

WIGAN PIER OR THE ROCKY ROAD TO SOCIALISM: GEORGE ORWELL AND THE ROMANTIC CRITIQUE OF INDUSTRIALISM*

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This paper argues that George Orwell's Socialism was not arrived at in a smooth, linear or unproblematic trajectory. Rather, it was the outcome of a fraught experiential process, conceived of, first and foremost, as an ethical mandate to "see and smell" the material conditions of degradation into which decadent capitalism had issued. This experiential dimension had to be complemented by a critical elucidation of class prejudice in its different manifestations and also, crucially, of the real blocks to action engendered by official leftist outlooks. Orwell's conclusion is a whole-hearted endorsement of the romantic critique of industrialism found in conservative authors such as Carlyle and Lawrence: a frontal assault on the instrumental logic of modern progress guided by an organic ideal of society.

Key Words: *Orwell, industrialism, socialism, instrumental reason, community, society.*

Este artículo sostiene que el socialismo en la obra de George Orwell no surge de una evolución ideológica lineal. Al contrario, este proyecto político singular nace de un proceso experiencial complejo, concebido en primer lugar como un mandato ético predicado sobre la necesidad de "ver y oler" las condiciones materiales de degradación a las que el capitalismo en crisis había dado lugar. Esta dimensión experiencial se habría de complementar, según Orwell, con un análisis crítico de los prejuicios de clase en sus diversas manifestaciones,

así como de los obstáculos materiales generados por determinadas concepciones de la izquierda oficial. Orwell asume, en consecuencia, los postulados básicos de la crítica romántica a la industrialización de autores tales como Carlyle o Lawrence: un ataque frontal a la lógica instrumental del progreso guiado por un ideal orgánico de sociedad.

Palabras Clave: *Orwell, industrialismo, socialismo, razón instrumental, comunidad, sociedad.*

Writing in “Nottingham and the Mining Country” about childhood memories of his native region, D.H. Lawrence rescues a powerful image of community, of organic linkage between fellow workers and their social world, projecting beyond the barren human landscape of 1930s Britain an alternative vision of social integration:

The people lived almost entirely by instinct, men of my father’s age could not really read. And the pit did not mechanize men. On the contrary. Under the butty system, the miners worked underground as a sort of intimate community, they knew each other practically naked, and with curious close intimacy, and the darkness and the underground remoteness of the pit “stall”, and the continual presence of danger, made the physical, instinctive, and intuitional contact between men very highly developed, a contact almost as close as touch, very real and very powerful. This physical awareness and intimate *togetherness* was at its strongest down pit. When the men came up into the light, they blinked. They had, in a measure, to change their flow. Nevertheless, they brought with them above ground the curious dark intimacy of the mine, the naked sort of contact (Lawrence, 1950: 117)

The intimate affectivity of the vision emphasises a direct physical continuity of bodies, miners’ bodies, carrying the symbolic burden of a combined exposure to the cruder depredations of

industrial capitalism and a deep, instinctual homosociality fundamentally at odds with the cunning rationalities of modern political and economic forms. Lawrence's image of mutuality is indeed closer to Burke's depiction of the foregone "age of chivalry", of its mores and rules of social intercourse, than it is to the contemporaneous discourse of Socialism or Labourism. In effect, his miners' underground community rehearses – in Burke's words – "that subordination of the heart, which kept alive, even in servitude itself, the spirit of an exalted freedom" (1986: 170).

According to Lawrence, the "colliers were deeply alive, instinctively. But they had no daytime ambition, and no daytime intellect. They avoided, really, the rational aspect of life. They preferred to take life instinctively and intuitively" (1950: 118). The elemental immediacy of this existence harbours no discursive or (in Lawrence's words) "materialistic" concern – just the sheer immanence of homosocial affect, the sheer *life* of labouring and communing bodies.

