Lion and the Unicorn* was that the war against Hitler could not be won unless Britain took the socialist path. The country’s dismal performance in the early months of the war showed that the free market could not produce weapons efficiently enough. It also showed that capitalism tended to concentrate political power in the hands of the wealthy and the old (ineffably complacent “lords of property” like Lord Halifax) who were simply too set in their ways to provide effective leadership. If the English people were to be spared the indignity of seeing German troops washing their boots in the Thames, they had to take matters into their own hands and implement a full-blooded socialist programme including nationalisation of all basic industries, reduction of income inequality and democratic reform of education. As surprising as it may seem in retrospect, Orwell was convinced for much of the period between 1940 and 1942 that this sort of revolution was not merely necessary but also imminent. Whenever Britain

²⁴ Ibid., p. 397.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 397.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 432.

²⁷ *The English People* was written in 1943 but only published in 1947.

experienced some especially grave military setback, such as the evacuation from France in 1940 or the defeats in the Far East in 1942, he thought it almost inevitable that the people would rise up and turn out their rulers. His optimism on this score increased markedly when Sir Stafford Cripps emerged as the possible leader of an independent left in 1942. Moreover, Orwell seemed perfectly comfortable with the idea that the people might have to resort to violence in order to achieve power (“I dare say the London gutters will have to run with blood. All right, let them, if it is necessary.”)²⁸ and even argued that the Home Guard (to whose St John’s Wood section he belonged) might soon be transformed into a sort of citizen’s militia. Not much of this revolutionary bravado survived into *The English People*. Having accepted at some time in late 1942 that his predictions of imminent revolution were wrong, Orwell was now anxious to point out that Britain was not a country in which political violence was at all likely: “. . . civil war is not *morally* possible in England. In any circumstances that we can foresee, the proletariat of Hammersmith will not arise and massacre the *bourgeoisie* of Kensington: they are not different enough.”²⁹ What was new about *The English People* was Orwell’s implied argument (later spelled out more explicitly in essays such as “Towards European Unity”) that England’s ultimate political destiny was to exercise a civilising influence on socialist revolutions throughout the rest of the world. Since the “outstanding and . . . highly original quality of the English is their habit of *not killing one another*” (Orwell’s emphasis),³⁰ it followed that the socialist movement in Britain had at least a sporting chance of building a planned economy without surrendering to the totalitarian temptations which go with it. This might well lead to a situation (or so Orwell implied) in which the example of a socialist Britain would serve to stimulate change elsewhere in the world, not least by puncturing the myth that any attempt to overthrow capitalism leads necessarily to the sort of Stalinist “deformations” seen in the USSR.

Perhaps because most of his readers were likely to be culturally ambitious members of the lower middle class, Orwell made no reference in either of the books on Englishness to the “radical tradition” whose history the communists had uncovered. There were no stirring references to the Peasants’ Revolt or even to the

²⁸ Orwell, “My Country Right or Left” in CW 12, p. 272.

²⁹ Orwell, *The English People* in CW 12, p. 210.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 222.

Lollards, the Levellers and the Diggers. However, in a number of his other writings, Orwell made it clear that he was familiar with communist research on the radical tradition and that he agreed with much of what it had to say. At the same time (and unsurprisingly) he also took a great delight in holding some of its more tendentious assumptions up to criticism. There is an amusing example of this dual attitude in Orwell's "Introduction" to Volume One of *British Pamphleteers* (1948), the anthology of extracts from British political pamphlets which he co-edited with his friend Reginald Reynolds. In the context of a stimulating discussion of the role of the pamphlet in British life, Orwell pointed to the fact that "revolutionary" and "visionary" pamphlets by the likes of Gerrard Winstanley had appeared time and again in the course of British history. Much of what he said about this revolutionary tradition would not have been out of place in a pamphlet by Lindsay or an essay by Rickword. For instance, he noted that Winstanley's writings were authentically socialist in spite of being written in a pre-industrial society (the communists had often been fiercely criticised for arguing that socialism had pre-existed the industrial age), and also that British revolutionaries frequently tried to bolster their support by claiming that a communist society had already existed in Britain. Yet many of his other comments might have been specifically designed to stick in the communist gullet. Most obviously, Orwell disagreed spectacularly with the communists over the relevance of the radical tradition to contemporary politics. Whereas writers like Morton, Lindsay and Rickword clearly believed that the vision of human brotherhood which the radical tradition had passed down through the centuries (and which formed the core of its appeal) would at last be realised in the communist society of the future, Orwell seemed to regard it as profoundly inspiring but also deeply quixotic, a sort of necessary myth to leaven the harsh realities of practical politics: "The most encouraging fact about revolutionary activity is that, although it always fails, it always continues. The vision of a world of free and equal beings, living together in a state of brotherhood . . . never materialises, but the belief in it never seems to die out."³¹

