

My Orwell Right or Wrong

***Why Orwell Matters*, by Christopher Hitchens. Basic Books, 2002, 211 + xii pages. A book review by David Ramsay Steele**

At the end of his book on George Orwell, Christopher Hitchens solemnly intones that “‘views’ do not really matter,” that “it matters not what you think but *how* you think,” and that politics is “relatively unimportant.” The preceding 210 pages tell a different story: that a person is to be judged chiefly by his opinions and that politics is all-important.

Why Orwell Matters is an advocate’s defense of Orwell as a good and great man. The evidence adduced is that Orwell held the same opinions as Hitchens. Hitchens does allow that Orwell sometimes got things wrong, but in these cases Hitchens always enters pleas in mitigation. Hitchens’s efforts to minimize the importance of Orwell’s objectionable views, or in some cases his inability to see them, paint a misleading picture of Orwell’s thinking.

Orwell’s Anti-Homosexuality

One way of playing down Orwell’s non-Hitchensian views is to attribute them to his unreflective gut feelings. We are to suppose, then, that when Orwell thought things over, he anticipated the Hitchens line of half a century later, but whenever Orwell slid into heresy, it was because he allowed himself to be swayed by his intense emotions.

Of Orwell’s opposition to

homosexuality, Hitchens says: “Only one of his inherited prejudices—the shudder generated by homosexuality—appears to have resisted the process of self-mastery” (p. 9). Here Hitchens conveys to the reader two surmises which are not corroborated by any recorded utterance of Orwell, and which I believe to be false: that Orwell disapproved of homosexuality because it revolted him physically, and that Orwell made an unsuccessful effort to subdue this gut response.

Orwell harbored no unreasoning, visceral horror of homosexuality and he did not strive to overcome his disapproval of it. The evidence suggests that, if anything, he was less inclined to any such shuddering than most heterosexuals. His descriptions of his encounters with homosexuality are always cool, dispassionate, even sympathetic. His disapproval of homosexuality was rooted in his convictions. He was intellectually and morally opposed to it.

Compare Orwell’s opposition to homosexuality with his opposition to inequalities of wealth and income. Both of these standpoints involve an element of moral disapproval, but both are reasoned and thoughtful, both draw upon an elaborate theoretical structure conveyed by an ideological tradition—in the first case, *fin-de-siècle* preoccupation with degeneracy, in the second, equalitarian socialism. How apposite would it be to dismiss Orwell’s income-equalitarianism, one of the foundations of his socialism, by saying that it was an involuntary shudder, that he could not rid himself of an inherited, unreflective prejudice?

Orwell’s anti-homosexual position (definitely not ‘homophobia’, which would suggest irrational fear)

flowed naturally from beliefs and values about which he was quite forthcoming, though he never provided a systematic exposition. Orwell held that modern machinery and urbanization were inhuman and degrading. City life was rootless, alienating, and demoralizing. Although there was no going back to the organic rural community which had been shattered by the industrial revolution, any more than there was any going back to religious faith, both losses were sad and wrenching—in this respect, Orwell’s outlook is akin to that of Mr. and Mrs. Leavis. Industrial and scientific progress could not be stopped without unacceptable consequences, but were essentially malign.

Orwell was decidedly against birth control as well as feminism and homosexuality.¹ He singled out “philoprogenitiveness” (a high valuation for having children) as one of a handful of essential precepts of any viable society. He believed (as did most intellectuals in the 1940s) that western society was beset by a crisis of declining fertility. He routinely equated decency with masculinity and masculinity with virility and physical toughness. He expressed contempt for people who took aspirin. He did not welcome reductions in the working day or increasing affluence, because more leisure and more comforts were liable to lead to enervating softness and a life of meaningless vacuity. As was remarked by someone who knew him well, his human ideal would have been a big-bodied working-class female raising twelve children.²

Though I cannot unpack all this here,³ it forms part of a coherent and

cogent worldview, and relates Orwell to the “anti-degenerate” thinking of influential writers like Max Nordau. During the Second World War, Orwell repeatedly insinuated, or more than insinuated, that “pacifists” were homosexuals and therefore cowards. The “nancy poets,” Auden and his friends, were a favorite target. Apparently no one ever explained to Orwell that *ad hominem* arguments are generally fallacious, and he often made his point by unfairly questioning the motives of those whose views he was combatting.