The aim of this essay is to situate George Orwell's critique of industrial capitalism and of the standard doctrinal responses articulated by the "official" left in the 1930s within this "affective" tradition of anti-capitalism. In this sense, the analyses Orwell brings together in his 1937 book *The Road to Wigan Pier* are an ethical and strategic repository of contestation whose distinctive idiom must be read in the light of earlier, anti-progress and even anti-modern, critiques of social and ideological change. The emphasis is laid on survival and continuity, on the affective alliances and material articulations of social experience which make the denunciation of class oppression fundamentally dependant on the creative possibilities of ordinary resistance and hence deeply suspicious of rational-theoretical dogma.

Orwell's documentary analysis of poverty and unemployment in the first half of *The Road to Wigan Pier* brings Lawrence's indictment of modern ugliness to bear on the particular realities of moral and physical dereliction induced by the economic slump of the 1930s. Orwell's depiction of the human landscape shaped by the Depression in the North of England is directly influenced by a conceptual sequence (rehearsed throughout the Romantic tradition in its classic

criticism of Industrialisation) which causally relates the “civilising” logic of capitalist rationality and its attendant discourse on “progress” to a grim offshoot or by-product of material ruin and spiritual decay.

The Road to Wigan Pier thus opens with a glimpse of degraded working-class life, a dramatic foray into the darker recesses of modern society rather than with the relatively triumphalist description of coalmining. The Brookers’ lodging house is a condensed repository of degradation; a paradigmatic negation of the principles and values of community and organic belonging hypostasised by Lawrence. Neither *Gemeinschaft* nor *Gesellschaft* (Tönnies, 2002) the world inhabited by the Brookers and their like is a lumping together of miseries and humiliations – a voiding of humanity branded with the logic of class stratification:

On the day when there was a full chamber-pot under the breakfast table I decided to leave. The place was beginning to depress me. It was not only the dirt, the smells and the vile food, but the feeling of stagnant meaningless decay, of having got down into some subterranean place where people go creeping round and round, just like black beetles, in an endless muddle of slovened jobs and mean grievances. The most dreadful thing about people like the Brookers is the way they say the same things over and over again. It gives you the feeling that they are not real people at all, but a kind of ghost for ever rehearsing the same futile rigmarole... But it is no use saying that people like the Brookers are just disgusting and trying to put them out of mind. For they exist in tens and hundreds of thousands; they are one of the characteristic by-products of the modern world. You cannot disregard them if you accept the civilisation which produced them. For this is part at least of what industrialism has done for us (Orwell, 2001a: 66).

The material and moral penury of a particularly degraded example of working-class life is thus inextricable from the “civilising project” of modernity. There is an inescapable consubstantiality and continuity between capitalistic rationality and the local embodiments

of its systemic failure. This makes the acknowledgment of poverty, its close analysis and experiencing, not only requisite for the doctrinal observer – for the socialist in the making – as part of a process of ideological development, but rather, a general ethical mandate with consequences for all: “It is a kind of duty to see and smell such places now and again, especially smell them, lest you should forget that they exist” (Orwell, 2001a: 66).

The bid for an organic reconstitution of social life away from the bracing dereliction of modern industrial “civilisation”, which has been pointed out as a central element of Orwell’s programme,¹ is predicated on a contrasting pattern of working-class reality which is closely associated, as in Lawrence, with the archetypical masculinity of miners.

Orwell’s depiction of mining in the Northern districts supposes a radical shift in tone and emphasis, from the bleakness and inertia of a self-defeating working class overly exposed to the worse dynamics of an internalised subalternity, to the proud proletarian identity of the mining communities. The dynamics of homosociality emphasised by Lawrence give way in Orwell to a detailed description of underground work. The mine becomes a heroic space – in sharp contrast with the vile domesticity of the Brookers’ house – in which the well-nigh superhuman powers of the miners meet and defy the internal limit of productive rationality. Coalmining supplies the emblem of a native resistance which tips the balance against a blanket projection of the working-class condition as deprived and debased. This emblematic position is, as Beatrix Campbell has pointed out, the product of a characteristic identification, in the critique of industrialism, between oppositionality and the mystique of masculinity: “[t]he socialist movement in Britain – and we could add: the broad range of anti-industrialist discourses, not only on the left – has been swept off its feet by the magic of masculinity, muscle and machinery. And in its star system, the accolades go to the miners” (1984: 98).