There was also an interesting difference of opinion over whom should be regarded as the radical tradition's modern heirs. On most of the occasions when the communists

³¹ George Orwell, "Introduction" to George Orwell and Reginald Reynolds (eds.), *British Pamphleteers, Volume 1: From the Sixteenth Century to the French Revolution*, (London: Allan Wingate, 1948). Reprinted in *The Complete Works of George Orwell, Volume 18: It Is What I Think 1947-1948* (London: Secker and Warburg, 2002), p. 109.

wrote about the history of English revolt, they were careful to emphasise that the only modern organisation that could claim the mantle of Wat Tyler, Robert Owen or William Morris was the CPGB itself — the “party of a new type” that would finally allow the English people to achieve their dream of a classless society. Orwell saw things rather differently: “The English Diggers and Levellers . . . are links in a chain of thought which stretches from the slave revolts of antiquity, through various peasant risings and heretical sects of the Middle Ages, down to the Socialists of the nineteenth century and the Trotskyists and Anarchists of our own day.”³² Of all Orwell’s barbs against the communists, this might well have been the one that hurt the most.

Science and the Suspicion of Theory

If Orwell agreed with the communists that the English people had conflated socialist and liberal concerns in a very distinctive way, he also echoed Rickword’s point about their distrust of theory. One of his first observations in “England Your ‘England’” was that “. . . the English are not intellectual” and that they “. . . have a horror of abstract thought, they feel no need for any philosophy or systematic world-view.”³³ Moreover, in spite of belonging to one of the most emphatically doctrinal movements in the history of world politics, he not only recognised the strain of anti-intellectualism in the English sensibility but actually seemed to endorse it.³⁴ One of the reasons for this was his paradoxical belief that indifference to intellectual achievement can often be of great help in keeping liberal values alive. Since the English people cared so little about ideas, Orwell appeared to argue, they were unlikely to call for restrictions on anyone’s right to express them. Orwell also took great pleasure in the sheer inconsistency to which his fellow countrymen were prone, even predicting on one occasion that an element of scatterbrained illogicality would be absolutely typical of the socialist future. For instance, while a revolutionary government in Britain would undoubtedly take steps to abolish capitalism and reduce social inequalities, it might also decide to keep the monarchy in place — not least (or

³² Ibid., p. 109.

³³ Orwell, *The Lion and the Unicorn* in CW 12, p. 393.

³⁴ It should nevertheless be pointed out that Orwell did not endorse the English suspicion of the intellect without qualification. In *The English People* he argued that “. . . they [the English] must get rid of their downright contempt for ‘cleverness,’” though even there he acknowledged that “They will always prefer instinct to logic, and character to intelligence.” See CW 16, p. 227.

so Orwell implied) because of the historical myth which stated that kings and queens had frequently taken the poor's side against the ruling class of the day. Yet his real reason for endorsing the English suspicion of theory went much deeper than any of this. One of the most salient characteristics of English socialism in Orwell's period was its reverence for the physical sciences. Convinced that the capitalist system was incapable of exploiting the latest advances in technology, many of the left's most powerful advocates argued that socialism's chief mission was to liberate science from the distortions of the free market. By celebrating the common people's instinctive preference for concrete particulars over the scientist's drab abstractions, Orwell was therefore implicitly distancing himself from what he called the left's habit of "machine worship." Like Rickword before him (though much more explicitly) he was setting himself up as a "diagnostician of the Left's ills" whose purpose was more to bury science than to praise it.³⁵