Above all else, Orwell was a rhetorician and a propagandist. He doubtless sincerely believed that homosexuals were more inclined to be cowards and therefore more inclined to be politically against war. But he certainly chose this kind of argument because he thought it would work as an instrument of persuasion, and perhaps it did. One remarkable thing, though, is that the ‘pacifist’ views Orwell assailed in this manner were precisely the opinions he had himself held until quite recently, and had enthusiastically propounded for almost a decade.

Among advanced and humane thinkers in Orwell’s day, there was still an overwhelming consensus that homosexuality was pathological. This had been the view of Krafft-Ebing and of Freud, for instance. The theory was still popular among intellectuals that the alienation of urban life encouraged masturbation, which led to all the perversions, particularly homosexuality. It is not especially surprising that Orwell, who was never one for intellectually striking out on his own, would assimilate this predominant view. At this time, anything perceived as sexual ambivalence was quite commonly taken as a symptom of decadence and disintegration, as witness, among many examples, the figure of Tiresias in *The Waste Land*.

In the mid-1930s Orwell resisted conversion to socialism because he

¹ Orwell himself was sterile. He and his wife adopted a son, whom Orwell devotedly cared for after her death.

² Most of the above views are clearly propounded in Chapter 11 of *The Road to Wigan Pier*.

³ See my forthcoming book, *Orwell Your Orwell: An Ideological Study* (South Bend: St. Augustine’s Press, 2004).

associated it with cranky and degenerate practices, including vegetarianism, nudism, teetotalism, and sexual abnormality. After he had become a socialist, he saw these associations as a liability to the socialist movement, and therefore saw it as incumbent upon him to fight against them within the left. He perceived middle-class people as more susceptible to crankiness than working men, and went out of his way to emulate what he identified as working-class habits, even to the extent of slurping his tea out of his saucer. Orwell's *machismo* is therefore intimately linked with his worship of the proletariat.

Orwell's Anti-War Phase

Another of Hitchens's techniques is to tell us what Orwell must have been thinking when he arrived at his mistaken views. He reconstructs Orwell's thoughts so as to offer a rationale for Orwell's views which is acceptable to present-day political correctness and to Hitchens, while it may not be the rationale that would have occurred to Orwell. Here's an example:

So hostile was Orwell to conventional patriotism, and so horrified by the cynicism and stupidity of the Conservatives in the face of fascism, that he fell for some time into the belief that 'Britain', as such or as so defined, wasn't worth fighting for. (p. 127)

Notice that Orwell "fell," rather than reasoned his way, into this position. Because Orwell's anti-war standpoint up to August 1939 is an opinion that Hitchens disagrees with, it is implicitly attributed to Orwell's emotional reactions, and these reactions are presented sympathetically. We are invited to admire Orwell's motives and ignore his arguments.

However, this reconstruction of Orwell's motives for being a "pacifist" is not convincing. It is not a report of the reasons given by Orwell, or by the bulk of the left, whose anti-war theories and attitudes Orwell shared. You would hardly guess from Hitchens's remarks here that Orwell observed the growth of anti-fascist pronouncements by Conservatives and viewed them with concern as signs of warlike intentions towards Nazi Germany, or that he condemned the Chamberlain government for its arms build-up.

Orwell's view, prior to his conversion to a pro-war position, was very much in line with the "pacifism" of the left, harking back to the First World War and expecting the next war to be similarly indefensible. If, as Hitchens quite reasonably does, we take Orwell's real career as a writer as starting in October 1928, then for more than half of that career Orwell was a "pacifist". Orwell joined the Independent Labour Party (I.L.P.) and his anti-war views were quite similar to those of other I.L.P. members; he left the I.L.P. after he began to support the war.

Orwell accepted the common leftist view that "fascism" was nothing other than capitalism with the gloves off, and that going to war would make Britain fascist (or speed up Britain's going fascist, which was probably inevitable in due course) so that no true "war against fascism" was possible. War against fascism, then, could only be a feeble pretext for a war driven on both sides purely by the economic rivalry of capitalist states.