The miner stands out, in the loaded iconography of labouring figures and working-class idols, as a structural pivot commanding symbolic authority and attracting the unflinching adherence of a fetishistic discourse made by and for men. Orwell’s characteristic

definition of the coal miner as “a sort of grimy caryatid upon whose shoulders nearly everything that is *not* grimy is supported” (2001a: 68) encapsulates this fundamental equation between an idealised incarnation of Work – as the real sustenance upon which the capitalist machine is propped – and an essential notion of masculinity. According to Rob Breton: “In its physicality, its demand for total engagement, its social usefulness, its community, its demand for ‘manly’ strength, its direct involvement with the land and solid materials, and in the image of self-realization it confirms, mining encapsulates nonrationalized Work, an idea Orwell isolates and protects” (2005: 161):

the fillers look and work as though they were made of iron. They really do look like iron – hammered iron statues – under the smooth coat of coal dust which clings to them from head to foot. It is only when you see miners down the mine and naked that you realise what splendid men they are. Most of them are small (big men are at a disadvantage in that job) but nearly all of them have the most noble bodies; wide shoulders tapering to slender supple waists, and small pronounced buttocks and sinewy thighs, with no one ounce of waste flesh anywhere (Orwell, 2001a: 69).

This eroticisation of the labour-force, taken or cast at its most primary or elemental – as sheer corporeality –, paradoxically overturns the symbolic position initially assigned to the worker within the social organisation of labour. By hypostasising and fetishising the sterling physicality of these Nietzschean *Übermenschen* of modern industrialism, their enforced position in the system (their objective “nature” as cogs in a complex machinery) is undercut and ultimately replaced by a figure of immanence and self-referentiality for which no instrumental use can be prescribed.

Orwell’s libidinal engagement with the archetypes of industrial civilisation is counterbalanced, in the remaining sections of the first half of the book, with substantial documentary mapping of the actual conditions endured by many of these iconic representatives of working-class life. Thus the cruder effects of the crisis are

contextualised in a particular dismantling of the very foundations of “civilisation” (Schweizer, 2001: 28).

The second half of the book analyses the facts of class which made Orwell’s integration with the working-class communities of the North an ultimately failed project. As Ben Clarke has pointed out, despite “his admiration for the working class, Orwell is simply ‘not one of them’, just as he equally simply is ‘a bourgeois’. The complex network of practices and values that defines the communities he visits prevents his integration. It also undermines his position as a social explorer” (2007: 59). The highly idiosyncratic and opinionated quality of this section of *The Road* would eventually earn Orwell the unqualified ire and contempt of broad sectors of the British Left.ⁱⁱ Most tellingly, it caused the book to be published with an editorial note by Victor Gollancz in which he expressed, on behalf of the Left Book Club, his disagreement with Orwell’s conclusions.

Orwell begins by delineating a personal trajectory of conversion to the socialist cause, examining the whys and wherefores of his decision to “see the most typical section of the English working class at close quarters” (2001a: 140). Orwell writes: “This was necessary to me as part of my approach to Socialism” (2001a: 140). His “descent” into the northern “abyss” of proletarian England is imagined as a fundamental and ineluctable step in the process of political development which had first seen him break with British imperialism in Burma and then experience the “down and out” life of a tramp in the urban underworlds of London and Paris. However, his exploration of the northern working class implied a qualitative leap, a change of moral substance which explicitly postulated Socialism – however embryonically or instinctively conceived – as the precise horizon of political achievement against which concrete realities and limitations were to be judged.