Orwell's attitude to science reminds us once again of how deeply he was influenced by his communist contemporaries.³⁶ The close association between science and socialism in the 1930s was largely brought about by a very distinguished group of scientists, including J.D. Bernal, J.B.S. Haldane, Hyman Levy, Joseph Needham and Lancelot Hogben, who either joined or became actively sympathetic to the CPGB at about this time. Apart from pursuing research in their respective areas of expertise, these and other writers exercised a major influence on the public debate about science through their membership of the so-called "Social Relations of Science" movement (SRS).³⁷ The SRS movement was an informal grouping of Marxist and *Marxisant* intellectuals which set out to understand the relationship between scientific activity and broader forms of social organisation. Its guiding assumption was that scientific research could not be expected to prosper if capitalism remained in existence. The most powerful version of this argument was put forward by Bernal in a flurry of books, essays and articles, notably "Science and Civilisation" (1938) and *The Social Function of Science* (1939). Bernal's point was that capitalism tends to

³⁵ The phrase "diagnostician of the left's ills" is taken from Alex Zwerdling, *Orwell and the Left* (London: Yale University Press, 1974), p. 5.

³⁶ For Orwell's attitude towards science and technology, see, *inter alia*, Steven Edelheit, *Dark Prophecies* (New York: Revisionist Press, 1979); Peter Huber, *Orwell's Revenge: The 1984 Palimpsest* (New York: The Free Press, 1994), pp. 67-75. Huber's account is especially insightful.

³⁷ For the history of the SRS movement, see, *inter alia*, Gary Werskey, *The Visible College: A Collective Biography of British Scientists and Socialists of the 1930s* (London: Free Association Books, 1988).

undermine scientific research by doing two things: (1) creating an intellectual climate in which “pure” science is better regarded than “applied” science,” and (2) preventing individual scientists from fully co-operating with other experts in their respective fields. The root of both problems was what Marxists often called the “anarchy” of capitalist production. Because there is no guarantee in a free market that goods and services will necessarily find a buyer, there is a natural tendency for companies greatly to delay investing (and sometimes not to invest at all) in the most expensive forms of new technology. This creates a mood of profound disillusionment among scientists which causes them to devalue the idea of applied research (that is, research carried out for explicitly practical ends) and to retreat instead into compensatory fantasies about the “disinterested” pursuit of knowledge. However, since scientists are usually at their most creative when seeking to solve practical problems, this means that the finest scientific minds are effectively robbed of one of their most powerful intellectual stimulants. Matters are compounded by the sheer isolation which market societies impose on their scientific workers. Scientists employed by private companies are usually forbidden from sharing their knowledge with their peers in other organisations (on the obvious grounds that to do so might be to lose a competitive advantage), while state-employed scientists have no record of meaningful collaboration with their foreign colleagues. The consequence is an immense loss of intellectual power, since (or so Bernal argued) scientific research can only proceed efficiently if knowledge is firstly pooled and then rigorously assessed by all the relevant experts. The only solution to the crisis of scientific research is the creation of a socialist society, since it is only in a planned economy that technological advances can immediately be applied to practical problems. The advent of socialism also allows the entire population to receive an extensive scientific education, thereby creating a situation in which scientific workers can be held to account by ordinary working people. Bernal insisted that these benevolent developments were already underway in the Soviet Union.³⁸

Orwell’s attitude to the work of the SRS movement was deeply ambiguous. On the one hand, as we shall see in a moment, there were passages in his work in

³⁸ This paragraph summarises the argument of J.D. Bernal, *The Social Function of Science* (London: Routledge, 1939). Bernal’s own summary of the argument is contained in his essay “Science and Civilisation” in C. Day Lewis, *The Mind in Chains: Socialism and the Cultural Revolution* (London: Frederick Muller, 1937). For a useful overview of “Bernalism,” see Edwin A. Roberts, *The Anglo-Marxists: A Study in Ideology and Culture* (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, 1997), pp. 156-178.