Here, as time and again throughout Hitchens's book, we see Hitchens concealing from his readers (inadvertently, for Hitchens does not quite grasp it himself) that Orwell has a reasoned way of arriving at conclusions Hitchens doesn't like. Orwell, of course, did not think up the reasoning or conclusions for himself, but adopted both from the leftist discourse of the times,

though within the range of views on the left, he selected some positions in preference to others, and then engaged in controversies with fellow leftists.

The Banality of Orwell's Politics

Hitchens praises Orwell for having noted that Catholics tended to be pro-fascist. But it is misleading to present this as though it were an isolated *aperçu*, without mentioning that Orwell was doggedly anti-Catholic. In a letter to a girl-friend he casually dismisses one writer as “a stinking RC,”⁴ though there may be an element of self-mockery here with respect to his own anti-Catholicism, which was notorious among his acquaintances, for earlier in this letter he refers to “my hideous prejudice against your sex, my obsession about R.C.s, etc.” Orwell was very much a Protestant atheist; in his youth there had been a vigorous Catholic movement in British letters, against which he reacted strongly; Orwell saw the Catholic Church as an old and still formidable enemy of freedom of thought.

It’s perhaps necessary to add, since this seems so strange today, that Orwell lived in a culture where it was unquestionably the done thing to make derogatory or laudatory generalizations about entire groups of people, however defined, and at the same time minimal good manners to treat individual members of those groups with complete respect, as well as sporting and decent to take individuals as one found them. On a personal level, Orwell was open and considerate to homosexuals, Catholics, and Communists.

Hitchens often gives the impression that Orwell’s opinions were exceptional, and occasionally seems to imply that Orwell was almost isolated. This is a popular take but it won’t bear examination. In broad outline, Orwell’s

political views could scarcely have been more commonplace. For the most part, they were the leftist orthodoxy—and that means the intellectuals’ orthodoxy—in the 1930s and 1940s. They were mainly the political correctness of his day, just as Hitchens’s views are of his. And on the rare points where this characterization might be disputed, Orwell’s views were still far from *outré* in that milieu at that time.

Hitchens’s primary exhibit is Orwell’s attitude to “the three great subjects of the twentieth century . . . imperialism, fascism, and Stalinism” (p. 5). By “imperialism” Hitchens means only the British empire: he is an enthusiastic supporter of American imperial expansion today. By “Stalinism” he means Communism, his years on the left having left him with the habit of being semantically charitable to Trotskyists. And within “fascism” he loosely includes both National Socialism and Spanish Nationalism. A crucial premiss of Hitchens’s thesis is that being simultaneously opposed to these three entities was unusual. This is a simple factual error. Thousands of people held these views.

As an example, let’s look at Bertrand Russell, probably the most influential writer of the British left in the 1920s and 1930s, someone who knew Orwell and someone from whose opinions on political questions Orwell seldom greatly diverged (though their views on culture and personal fulfillment were quite unlike). Orwell had a short life, so that some of the writers who had influenced him in his youth outlived him—another was George Bernard Shaw.

Russell was an active and outspoken opponent of the British empire. He was chairman of the India League, pressing for Indian independence. Russell was always a committed opponent of Fascism, Nazism, and the Spanish Nationalist rebels.

⁴ *Complete Works*, Volume 10, p. 268.

Immediately after the Bolshevik seizure of power in Russia in 1917, Russell displayed some general sympathy for the new regime. He then visited Russia and wrote *The Practice and Theory of Bolshevism* (1920), shocking many by his bitter opposition to Communism (Bolshevism renamed itself ‘Communism’ just around this time). Russell remained resolutely opposed to Communism until Orwell’s death and then until at least 1958 (when he began to soften his opposition to the Soviet Union because of his belief that the extinction of humankind through thermonuclear war had become a serious likelihood).

In the 1930s, both Russell and Orwell were at first opposed to the looming war with Germany, both were classed as “pacifists”, and both switched at around the same time to support for the war. Russell wrote the anti-war book *Which Way to Peace?* (1936), while Orwell wrote an anti-war pamphlet which was not printed and has not survived, though we can figure out much of what it must have said by scattered remarks he made at the time. As Hitchens notes, Orwell also tried to persuade his friends to form an illegal underground group to sabotage the war effort.