His reflection commences with a cross-examination of English class realities and, in particular, with the difficult topography of middle class distinctions and prejudices. Thus, he famously characterises his own background as “lower-upper-middle-class” – a particular stratum or “sub-caste” within an intricate series of bourgeois layers. Orwell emphasises in this respect that, however useful the economic

determination may appear in terms of establishing the identity of a particular individual or family within the accepted divisions, “the essential point about the English class-system is that it is *not* entirely explicable in terms of money. Roughly speaking it is a money stratification, but it is also interpenetrated by a sort of shadowy caste-system; rather like a jerry-built modern bungalow haunted by medieval ghosts” (2001a: 140).

Orwell explains the virulence of much upper-middle-class prejudice (of the sort he himself had imbibed during his formative years and from which his socialist conversion was to mark the final break) as a particular ideological function of the often crude material differences between the various bourgeois rungs. The common denominator of these groups was a firm prejudice and an ingrained snobbishness aimed at the working classes. However, the lower strata within them, the “shabby genteel” and generally impoverished middle classes played a specific role in the defence and upkeep of the bourgeois ideological fortress. These “down-at-heel” members of the class were in that sense “the shock-absorbers of the bourgeoisie”:

The real bourgeoisie, those in the £2,000 a year class and over, have their money as a thick layer of padding between themselves and the class they plunder; in so far as they are aware of the Lower Orders at all they are aware of them as employees, servants and tradesmen. But it is quite different for the poor devils lower down who are struggling to live genteel lives on what are virtually working-class incomes. These last are forced into close and, in a sense, intimate contact with the working class, and I suspect it is from them that the traditional upper-class attitude towards “common” people is derived (Orwell, 2001a: 141).

The most basic aspect of the general characterisation and screening of the working classes operated by the bourgeois mentality is also the most irrational and hard to eradicate. This is the belief, from which a middle-class upbringing is inseparable, that “the lower classes smell”: “That was what we were taught – *the lower classes smell*. And here, obviously, you are at an impassable barrier. For no feeling of

like or dislike is quite so fundamental as a *physical feeling*” (Orwell, 2001a: 144). The rooting of prejudice in a fact of sheer physicality thus creates a chasmic antagonism, which even the best of one’s intellectual efforts and deep-seated political convictions can do little to unsettle. Orwell insists on the extraordinary resilience of habits, manners and prejudices acquired in the early stages of a middle-class upbringing. His point is that the former are fundamentally inseparable from the latter, and so, that the instinctive badges of class identity – however trivial they may appear – actually betray a fundamental assumption of superiority and continue to shape, even beyond the nurturing ground of a middle-class background, the individual’s unconscious allegiances:

Perhaps table-manners are not a bad test of sincerity. I have known numbers of bourgeois Socialists, I have listened by the hour to their tirades against their own class, and yet never, not even once, have I met one who had picked up proletarian table-manners. Yet, after all, why not? Why should a man who thinks all virtue resides in the proletariat still take such pains to drink his soup silently? It can only be because in his heart he feels that proletarian manners are disgusting. So you see he is still responding to the training of his childhood, when he was taught to hate, fear, and despise the working class (Orwell, 2001a: 150).

The specific resistances induced by this early training in prejudice make any genuine attempt to transcend the class differential – in substance and not merely in appearance – a genuine personal struggle which the aspiring middle-class socialist must necessarily confront. Orwell locates the roots of his own struggle in the acute experience of oppression with which he had been acquainted in Burma. The bitterness and injustice generated by five years in the British Imperial Police were to issue in a sense of self-estrangement and in a radical urge to “get right down among the oppressed, to be one of them and on their side against their tyrants”:

It was in this way that my thoughts turned towards the English working class. It was the first time

that I had ever been really aware of the working class, and to begin with it was only because they supplied an analogy. They were the symbolic victims of injustice, playing the same part in England as the Burmese played in Burma (Orwell, 2001a: 158).