which he reproduced the tenets of “Bernalism” almost exactly. But there were many other passages (infinitely more heartfelt ones) in which he implicitly defined his attitude to science *against* the SRS orthodoxy. The most interesting example of the anti-scientific strain in Orwell’s thinking can be found in Chapter XII of *The Road to Wigan Pier*. The argument of this chapter was that although “machine civilisation” can never be turned back (and although socialism can indeed be expected to benefit scientific research), it nevertheless contains grave dangers which need to be guarded against if the quality of human life is not to be permanently lowered. Orwell’s biggest anxiety was that technological progress would end up reducing human beings to a state of “soft” and “flabby” torpor. Against the argument that socialism inevitably restores what John Ruskin had famously called “joy in labour,” Orwell insisted that the “tendency” of modern technology is to rationalise production to the point where all traces of intellectual and aesthetic significance have been stripped from the experience of work. In a society which compels the worker to become the glorified superintendent of an automated labour process (and which also condemns him to live in a “glittering Wells-world” from which nature has been largely expelled) it is more or less impossible to cultivate the “hard” and “brave” qualities which Orwell regarded as the foundation stones of a genuine civilisation: “strength, courage, generosity, etc.”³⁹ Nor did Orwell believe that advanced technology would liberate people into a new world of creative and fulfilling leisure. While accepting that socialism would greatly reduce the length of the working week, he also insisted (*pace* William Morris) that it would ultimately prove very difficult to prevent the machine invading people’s leisure time and doing as much damage to their recreations as it had once done to their work.

The citizen of Utopia, we are told, coming home from his daily two hours of turning a handle in the tomato-canning factory, will deliberately revert to a more primitive way of life and solace his creative instincts with a bit of fretwork, pottery-glazing or handloom-weaving. And why is this picture an absurdity — as it is, of course? Because of a principle that is not always recognised, though always acted upon: that so long as the machine is

³⁹ Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, p. 180.

there, one is under an obligation to use it. No one draws water from the well when he can turn on the tap.⁴⁰

As is clear from this passage, Orwell's main fear was that technology had somehow acquired a momentum of its own. Human beings now invented machines even when there was no clear need to do so. If this situation were to be reversed under socialism, it would be necessary for mavericks like Orwell to form themselves into a "permanent opposition" and campaign for technology to be used sensitively and sparingly. All of which brings us back to the brief passages which celebrated the common people's lack of intellectual distinction. When Orwell portrayed the English workers as the polar opposites of the scientific elite, instinctively attached to the life of the senses and suspicious of all forms of abstraction, he was surely implying that they would form a powerful counterweight to all forms of Bernalist technophilia in the society of the future. This belief occasionally betrayed him into some highly idiosyncratic observations about the value of education. Whereas most left-wingers believed that socialism would enable all men to become intellectuals, Orwell seems to have been concerned that too much education would strip the workers of their healthiest instincts. In a curiously invigorating (though also highly disconcerting) passage in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, he famously praised the working class for "see[ing] through" the idea of formal education and insisted that "I now know that there is not one working-class boy in a thousand who does not pine for the day when he will leave school. He wants to be doing real work, not wasting his time on ridiculous rubbish like history and geography."⁴¹ And yet, as George Woodcock has pointed out, there were other occasions on which Orwell's educational pronouncements were so mild as to be scarcely noticeable.⁴² There was an especially interesting example towards the end of *The English People*. While insisting that a "uniform educational system" (i.e. one in which children of all backgrounds and aptitudes are taught together) should be instituted for all pupils up until the age of about ten or twelve, Orwell also argued that educational streaming should be

⁴⁰ Ibid., pp. 185-186.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 107.

⁴² For Woodcock's account of Orwell's views on education, see George Woodcock, *The Crystal Spirit: A Study of George Orwell* (London: 4th Estate, 1984), pp. 217-219.

rigorously applied to the older age-groups.⁴³ It was not one of his more inspiring proposals.