Orwell reports that he changed his view about the war as the result of a dream, on August 22nd 1939, ten days before the outbreak of war. Hitchens’s statement that Orwell became pro-war when “the war itself was well under way” (p. 127) is thus inaccurate, though it is true that Orwell’s new position did not become widely known until after the war had begun. Russell is on record as having switched to support of the war by early 1940. He explained his change of position in a long letter to the *New York Times* in February 1941,⁵ in which he

⁵ Reprinted in Ray Perkins Jr., ed., *Yours Faithfully, Bertrand Russell: A Lifelong Fight for Peace, Justice, and Truth in Letters to the*

dated his re-appraisal to the Munich agreement, and especially to Hitler’s subsequent breach of that agreement by occupying what remained of Czechoslovakia.

Most leftists at the beginning of the 1930s were anti-war (or, as they were loosely called, “pacifists”).⁶ Some remained against the war, but many, including Russell and Orwell, switched to support for a war against Hitler. I mention this to emphasize that in case Hitchens wants to take support for the British war effort as evidence of anti-Nazism, Orwell was a late convert to support for the war effort (as Hitchens, of course, fully acknowledges), and in this respect was a fairly ordinary leftist intellectual of the period. Though there isn’t space to document it here, Russell’s commitment to all three of Hitchens’s correctness tests was more resolute, more unswerving than Orwell’s. At times, for instance, Orwell wobbled on the issue of Indian independence, asserting that it was not really practicable (just a few years before it became a reality).

Goodbye to the Empire

Aside from Russell’s views, there is much wider evidence for the broad opposition to the empire, to Naziism and Fascism, and to Communism. The tide of leftwing support for dismantling the empire was so strong that the Labour Party, following its landslide election victory in 1945, was able to rush through independence for Burma and India.

After all, what was at stake? There had long been a widespread view within British politics that the empire was a net drain on Britain’s resources

Editor (Chicago: Open Court, 2002), pp. 177–182.

⁶ This term was commonly used to include those who were not strictly pacifists.

and would better be abandoned.⁷ The majority of those in favor of holding onto the empire accepted that the colonies would gradually acquire more self-government until they achieved ‘dominion status’, the stage reached by countries like Canada and Australia. India in the 1930s was already largely self-governing, except for foreign policy, and more self-government would no doubt have arrived even under Churchill.

During the war, the Indian Congress, under Gandhi’s inspiration, opposed the war and took the position that the Japanese or Germans would be no worse as rulers than the British. Britain therefore suspended the Congress and imposed martial law in India, an important piece on the strategic chessboard. Though critical of martial law, Orwell (again, like Russell) was not in favor of giving India independence while the war was going on, a position that flowed automatically from his support for the war effort.

Orwell believed that the empire was “a money racket,” that Britain benefitted economically from exploitation of the colonies, and that decolonization would necessarily bring about a sharp drop in British living standards. Orwell, writes Hitchens approvingly, “never let his readers forget that they lived off an empire of overseas exploitation, writing at one point that, try as Hitler might, he could not reduce the German people to the abject status of Indian coolies” (p. 44). Orwell might be forgiven for overlooking, in the heat of the moment, that the Indian coolies’ status was abject before the British arrived, after which it became less abject, but what to make of Hitchens, all these years later, holding aloft this daft remark as if it were a penetrating observation?

The abandonment of the empire coincided with the beginning of the most

rapid rise in British living standards ever experienced. Taken overall, the empire probably was a net drain on British resources. Certainly, there is no clear indication that the British people as a whole suffered economically from giving up the empire.

The Left Loves Orwell

Orwell wrote for leftwing intellectuals, they were his intended audience, and he strained to make his opinions acceptable to them. He was adroit at trimming his utterances to gain maximum acceptability by the left. When, in his final years, he suddenly attained literary fame, he acquired a much larger audience, and this was embarrassing, like one of those Hollywood comedies where someone whispering to an intimate acquaintance discovers too late that the public address system has been switched on, and his words are being carried to everyone in town.

Hitchens reproduces some choice examples of leftist hostility to Orwell. Any Communist Party member or fellow-traveller and any orthodox Trotskyist defender of the Soviet Union as a progressive workers’ state, was bound to regard Orwell as a bitter enemy. Hence the nasty attacks by Raymond Williams, E.P. Thompson, and Isaac Deutscher, which Hitchens deftly dissects. It is rather surprising that Hitchens doesn’t similarly excerpt some of the feminist examples of anti-Orwell diatribe, among which Daphne Patai’s is, though sometimes unfair, often quite perceptive.⁸

It is easily confirmable that the bulk of books and articles on Orwell are both leftist in political orientation and very well-disposed towards Orwell. The left has all along been predominantly

⁷ See for example Peter Cain, ed., *Empire and Imperialism: The Debate of the 1870s* (South Bend: St. Augustine’s Press, 1999).