This fundamentally immature desire to mingle with the despised “others” of a markedly blinkered class ideology took the form, in these early years of reaction against the inherent outlook of his bourgeois background, of an “extreme” and yet still “unconscious” courting of underclass life: Orwell’s strenuous efforts to “go native” among London tramps are marked by a crucial overcoming of the physical scruple which he relates to a middle-class upbringing (Orwell, 2001b). This preliminary step will only acquire retroactive value with the securing of an enlightened position vis-à-vis the structural causes of class division; that is, with the assumption of an explicitly socialist programme of action.

Orwell’s central emphasis and injunction in the second part of *The Road* is precisely the need to reconcile political vision with a real acknowledgement of deep-seated class instincts, and thus, ultimately, to consciously undertake the difficult road beyond class not by circumventing its facts – and real blocks to action – but by limiting and reducing their relevance to effective socialist transformation. In this perspective, many well-intentioned attempts to “break” class barriers by enacting facetious scenarios of communal sharing which tend to ignore the radical embeddedness of prejudice and separation are fundamentally flawed:

All such deliberate, conscious efforts at class-breaking are, I am convinced, a very serious mistake. Sometimes they are merely futile, but where they do show a definite result it is usually to *intensify* class-prejudice... You have forced the pace and set up an uneasy, unnatural equality between class and class; the resultant friction brings to the surface all kinds of feelings that might otherwise have remained buried, perhaps for ever (Orwell, 2001a: 168).

The opposite temptation to demonise the bourgeoisie from a supposedly advanced proletarian position – one claiming to have “seen through” the bankruptcy of bourgeois values and culture as a whole – is, according to Orwell, a parallel source of estrangement and a further obstacle to the necessary creation of inter-class socialist alliances. This hostile and reductionistic approach, which Orwell associates with “the younger Communist writers” and the *Left Review* – generates a further dislocation of the real challenges and aims in the attempt to surpass the class divide. In that sense:

The only sensible procedure is to go slow and not force the pace. If you secretly think of yourself as a gentleman and as such the superior of the greengrocer’s errand boy, it is far better to say so than to tell lies about it. Ultimately you have got to drop your snobbishness, but it is fatal to pretend to drop it before you are really ready to do so (Orwell, 2001a: 172).

The road to Socialism, as Orwell explicated it in the pre-revolutionary – that is, pre-Spanish Civil War – approach of *The Road to Wigan Pier*, is thus a hazardous and meandering road around ingrained conceptions and prejudices (around “ideologies”) with the distinctive, and all too real threat of Fascism lurking in the background. The parlous state of the movement, both nationally and internationally, prompts a critical reconsideration of both its material underpinnings (the class divide and the set of ideological responses it generates) and its doctrinal components. This particular turn in Orwell’s argument is by far the most controversial and symptomatic of what, at this stage in his political development, can only be characterised as the preliminary phase of his Socialism. The basic identification of its doctrinal core is thus a commonsensical acknowledgement of egalitarianism and mutuality in a time of dire inequalities and social fragmentation: “the idea that we must all co-operate and see to it that everyone does his fair share of the work and gets his fair share of the provisions, seems so blatantly obvious that one would say that no one could possibly fail to accept it unless he had some corrupt motive for clinging to the present system” (Orwell, 2001a: 173) And yet, “the fact that we have got to face is that Socialism is *not* establishing itself. Instead of going forward, the cause

of Socialism is visibly going back. At this moment Socialists almost everywhere are in retreat before the onslaught of Fascism, and events are moving at terrible speed” (Orwell, 2001a: 174). The root-cause of this retreat must therefore be sought out, at least partially, in the specific imaginaries invoked by Socialists, in the established outlook of a theory of social praxis that “in the form in which it is now presented to us, has about it something inherently distasteful – something that drives away the very people who ought to be flocking to its support” (Orwell, 2001a: 174).