On the relatively few occasions when Orwell spoke positively about science, he usually employed arguments which the SRS movement had done much to popularise. In spite of his hostility to the machine, he took it for granted that one of the main reasons for wanting socialism was that the free market had become a brake on technological development. While scarcely as utopian as a Bernal or a Hogben, he also recognised that the machines of the future would go a long way towards liberating human beings from unpleasant work — not least the gruesome business of doing the dishes. Moreover, as Peter Huber has pointed out, there was a corner of his mind which regarded technology as one of the most potent enemies of totalitarianism. Since all dictatorships are founded on systematic lying, Orwell appeared to believe, it is clearly of the highest significance that science has invented a range of devices which can store truthful information in a comparatively indestructible form. For instance, while working at the BBC as a talks producer during the war, he pointed out in a letter to Ritchie Calder that microfilms (the subject of a forthcoming broadcast) had the ability to “prevent . . . libraries from being destroyed by bombs or by the police of totalitarian regimes.”⁴⁴ Yet even when he seemed closest to the spirit of the SRS movement, he could rarely resist taking its ideas and imbuing them with an anti-scientific twist. There was a particularly outrageous example in an article called “What is Science?” which appeared in *Tribune* in 1945. Responding to a piece of correspondence from J. Stewart Cook, Orwell endorsed the idea that the general public should receive a much wider scientific education — one of the SRS movement’s main demands.⁴⁵ Yet he followed this concession to orthodoxy with a swingeing attack on the political outlook of scientists, insisting that a knowledge of the natural world could often do as much to blunt political understanding as to promote it. Drawing his evidence from Robert Brady’s *The Spirit and Structure of German Fascism* (a publication of the Left Book Club) he noted that German scientists had proved especially susceptible to the appeal of Hitler, and that “the

⁴³ Orwell, *The English People* in CW 16, pp. 224-225.

⁴⁴ George Orwell, Letter to Ritchie Calder in *The Complete Works of George Orwell, Volume 14: Keeping Our Little Corner Clean 1942-1943* (London: Secker and Warburg, 2001) [hereafter CW 14], p. 51. Quoted in Huber, op cit., p. 72.

⁴⁵ J. Stewart Cook’s letter to *Tribune* is reproduced in *The Complete Works of George Orwell, Volume 17: I Belong To The Left 1945* (London: Secker and Warburg, 2001) [hereafter CW 17], pp. 317-318.

ability to withstand nationalism” was likely to be stronger in ordinary people than in the scientific elite.⁴⁶ Whereas Bernal had blamed the insularity of modern science on competition between capitalist states, Orwell seemed to regard it as a sort of professional deformation arising from scientific activity itself.

The Role of the Middle Classes

Having surveyed the most important characteristics of the common people, Orwell’s other main goal in the writings on Englishness was to provide a brief snapshot of the wider class structure in England. What was the current state of the middle and upper classes? To what extent could people from outside the working class be expected to participate in the socialist movement? Were the working, middle and upper classes really that different from each other? These were the questions which preoccupied Orwell in sections III to VI of “England Your England” and in certain passages of *The English People*. Developing a theme which had first been broached in *The Road to Wigan Pier*, Orwell argued that the socialist movement would only be successful in England if it won the support of “most of the middle class,” especially the “new indeterminate class of skilled workers, technical experts, airmen, scientists, architects and journalists” who were right at home in the “radio and ferro-concrete age.”⁴⁷ It is often assumed that this interest in the middle-class distinguished Orwell from the rest of the British left, which (or so the argument goes) remained obsessed with the industrial workers and wholly uninterested in the “progressive” potential of other social strata. Yet this is to overlook the fact that a concern with winning middle-class support had been a central feature of Marxist politics at the time of the People’s Front. Indeed, there were some striking parallels between *The Lion and the Unicorn* and Alec Brown’s *The Fate of the Middle Classes* (1936), a rather breathless communist text which Orwell reviewed on two separate occasions in the months following its publication.⁴⁸ The purpose of the rest of this article is to examine Orwell’s writings on the English class system in the light of Brown’s earlier efforts.

⁴⁶ George Orwell, “What is Science?” *Tribune*, 26 October 1945. Reprinted in CW 17, p. 324.

⁴⁷ Orwell, *The Lion and the Unicorn* in CW 12, p. 427.

⁴⁸ See George Orwell, Review of *The Fate of the Middle Classes* by Alec Brown, *New English Weekly*, 30 April 1936. Reprinted in CW 10, p. 477; George Orwell, Review of *The Fate of the Middle Classes* by Alec Brown, *The Adelphi*, May 1936. Reprinted in CW 10, p. 478.