⁸ *The Orwell Mystique: A Study in Male Ideology* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984).

pro-Orwell. The most common view among leftists is that Orwell is the property of the left, and that it is therefore outrageous if a rightwinger cites Orwell in opposition to totalitarianism. If you start researching Orwell, you soon lose count of the times you have read about the sacrilege of the John Birch Society in using ‘1984’ as a telephone number.

A particularly crude example of the most prevalent leftist view is *Orwell for Beginners*.⁹ The *For Beginners* series is a set of socialist tracts, in the form of easy introductions to modern thinkers illustrated with cartoons. *Orwell for Beginners* is one of the most inaccurate and amateurish of this commercially successful series; it exemplifies the conventional opinion that anyone who mentions Orwell in criticizing socialism is doing something unconscionable, because, to a leftist, Orwell is ‘one of ours’.

Hitchens refers to “the intellectuals of the 1930s” (p. 56) as though most of them were pro-Communist. He mentions Orwell’s “innumerable contemporaries, whose defections from Communism were later to furnish spectacular confessions and memoirs” (p. 59). Hitchens is not alone in exaggerating the importance of Communist influence in the 1930s. The notion that most British intellectuals were bowled over by Communism is an inflated legend.

There were those very few intellectuals, like Maurice Dobb and Maurice Cornforth, who remained Communists throughout. There were those promising young intellectuals like Christopher Caudwell who became Communists and died fighting for Communism in Spain. Whether they would have remained Communists for long had they survived a few more years is not certain. I doubt it. There were

those who enjoyed whirlwind romances with Communism, like Auden and Spender, and who could never furnish spectacular confessions and memoirs because they had nothing spectacular to recall or confess. There were some who left the Party or never joined it but remained devout fellow-travellers. There were some *sui generis* cases, like J.B.S. Haldane, whose wife left him and wrote an informative book that may be considered a slightly spectacular confession and memoir, and who himself faded away without actually breaking with the Communists, or John Strachey, a non-C.P. member who preached the Communist line with great eloquence for a few years, then put it all behind him to seek a career as a Labour politician. Then there were the broad ranks of the left, who had spasms of sympathy for Soviet Russia now and then, but who were not to be dislodged from support for the Labour Party or the I.L.P., both essentially anti-Communist organizations.

The rarity of the individuals who conformed to the pattern described by Hitchens is illustrated by the fact that Richard Crossman couldn’t find a single convincing British example of a former Communist intellectual turned anti-Communist for the landmark volume, *The God that Failed*, and not wishing to go to press without one British specimen, had to make do with Stephen Spender.

The lack of any such examples did not arise because large numbers of intellectuals joined the Communist Party and never left it. It arose because very few joined the Communist Party at all, and nearly all of those who did left quickly before they could get up to any skullduggery worth memorializing. My guess would be that prior to 1941 more British intellectuals joined the I.L.P. than joined the C.P.G.B. And, it goes without saying, far more joined the Labour Party than either of those. The gigantic Labour Party, with a membership of millions, operated a rigorous and active policy of

⁹ David Smith and Michael Mosher, *Orwell for Beginners* (Writers and Readers, 1984).

excluding all members of the Communist Party or any of its front organizations.

To say all this is not to belittle the effectiveness of the Communist Party of Great Britain. It had an extraordinary impact on British political and intellectual life, *given that it was always such a small group of people with so little popular support.*

It might be contended that the real influence of the Communist Party was not in its membership but in the spread of pro-Communist ideas among non-C.P. members. But first, this too can easily be exaggerated. Much of it was akin to Western admiration for Japan in the 1970s. It did not mean that the admirers wanted to do the bidding of the admirees.

Second, Orwell was not as implacable an anti-Communist as is often supposed. *The Road to Wigan Pier*, for instance, has some cracks against the Communists and some compliments to them. It comes down in support of their line *du jour*, the Popular Front, and it dismisses resolutions “against Fascism and Communism” with “i.e. against rats and rat poison,”¹⁰ a remark as idiotically pro-Communist as anything in *Les communistes et le paix*.