Orwell polemically associates this repulsive kernel of the theory with the specific theoretical reflexes of orthodox Marxism (or even Marxism *tout court*). In establishing this long-standing, and often problematical, association (which will remain largely unrevised throughout his subsequent work), Orwell centrally targets some of the more obtuse pronouncements of a simplistic teleological vision welded to assumptions of “historic necessity” and the inexorability of Socialism itself.ⁱⁱⁱ The very occurrence of Fascism as a novel, determining force in the balance of political loyalties appears to confirm the failure of any such “iron laws” of historical prognostication.

Orwell’s counter-intuitive method is to expose the limitations of the anti-socialist view by proceeding from within, that is, by charting the sources and logical steps followed by “the ordinary objector to Socialism”. The first observable fact in any close study of existing Socialism is that, “in its developed form [it] is a theory confined entirely to the middle class” (Orwell, 2001a: 175). Thus, its prime adherents – at least in the English context with which Orwell is here concerned – are not working-class individuals with organic links to the industrial areas, but essentially bourgeois elements with a tendency to cut themselves off from any real sense of “common humanity”. The identification of Socialists with “cranks” (that is, with “every fruit-juice drinker, nudist, sandal-wearer, sex-maniac, Quaker, ‘Nature Cure’ quack, pacifist and feminist in England”) engenders an automatic reaction of hostility in the “ordinary man” (Orwell, 2001a: 175). This is with little doubt, as has been abundantly observed, Orwell at his most parochial and prejudiced (Hoggart, 1974: 38). Yet the reductionism (and chauvinism) of particular insights is inseparable from the main outline of the argument and its outstanding points. Thus the widening

gulf between middle-class Socialism and what Orwell identifies as the commonsensical average is a function of the actual distance, in manner, idiom and worldview, between their doctrine itself and the experiential horizon of the proletariat. This is especially true of the Fabian variety of socialist theory or the jargon-filled orthodox Marxist discourse “which, even when it is not openly written *de haut en bas*, is always completely removed from the working class in idiom and manner of thought. The Coles, Webbs, Stracheys, etc., are not *exactly* proletarian writers” (Orwell, 2001a: 176). Orwell’s claim is that the fine textures of orthodoxy and theory are essentially removed from the practical experience and immediate political imagination of working people:

To the ordinary working man, the sort you would meet in any pub on Saturday night, Socialism does not mean much more than better wages and shorter hours and nobody bossing you about. To the more revolutionary type, the type who is a hunger-marcher and is blacklisted by employers, the word is a sort of rallying-cry against the forces of oppression, a vague threat of future violence. But, so far as my experience goes, no genuine working man grasps the implications of Socialism. Often, in my opinion, he is a truer Socialist than the orthodox Marxist, because he does remember, what the other so often forgets, that Socialism means justice and common decency (Orwell, 2001a: 177).

In this alignment of the doctrine with a fundamentally bourgeois experience of political action, and in the resulting recognition of a basic rift between the theory and its avowed collective subject – the proletariat –, Orwell approximates a relatively widespread interpretation of working-class attitudes towards Socialism (Day, 2001: 168). Left-wing criticism of middle-class dirigisme within the ranks of British Socialism was not infrequent in the interwar period. Ellen Wilkinson’s 1929 novel *Clash* and Harold Heslop’s *The Gate of a Strange Field*, to name but two examples, offer a characteristic response to the Fabian-inspired, top-down logic of social transformation (Fox, 1994). Wilkinson was particularly vocal about class determinations of political action and about the discrepant loyalties these generated. Her portrayal of working-class labour heroine

Joan Craig provides the narrative cover for, and exploration of, the attempted and ultimately failed encounter between the “enlightened” world of a London middle-class intelligentsia with a “committed” outlook and the relatively backward world of northern labour activism (Del Valle Alcalá, 2009). The total effect of this representation is indubitably one of frustrated alliance: a recognition of the latent incompatibility between extant bourgeois loyalties and a purely rhetorical solidarity with the working class.^{iv} Wilkinson opts for class retrenchment, calling at the same time for a sincere break with middle-class values and tactics of resistance.

