



It's all in Orwell

Eric Blair's uncertain legacy

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When the critics are at a distance, and friends close at hand, literature is projected as an accurate and vivid mirror of the world; when the critics close in, and the friends are absent, oh well, then, some degree of literary licence has to be tolerated in the name of creative imagination.'

— Richard A. Epstein

To keep up with current affairs requires a lot of reading. In Australia, one would naturally look to the *Quarterly Essay* journal as a medium for understanding what issues are making Australians scratch their heads. You could learn, for instance, that Australians have been encouraged to fear each other. In case you hadn't noticed it (you obviously haven't been reading enough), 'the defining

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mood of the Howard years is an uneasy fear of each other, the fear that we're growing apart'—that is according to David Marr, public intellectual extraordinaire.

The joining of the literary world with the actual world is a practice that was picked up long ago. Yet political writing today is typically influenced by the political writing that has characterised twentieth-century politics, the writing to which we are introduced at school and later at University, should we be that unfortunate.

The topic at hand is the literary and political mastery of George Orwell. It is difficult to make proper commentary on twentieth-century politics without Orwell looming over our shoulders. His presence grows stronger still into the twenty-first century, as anti-terror laws have the effect of impeding our liberty and tripling the number of literary allusions to *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

These allusions are sometimes striking, but often self-indulgent. The phrase 'War On Terror' is often associated with the Orwellian invention of Newspeak. Take the

following example from an opinion piece in the *Washington Post* by Zbigniew Brzezinski, former national security advisor to the Carter Administration.

The phrase itself is meaningless. It defines neither a geographic context nor our presumed enemies ... But the little secret here may be that the vagueness of the phrase was deliberately (or instinctively) calculated by its sponsors. Constant reference to a 'war on terror' did accomplish one major objective: It stimulated the emergence of a culture of fear. Fear obscures reason, intensifies emotions and makes it easier for demagogic politicians to mobilize the public on behalf of the policies they want to pursue.

This is dripping with Orwell. Assuming the essence of Brzezinski's premise is correct (after all, these arguments rely a lot on 'essence'; see 'vibe' for more detail),

there remains at least one critical error. Fear obscures reason except when applied to Brzezinski, whose genius goes so far as to penetrate the power of fear and prevent it from destroying the analytical faculties of his own mind. Other exceptions, of course, would be the countless others who take issue with the current US administration's foreign policy.

With 9/11 clouding international affairs today, literary figures have conjured up frighteningly new dystopias in the mould of Orwell's Oceania. Other social democrats who have disowned Soviet communism or the false historicism of Karl Marx have begun to target American neo-liberalism as the new totalitarian threat, though in a more sophisticated, subtler way. Journalists and political scientists salivate at the opportunity to dissect political language and propaganda that might otherwise have deceived the unknowing masses. If you happen to purchase a copy of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* from the online ABC shop, you'll notice that the product description describes the book as 'more relevant than ever'.

This is hardly a surprise, and furthermore, it is an accurate description. Orwell's writing was so prolific, his generalisations so magnificent, that there is literally something for everyone. Socialists can take ease at reading his hopes for universal equality. Conservatives can enjoy his musings on the English language and its abuse by Stalinist dogmatists.

We know that we can never agree with Orwell on everything, and so we embrace the particular writings of his that fit into our own conception of the universe. Orwell is both the working-class hero and the patron-saint of intellectualism. He is the defender of a socialist state and a warrior against totalitarianism. He tried to reconcile these two positions in this manner:

Capitalism leads to dole queues, the scramble for markets, and war. Collectivism leads to concentration camps, leader worship, and war. There is no way out of this unless a planned economy can be somehow combined with the freedom of the intellect, which can only happen if the concept of

right and wrong can be restored to politics.

If you go looking for Orwell's in-depth, empirically based justification as to why these two types of political/economic systems necessarily lead to similar ends, you won't find it. Would such a wordsmith allow his literature to be spoiled by statistics and facts? This would be a harsh judgement on Orwell, though partly evident in his short article title 'What is Science?' where his skepticism is made known.

Orwell was rightly critical of the idea that scientists are better able to appreciate and understand social phenomena than the historian or the literary writer. After all, chemical reactions in a test-tube are predictable, where as human behaviour is not.

Again, however, Orwell falls prey to his constant literary generalisations:

Put in these words, and the apologist of scientific education will usually agree. Press him further, ask him to particularize, and somehow it always turns out that scientific education means more attention to the sciences, in other words—more facts. The idea that science means a way of looking at the world, and not simply a body of knowledge, is in practice strongly resisted.

Orwell's critical mind and his skepticism are what makes him a deserved hero, but his reliance on literature as a medium through which to deliver his analysis lets him down. That is not to say that literature is ultimately useless, or dangerous. Rather, it is the strongest medium for expressing human emotion, and weaker as a tool for constructing empirically verifiable observations of the real world. Moreover, literature is easier to write, because we are our own masters of how we feel and connect with the world around us. The scientific method requires a dedication to an analytical frame of thinking that challenges us to separate emotion from fact.

There are benefits to deploying the literary, fictional world for political writers, however. The use of metaphors, similes and allusions to other literary works

makes it easier to produce an 'argument' that might otherwise be discredited by inconsistencies with real-life facts.

To hark back to our opening examples, the atrocities of the Nazi regime, or the Soviet regime, are still too recent to begin comparisons with contemporary governments, without offending people who've experienced both. We can, however, compare the Bush Administration to 'The Party' in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, even if Orwell's imagined regime was a lot worse.

Similarly, it would be too much to suggest that dealings with the nuclear industry are like dealing with Adolf, so we can choose Satan instead. A 'Faustian bargain' sounds a lot less offensive than 'holding hands with Hitler', even if Satan is more evil.

Richard Epstein's brilliant essay, 'Does Literature Work as Social Science? The Case of George Orwell', describes an undergraduate class he attended where the teacher presented two different texts describing the conditions of the working class in England and France during the nineteenth century. One of the texts was a novel by a famous French novelist, the other a non-fictional defence of industrialism. By far, the class preferred the novella over the dry historical defence.

Literature has the ability to sweep us off our feet or hit us with a crushing emotional blow. This is probably, ironically, where Zbigniew Brzezinski sees George Bush's generalisations as dangerous. This may unfortunately be half true. Politicians are just as bound to utter crass generalisations as the humble wordsmith. But fighting fire with fire never solves the problem, not in any effective way at least. Moreover, the general public are always less stupid than intellectuals make them out to be.

Orwell stands on top of political literature, and to some extent he has succeeded in making many of us think within the same paradigm as he did. It is time to recognise the weakness of this method, however, and take a more critical look at the work of Eric Arthur Blair.

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