But Stink He Does

After Orwell’s *Road to Wigan Pier* came out in 1937, Orwell was twitted by Communists, who gleefully quoted his scandalous slander against the English workers: that they smelled. Orwell branded this a “lie” and persuaded his publisher Victor Gollancz to make a fuss about it.

Hitchens indignantly denies that Orwell wrote the sentence, “The working classes smell.” Hitchens vouchsafes that this would be a “damning” sentence, a “statement of combined snobbery and heresy.” All his hormones of outrage

firing, Hitchens rushes to poor Orwell’s defense: Orwell “only says that middle-class people, such as his own immediate forebears, were convinced that the working classes smelled” (p. 46). According to Hitchens, to accuse Orwell of saying that the workers smelled is a “simple—or at any rate a simple-minded—confusion of categories,” and he refers readers to *The Road to Wigan Pier*, where what Orwell says about the odiferous working classes can be “checked and consulted.”

A pity, then, that Hitchens did not take a minute or two to check or consult it. Orwell broaches the topic of proletarian smelliness by stating that in his childhood “four frightful words” were “bandied about quite freely. The words were: *The lower classes smell.*”¹¹ So far this is consistent with Hitchens’s reading, and must have been where Hitchens stopped. Orwell now pursues this theme for three pages.

At first he does not strongly commit himself on the factual issue of proletarian redolence, though he does imply that the comparative uncleanliness of navvies, tramps, and even domestic servants is a matter of observation. He quotes from a Somerset Maugham travel book: “I do not blame the working man because he stinks, but stink he does. It makes social intercourse difficult to persons of sensitive nostril.” Then Orwell confronts the inevitable factual question:

Meanwhile, do the ‘lower classes’ smell? Of course, as a whole, they are dirtier than the upper classes. They are bound to be, considering the circumstances in which they live, for even at this late date less than half the houses in England have bathrooms. Besides, the habit of washing yourself all over every day is a

¹⁰ *Road to Wigan Pier* (London: Penguin, 1989 [1937]), p. 206.

¹¹ Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, p. 119. Orwell’s italics.

very recent one in Europe, and the working classes are generally more conservative than the bourgeoisie. . . . It is a pity that those who idealise the working class so often think it necessary to praise every working-class characteristic and therefore to pretend that it is meritorious in itself. (p. 121)

The “Meanwhile” indicates that though Orwell feels he can’t evade answering the question, he wants to put it in its unimportant place, as an aside to his main argument. He avoids answering it directly or literally, while making his meaning quite clear: the smelliness of the lower classes is not a false belief held by the upper classes, but a fact.

A little later Orwell mentions the notion “that working-class people are dirty from choice and not from necessity,” again accepting that they are dirty while trying to leave that point in peripheral vision. “Actually, people who have access to a bath will generally use it” (p. 122). He has already told us that most households don’t have bathtubs, which means that the great majority of working-class people don’t have baths in their homes. Earlier, Orwell has closely identified being dirty with smelling (pp. 119–120), so there is no room to interpret him as accepting the griminess of the lower orders without also acknowledging the olfactory corollary.

We see then, that despite some references by Orwell to the middle-class belief that the lower classes smell, worded almost as though this belief were in itself wrong, Orwell ultimately does not flinch from the objective fact that the English working classes of 1936 are dirtier than their social superiors like himself, and that they therefore smell—though it’s not their fault. This is not an invention of Orwell’s detractors, as Hitchens heatedly asseverates, but Orwell’s very own opinion. And Orwell’s opinion on this point is correct.

As an English working-class child in the 1950s, when things were a lot better than twenty years before, I can recall that, though most homes by then had bathtubs, it was out of the question to pay for hot water to be available all the time. The water was heated for the occasion, and when it was bath night, once a week at most, barely enough was heated for one bath per person; this meant that if the depth of water in the tub exceeded about two inches, it would get uncomfortably cold. (Showers did not become common among the English working class until the 1960s.) You didn’t wash your hair as often as you had a bath (so the shoulders of jackets and coats were always greasy, as therefore were places like chairbacks that they frequently touched), and you “could not afford” (the opportunity cost was too high, because of your low income) to change your socks, underwear, or shirt every day. Clothes had to be washed by the housewife, by hand, in a sink, with soap flakes and then hung on a line, every Monday unless it rained, to dry in the wind. Wearing the same clothes for many days or weeks at a stretch is probably more conducive to a noticeable smell than not bathing.