Orwell’s position, though less expedient about the necessary passage beyond middle-class ideological boundaries, is largely coincidental with Wilkinson’s criticism of the “high-minded Socialist slum-visitor”: “The truth is that to many people, calling themselves Socialists, revolution does not mean a movement of the masses with which they hope to associate themselves; it means a set of reforms which ‘we’, the clever ones, are going to impose upon ‘them’, the Lower Orders” (Orwell, 2001a: 179-180).^v

One of the more palpable effects of this estrangement of Socialists from common feeling and sensibility is, according to Orwell, the blanket rejection to which the movement *as a whole* is often condemned by people who could, at least potentially, sympathise with “the *essential* aim of Socialism.” This induced alienation cannot be accounted for in a mechanistically materialist way, as is often the case in the standard (vulgar) Marxist analysis. Thus the grim spectacle of 1930s left-wing politics, as Orwell interprets it in the English context, is one marked by a general disconnection between projected aims (which are regarded as largely compatible with a numerical majority of the population) and particular stylistic and intellectual modes of presentation and explanation.

Amongst the ominous consequences of this fundamental breakdown, the rise of Fascism as a compensatory strategy indirectly capitalising on Socialists’ incapacity to make their case and to generally empathise with popular demands, stands out as the most symptomatic development of the period. In the popular reaction against Socialism – grounded in a “commonsensical” hostility towards “prigs” – (Orwell,

2001a: 182), Orwell identifies a fundamental aversion to mechanisation. Thus the “Socialist world is always pictured as a completely mechanised, immensely organised world, depending on the machine as the civilisations of antiquity depended on the slave” (2001a: 185). This unquestioning complicity and even co-extensiveness of Socialism with technological dominance becomes a serious limitation as soon as the mechanical aspect is no longer “merely regarded as a necessary development but as an end in itself, almost as a kind of religion”:

All the work that is now done by hand will then be done by machinery: everything that is now made of leather, wood or stone will be made of rubber, glass or steel; there will be no disorder, no loose ends, no wildernesses, no wild animals, no weeds, no disease, no poverty, no pain – and so on and so forth. The Socialist world is to be above all things an *ordered* world, an *efficient* world. But it is precisely from that vision of the future as a sort of glittering Wells-world that sensitive minds recoil. Please notice that this essentially fat-bellied version of “progress” is not an integral part of Socialist doctrine; but it has come to be thought of as one, with the result that the temperamental conservatism which is latent in all kinds of people is easily mobilised against Socialism (Orwell, 2001a: 186).

The tenor of this analysis brings back the main emphases of the Romantic critique of industrialism. The unrelenting onslaught of the machine is the price of a bleary-eyed progressivism; and this price is to be paid in a brutal dismantling of the organic equilibria – the harmonious rhythms – of pre-industrial society. Thomas Carlyle’s conservative pronouncements against industrialism in the first half of the nineteenth century defined a very similar polemical target, which he evocatively labelled “the Age of Machinery” (an “epoch” of which 1930s Socialism as anatomised by Orwell, no doubt constituted – as Jacobinism and Chartism before it – a precise and organic function):

It is the Age of Machinery, in every outward and inward sense of that word; the age which, with its whole undivided might, forwards,

teaches and practises the great art of adapting means to ends. Nothing is now done directly, or by hand; all is by rule and calculated contrivance. On every hand, the living artisan is driven from his workshop, to make room for a speedier, inanimate one. The shuttle drops from the fingers of the weaver, and falls into iron fingers that ply it faster... These things, which we state lightly enough here, are yet of deep import, and indicate a mighty change in our whole manner of existence. For the same habit regulates not our modes of action alone, but our modes of thought and feeling. Men are grown mechanical in head and in heart, as well as in hand. They have lost faith in individual endeavour, and in natural force, of any kind. Not for internal perfection, but for external combinations and arrangement, for institutions, constitutions, – for Mechanism of one sort or other, do they hope and struggle. Their whole efforts, attachments, opinions, turn on mechanism, and are of a mechanical character (Carlyle, 1971: 64, 67).