Brown was already well known as an experimental novelist by the time he wrote *The Fate of the Middle Classes*. (Orwell ungenerously described his novel *Daughters of Albion* as a “huge wad of mediocre stuff” in the *New English Weekly* in 1936.)⁴⁹ In 1934 he famously announced in *Left Review* that the socialist novel should be written exclusively in the language of the proletariat, on the grounds that “LITERARY LANGUAGE FROM CAXTON TO US IS AN ARTIFICIAL JARGON OF THE RULING CLASS.”⁵⁰ This earned him a considerable amount of derision from his fellow communists, though it also sparked a lengthy debate which anticipated many of the arguments in Orwell’s later writings on the political function of language. *The Fate of the Middle Classes* was less provocatively written, though its two main objectives were controversial enough: (1) to assess the likelihood of certain sections of the middle class going over to the side of communism, and (2) to identify the political, ideological and structural factors which had so far prevented them from doing so. Brown’s argument was that modern capitalism had created a middle class consisting of three distinct groups, each of which had been fundamentally affected by the onset of the world slump. At the bottom of the heap was the so-called “traditional” middle class, made up of shopkeepers, handicraftsmen and other “small traders.” Wholly ineffective in their efforts to beat off the competition from big business, the majority of this group were now in danger of being sucked down into the working class.⁵¹ More fortunate was the relatively small group of administrators who held elite positions in government and industry. Since most of these “black-coated workers” were essentially surrogates for the bourgeoisie, “piloting the ship” while the real bosses lived off a hoard of unearned income, their wealth and prestige had actually *grown* in the years since the Great War. As such, they were most unlikely to throw in their lot with the left. Brown’s real interest was in the section of the middle class which came between the other two groups — the extensive network of “brain workers” (teachers, scientists, writers etc.) who catered to all the educational, technical and cultural requirements of advanced capitalism. In a passage which echoed many of the assumptions of the SRS movement, Brown insisted that the onset of the slump had put Britain’s intellectual workers in an

⁴⁹ George Orwell, Review of *The Novel To-Day* by Philip Henderson, *New English Weekly*, 31 December 1936. Reprinted in CW 10, p. 534.

⁵⁰ Alec Brown, Contribution to “Controversy: Writers’ International,” *Left Review*, Vol. 1 No. 3, December 1934, p. 77.

⁵¹ Alec Brown, *The Fate of the Middle Classes* (London, Gollancz, 1936), p. 99f.

intolerably frustrating position. Endowed by their professional training with a deep need to be creative, many of them had failed to find the sort of jobs that were capable of holding their interest. Highly trained scientists had settled for menial supervisory positions, writers of all kinds were hampered by a contracting market for their work, teachers languished on the dole. If the majority of disaffected intellectuals had yet to go over to communism, it was only (or so Brown argued) because the ideology of the middle-class had imbued them with some disabling illusions about the extent of their influence. Because the bourgeoisie had devolved so much power to managers, scientists, technicians and so on, it had become natural for the middle class to believe that modern society was essentially run by themselves. These illusions of power were reinforced by the modern education system, which imbued its more successful products with an entirely misleading sense of their own intellectual eminence. According to Brown, the modern middle class were instinctive voluntarists — they failed to understand that the ineluctable laws of capitalism would invariably prevent them from reshaping society according to their own desires. Yet this situation could not possibly last. A deepening of the capitalist crisis, combined with a vigorous intervention from the left, would surely convince even the most purblind member of the technical intelligentsia that communism was not merely necessary but also essential.