After *The Road to Wigan Pier* appeared, Orwell must have kicked himself for having given the Communists such an easy way to ridicule and discredit him. He blustered, not quite honestly, parsing his written words, trying to make something of the fact that he had never literally said “the lower classes smell,” except in attributing these words to middle-class snobs. Yet Orwell had unmistakably intimated that the working classes smelled, and it is both careless and pointless of Hitchens to maintain otherwise.

I’ve Got a Little List

In 1945 the Labour Party swept to power in Britain, with a landslide electoral

victory. Orwell saw himself as a supporter of this government, though he speedily became disappointed in it.

The British Foreign Office had a covert section known as the Information Research Department (I.R.D.), concerned to counteract Communist propaganda. George Orwell supplied this department with a list of names, annotated with comments mainly on their possible Communist connections, but also their sexual habits, their characters, their ethnic backgrounds, and their political soundness generally.¹² Orwell, it now seems to some, was a McCarthyist before McCarthy.

This is a sensitive matter for Hitchens. He has an unbroken record of detestation for ‘McCarthyism’, recently speaking out in condemnation, yet again, of Elia Kazan’s co-operation with HUAC in naming old Communist associates, which led to the interminable vilification of Kazan by Hollywood and the mainstream media. Hitchens has also been labelled “Snitchens” by Democratic Party faithfuls, because he gave testimony to Congress corroborating the fact that Sidney Blumenthal had been spreading dirt about Monica Lewinsky at the behest of his boss the Arkansas Rapist.

Here Hitchens tries to show that there is a great gulf between what Orwell did and what McCarthyists did, but he is

¹² George Orwell, *Complete Works*, Volume 20, pp. 240–259. Unfortunately Secker and Warburg have not handled the *Complete Works* happily. The hardbound edition is available only as a set at a monstrous price. Volumes 1–9 are Orwell’s nine book-length works. Volumes 10–20 comprise all of Orwell’s other output, arranged chronologically. These last eleven volumes, but not the first nine, have been released in paperback, with no volume number or series title on the cover or title page. None of them can be bought in a regular way from bookstores in the U.S., though they can be purchased from British suppliers online. They are usually listed by title, with no indication that they belong to the *Complete Works*. Volume 20 has the title *Our Job Is to Make Life Worth Living, 1949–50*.

not very convincing.¹³ He draws various distinctions, some of which are questionable, while others are quite genuine, though they don’t gainsay a certain family resemblance between the two endeavors.

“A blacklist is a roster of names maintained by those with the power to affect hiring and firing,” says Hitchens. Why would Hitchens say this, except to imply that Orwell’s list was not truly a ‘blacklist’? Yet Hitchens quotes Orwell as writing that “If it [the listing of ‘unreliables’ by the I.R.D.] had been done earlier it would have stopped people like Peter Smollett worming their way into important propaganda jobs where they were probably able to do us a lot of harm.”¹⁴ So Orwell’s intention was that his list should be used as (or as part of) a blacklist, to stop suspected Communists from being hired.

In another attempt at exculpating Orwell by legalistic definition, Hitchens says that “a snitch” or stool pigeon is rightly defined as someone who betrays friends or colleagues in the hope of plea-bargaining or otherwise of gaining advantage” (p. 166). Does this mean that the same behavior for motives other than “advantage,” such as sincere concern about the Communist threat, would grant immunity from these labels? Many like Kazan who told the truth about their involvement with the Communists to the F.B.I. or to HUAC did it as a matter of conscience. And as for the fact that Orwell did not personally know most on the list, Hitchens surely needs to do more work on this angle. Can it be right to report to the authorities one’s suspicions of a stranger’s Communist sympathies, intending that this will hurt his

¹³ With the air of one setting the facts straight, Hitchens declaims that the “existence” of Orwell’s list “was not ‘revealed’ in 1996.” But no one has ever suggested that it was. The fact that Orwell had passed on this list to a secret government agency was revealed in 1996.

¹⁴ Hitchens, p. 163; Orwell, *Complete Works*, Volume 20, p. 103.

employment chances, and simultaneously wrong to report one's definite knowledge of a friend's Communist Party membership?