The consubstantiality of this structural dynamic of modern society and the accompanying forms of social organisation and political rule is, for Carlyle, indisputable. Indeed, “Nowhere... is the deep, almost exclusive faith we have in Mechanism more visible than in the Politics of this time” (Carlyle, 1971: 70). The radical adherence to “institutions, constitutions” and an associated progeny of “mechanical” exertions against that “subordination of the heart” which, according to Burke, “kept alive, even in servitude itself, the spirit of an exalted freedom” (Burke, 1986: 170), supplied further proof of an unstoppable drift towards “speedy anarchy” (Carlyle, 1971:181). In a similar vein of interpretation, Orwell credits the predominant form of Socialism of his contemporaries with an analogous projection: the endless mediations and “rationalisations” supposed by technology and machinery fundamentally deny the human element in creativity. With the social division of labour – which pulsates at the core of Orwell’s description of the industrial condition in which Socialism has its roots – comes the end of that unitary process of production in which the worker can directly relate to the outcome of her/his work – and in which work itself displays the lineaments of an organic and total process requiring, so to speak, an integral productive intelligence – a craft, rather than a dictated gesture or isolated operation in an impersonal series (Braverman, 1974). The

boundless extensiveness of the mechanisation process leaves no exempted area, subjecting all and sundry to its logic and rituals: “The machine would even encroach upon the activities we now class as ‘art’; it is doing so already, via the camera and the radio. Mechanise the world as fully as it might be mechanised, and whichever way you turn there will be some machine cutting you off from the chance of working – that is, of living” (Orwell, 2001a: 192).

Orwell’s critique of industrial capitalism is fundamentally continuous with an earlier tradition of analysis and resistance to the mechanising dynamics of the modern age. It has been argued in this paper that *The Road to Wigan Pier* presents the crucial outline of his intellectual and moral conversion to Socialism as a process of experiential analysis and ideological critique. The material exposure to the degrading conditions of capitalist exploitation must thus be accompanied by an ethical denunciation of instrumental reason and “mechanical” doctrine. This, rather than signalling an original break with native radicalism, and the onset of a supposedly post-socialist line of thought, marks a crucial revitalisation of Burke’s, Carlyle’s, and more recently, Lawrence’s, emphases on communal loyalties and continuities. Radical resistance becomes, in the discursive modes of this romantic critique of capitalism, an assertion of common values which fundamentally rejects the ideological repudiation of shared social experience.

NOTES

¹ Richard Hoggart has suggested, in this sense, that Orwell “wanted to belong to a coherent society, [that] he longed for a sense of communion” (1974: 38).

² As Ben Jackson has noted, the “critique of Orwell’s definition of socialism became a minor industry” (2007: 98).

³ This criticism, from a radically different perspective, was also formulated by a declared Marxist thinker such as Walter Benjamin. His devastating critique of teleological “historicism” pervades his important “Theses on the Philosophy of History”, in which the vulgar conception of historical evolution encountered in linear interpretations of Marxism is berated for

its negation of the complex temporality of historical emancipation (Benjamin, 1999: 253-264).

⁴ More recently and in a different context, Ross McKibbin has drawn a parallel between particular expressions of working-class identity and effective reactions of hostility towards received discourses of radical social transformation. In his analysis, “class consciousness is a term which... describes attitudes which are defensive, negative or apolitical. A class conscious stance thus becomes one of working-class suspicion of middle-class men and women arising out of a belief in the fundamental incompatibility of the ideas and politics of men who do not share the same life experiences or the same way of earning a living, whether or not they are your allies or ostensible partners in the labour movement” (Quoted in McKibbin 1994: 294-295).

⁵ See Peter Beilharz (1992) and A.M. McBriar (1962).

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