There were several ways in which Orwell's account of the class system coincided with (and was presumably influenced by) the one to be found in *The Fate of the Middle Classes*. The first part of Section IV of "England Your England," in which Orwell provided a mordant commentary on the state of the ruling class, can almost be read as a four-page expansion of a throwaway remark in Brown's book. When Brown drew attention to the tendency of the modern bourgeoisie to delegate power to managers, technicians and scientists, he argued that one of the side effects had been a catastrophic decline of the bourgeoisie themselves: "This inactivity of the bulk of the owning class — partly made possible by the fact that the new middle class was more and more running the complex apparatus of fully developed monopolistic capitalism — naturally resulted in a deterioration of the individuals composing the class, a deterioration of the class as a whole."⁵² Orwell took exactly the same position in his comments on bourgeois culture, ascribing the "decay of ability in the ruling

⁵² Ibid., p. 71.

class”⁵³ to the fact that the dynamic entrepreneurs of the past had now been transformed into “mere *owners*, their work being done for them by salaried managers and technicians.”⁵⁴ Orwell only differed from Brown in suggesting that the process of decline had been accelerated by a conscious choice. Faced with the realisation that they no longer had a role to play in the running of the modern economy, the ruling class had actually *decided* to become stupid, since this was the only way they could convince themselves of their continuing relevance: “They could keep society in its existing shape only by being *unable* to grasp that any improvement was possible.”⁵⁵ When he shifted his attention to the middle classes, Orwell also found much to agree with in Brown’s book. Like Brown, though with much less recourse to Marxist terminology, he accepted that (1) the middle classes could now be divided into two or three distinct groups, (2) that at least one of these groups (the so-called “small traders”) were in danger of disappearing altogether, and that (3) it was the broadly “technical” and “intellectual” groups that could be expected to go over to the left. However, despite accepting Brown’s analysis in its broad outlines, Orwell also contributed some arguments of his own which went a long way towards distancing him from the communist position. The most important was about the precise circumstances in which the intellectual middle-class would be radicalised. While Brown had argued that Britain’s scientists, technicians and teachers would end up converting to socialism because middle-class employment was under threat, Orwell insisted that the middle class was actually *expanding*. Writing in Section VI of “England Your England”, he famously observed that one of the “most important developments” during the inter-war years had been the unprecedented spread of middle-class habits.⁵⁶ At a time when English culture had been permanently transformed by the “mass-production of cheap clothes and improvements in housing,”⁵⁷ it was becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish the middle classes from large sections of the proletariat and even from sections of the bourgeoisie. Class distinctions which had previously seemed inviolable were now being blurred by a “general softening of manners.”⁵⁸ It was this which opened up the possibility of an

⁵³ Orwell, *The Lion and the Unicorn* in CW 12, p. 401.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 402.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 403.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 407.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 407.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 408.

alliance between the middle and working classes, since (or so Orwell implied) the cultural differences which had previously held them apart were no longer quite so evident. Whereas the communists spoke the language of class polarisation, insisting that the rich were getting richer and the “middling types” sinking back towards the proletariat, Orwell put his hope for the future in the fact that large sections of British society were now converging on the centre ground.

There is one further parallel between Brown and Orwell which needs to be examined before we move on. This is the rather unusual fact that both men chose to illustrate their arguments about the middle class by invoking the work of H.G. Wells. References to Wells occur time and again in *The Fate of the Middle Classes*, beginning in the first few pages of the “Introduction” and extending right through to the “Appendix.” Brown’s argument was that Wells embodied in an extreme form all the most troubling characteristics of the intellectual worker under advanced capitalism. His most obvious handicap was the sort of delusions of intellectual grandeur that were typical of the scientific elite. Convinced that “We originative intellectual workers are reconditioning human life,”⁵⁹ he had somehow persuaded himself that people of his own kind could reshape the world without meeting undue resistance either from existing rulers or from the impersonal laws of capitalism. The result was an astonishing ignorance of the way that modern societies actually work. Nowhere in Wells’s writings was there any recognition that the free play of the scientific imagination could ever be stymied by the inherent limitations of a market society. According to Brown, Wells’s excessive faith in the power of the literary and scientific intelligentsia resulted from the widespread habit of associating membership of the middle class with the possession of high intelligence. Because admission to middle-class employment was now largely dependent on educational success (and because schools and universities breed intellectual snobbery in a peculiarly virulent form), it is inevitable that people like Wells will come to regard themselves as prodigies of intellectual flair — and also that they will venerate the intellect as a force which nothing on earth is ultimately capable of withstanding. In a mischievous attempt to deflate Wells’s reputation for scientific prescience, Brown suggested that this species of intellectual fanaticism expressed itself in his novels in the form of a solipsistic indifference to the laws of nature: “. . . in the *Food of the Gods* there is no