On the *Daily Telegraph's* reference to "Thought Police" in this connection, Hitchens protests that "the Information Research Department was unconnected to any 'Thought Police'." Must conservative newspapers be subject to a ban on the most elementary use of metaphor? Compiling secret government files on the ideological outlooks of people who have broken no law but are suspected of holding certain opinions is surely one aspect of the phenomenon satirized in Orwell's Thought Police.

My point is not that Orwell should not have given this list to the I.R.D., though perhaps he shouldn't, but that Hitchens should be more understanding of "McCarthyism", a term now most often used for activities with which McCarthy himself was not connected. Many of the elements now collectively referred to as "McCarthyism" were wrong, and there were some horrible injustices. But, contrary to most conventional accounts, there actually was a Communist conspiracy; it was no hallucination. When it is known that the Communist Party is under the control of Moscow and its members are used for conspiratorial work such as espionage and disinformation, should it be out of the question to deny sensitive government posts to Communists? That's what Orwell and Tail-Gunner Joe wanted to do, and I think both of them had a good general case.

There is also a suggestion in Hitchens's account that Orwell and Celia Kirwan, his old flame at the I.R.D., were doing this anti-Communist chore for democratic socialism, which renders it more virtuous. It would surely be hard for Hitchens to argue that democratic non-socialists ought not to be entitled to do anything to combat Communism that democratic socialists are entitled to do.

Furthermore, since most Labour voters were not "socialists" even in a very broad sense, there would be something not very democratic about employing a secret government agency for disseminating democratic socialism.

Hitchens is now a militant supporter of Bush's war against what Hitchens calls "theocratic terrorism," though its next step is apparently to terrorize a lot of non-terrorists in secularist Iraq. Any threat posed to Americans by Islamic terrorism today is paltry by comparison with the Communist threat of the 1940s and 1950s. The current "war on terror" is committing more injustices than were ever committed by "McCarthyism," though the victims this time do not include well-connected academics, bureaucrats, or movie stars. Far from complaining about these injustices, Hitchens smacks his lips at Bush's magnificent "ruthlessness". Hitchens has yet to get his ducks in a row on the question of when it is right to give information to the government.

My own view is that while you shouldn't give the government the time of day on a matter of drugs, pornography, insider trading, or illegal immigration, when it comes to murder, rape, or being a member of the Communist Party and therefore *ipso facto* a Soviet agent, under the conditions of fifty years ago, you may sometimes, according to the precise circumstances, be morally obliged to co-operate with a government body by telling it what you know. Whereas "McCarthyism" was mainly concerned with people who lied about their past deeds in behalf of a specific organization, Orwell's list was mainly concerned with people's ideological sympathies whether or not these had resulted in illegal acts. This aspect of the comparison surely does not favor Orwell.

Why Orwell Matters, Really

Orwell matters because he was a great writer. Orwell's social and political views are interesting, as are those of Samuel Johnson and Jonathan Swift, but they are most interesting for their nuances and their precise expression rather than for their gross anatomy, which was unexceptional and sometimes fashionably silly.

Orwell wrote two novels worth reading, *Burmese Days* and *Coming Up for Air*. He wrote a wonderful little allegory, *Animal Farm*. He wrote by far the most powerful of all dystopian stories, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, which made many a Westerner feel like committing suicide and many a Communist subject feel like not committing suicide (because someone outside hell understood what hell was like). He wrote excellent accounts of his own experiences, somewhere between investigative journalism and sociological participant observation.

That's quite a lot for an individual who died at forty-six. Yet there is something of greater weight than all of these put together: the numerous short pieces, the essays and reviews he turned out rapid-fire, week by week, mainly to put bread on the table. Although Orwell was not an original theoretician, and his ideas, broadly characterized, were all off-the-shelf, he had a superb gift for formulating them sharply, so that their implications appeared fresh and unexpected. These writings sparkle with polemical virtuosity; they throb with life.¹⁵ They will make entertaining reading for centuries to come.

¹⁵ The essays are now available in one 1,400-page volume: George Orwell, *Essays* (Knopf, 2002). Also invaluable are the four volumes of *The Collected Essays, Journalism, and Letters of George Orwell* (Godine, 2000 [1968]).