⁵⁹ H.G. Wells, *Experiment in Autobiography* (London: Gollancz, 1934), p. 17. Quoted in Alec Brown, *The Fate of the Middle Classes*, p. 14.

hint of the impossibility of a wasp just swelling to a yard long and still functioning; no hint of that most important truth that the organs of any species are all developed especially for that species, and as size increases or decreases from normal, the creature functions badly . . . the principal thing for Mr. Wells is not to start from reality and work with real elements, but to *invent something which is outside the normal world.*⁶⁰ Brown also detected a curiously *unhistorical* element in many of Wells's novels. Whenever Wells evoked one of the central characteristics of life under capitalism (such as the division of society into classes) he invariably did so in a basically *static* form — there was no attempt to analyse things in their historical development. In so doing, Brown implied, he was able to dismiss capitalism from his thoughts by portraying it as a system fundamentally lacking in dynamism. Although his two reviews of *The Fate of the Middle Classes* were not entirely complimentary, Orwell recognised in one of them that Brown's remarks about Wells were "brilliantly done."⁶¹ It is therefore unsurprising that Orwell's subsequent writings on Wells should have echoed Brown's arguments. This was especially true of "Wells, Hitler and the World State," the vigorously polemical essay which appeared in *Horizon* in August 1941. The core of the essay was Orwell's response to *Guide to the New World* (1941), a short book in which Wells had assessed the state of the war against Hitler and made some suggestions for "constructive world revolution." At a time when the German army had just scored some notable successes in Eastern Europe and Cyrenaica, Orwell found it astonishing that Wells should have (1) underestimated the strength of Hitler's military machine, and (2) suggested in all seriousness that the only solution to the problem of fascism was the immediate establishment of a World State. This breathtaking lack of realism was not so much the product of a defective imagination as of Wells's distinctive social position: "Mr. Wells, like Dickens, belongs to the non-military middle class."⁶² Because Wells had been immersed for so long in the scientific ideology of his particular social group, he had lost all understanding of the dark forces which drove contemporary world affairs. He had every faith in the ability of the "scientific man" to usher in a world of "order, progress, internationalism, aeroplanes, steel, concrete [and] hygiene"; yet he failed to

⁶⁰ Brown, *The Fate of the Middle Classes*, p. 31.

⁶¹ Orwell, CW 10, p. 478.

⁶² George Orwell, "Wells, Hitler and the World State," *Horizon*, August 1941. Reprinted in CW 12, p. 538.

recognise that the so-called “romantic man” (exemplified in the modern world by Hitler) had a much greater hold on the public imagination with his frankly atavistic vision of blood and honour.⁶³ The similarities between Orwell’s arguments and those of Alec Brown are surely clear enough. There is the same emphasis on Wells as a representative figure of the scientific middle class; the same sense of amazement that he should have misunderstood the modern world so completely (though Orwell was more concerned with his softness on fascism than with his ignorance of the capitalist system); and the same limitless scorn for the sheer impracticality of his political vision. Where Orwell differed from Brown was in his assessment of Wells’s historical achievement. While Brown had dismissed Wells as a scientific and historical ignoramus, Orwell looked back with admiration to the zenith of his career (roughly between 1890 and 1920) when he had helped to transform the modern world with the prescience of his political and scientific judgements. In spite of the unparalleled conservatism of Victorian and Edwardian society, Wells exploded the complacency of the age not simply by anticipating the radical changes that would shortly occur but also by imbuing them with an air of febrile excitement: “. . . [he] *knew* that the future was not going to be what respectable people imagined. A decade or so before aeroplanes were technically feasible Wells knew that within a little while men would be able to fly. He knew that because he himself *wanted* to be able to fly, and therefore felt sure that research in that direction would continue.”⁶⁴ Even when Orwell’s arguments came closest to those of the communists, he was clearly incapable of sharing their disdain for the ornaments of “bourgeois culture.” Wells was a “wonderful man”⁶⁵ and any younger writer who tried to question his achievement had ultimately committed a “sort of parricide.”⁶⁶

⁶³ Ibid., pp. 538-539.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 540.

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 540.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 539.