

The Road to Wigan Pier, George Orwell

I had read in a column that "Orwell predicted this" in *The Road to Wigan Pier*. The writer was noting that the "craziness" and "extremism" of "the liberal left" precipitates our current populist, worldwide swing toward "right wing authoritarianism. To make this intelligible: "open borders" and "men in women's sports" invites a xenophobic, "anti-immigrant" backlash.

A socialist, Orwell wrote this work to document the plight of coal miners of northern England, far from the wealthier, middle-class English nearer London. The first half of *Wigan* is a description of "Dickens like" conditions of miners and their families. The second half conveys Orwell's beliefs concerning Britain's classes. Orwell's descriptions of the impoverished are rich and sympathetic, or course.

I found a couple of Orwell's themes prescient. He wrote this in 1937, 9 years before his release of *1984*. If Orwell is anything, he's prescient. He notes the rise of "industrial food." Imagine what he would say now with the sophistication of processed food and its advertising army. This gem: "take taste in its narrowest sense—the taste for decent food. In the highly mechanized countries, thanks to tinned food, cold storage, synthetic flavoring matters, etc., the palate is almost a dead organ... Or look at the factory-made, foil-wrapped..."

Secondly, reading these pages on industrialism makes one think Orwell might have been a Luddite. He sketches a sophisticated few pages on the "cost" of industrialism and machinery. "...in some way or another 'progress' is a swindle...what is the function of the machine? Obviously its primary function is to save work...the inhabitants of Utopia would create artificial dangers in order to exercise their courage, and do dumb-bell exercises to harden muscles which they would never be obliged to use. And here you observe the huge contradiction which is usually present in the idea of progress. The tendency of mechanical progress is to make your environment safe and soft; and yet you are striving to keep yourself brave and hard... finally you land up in the by now familiar Wellsian Utopia, aptly caricatured by Huxley in *Brave New World*, the paradise of little fat men."

Now to address Orwell's observations on socialists of his era, whom he claimed, were driving Europe into the arms of the fascists: "the present intensely stupid handling of the class-issue may stampede quantities of potential Socialists into Fascism." Well, he nailed that, didn't he. As a moderate, I see the blind spots and hypocrisies of "both sides." He observes that the socialists are largely upper middle class whose activism spouts

“professional sympathy” for the “poor.” But they themselves are wealthy, insulated, and “revolted” by the ways of the poor—sort of a “missionary” who descends from the heavens to proclaim “salvation and civilization” to the savages (my paradigm). Think of America’s Ivy educated multimillionaires whose power rests on the mirage of “fighting for the poor” whom they disdain (“basket of deplorables”). Orwell: “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.”

American camps (left and right) are appalled by authoritarianism on the “opposite side,” failing completely to see their own dictatorial sentiments. Orwell simply despised authoritarianism, wherever it came from. In this he anticipates Hannah Arendt’s seminal work, *Origins of Totalitarianism*, which illustrates with both Stalin and Hitler. American intellectuals of that era were appalled by Hitler and gave Stalin a “pass.” Orwell: “Poverty and...the habits of mind created by poverty, are something to be abolished from above, by violence if necessary; perhaps even preferably by violence. Hence his worship of ‘great men’ and appetite for dictatorships...Stalin and Mussolini are almost equivalent persons.” American “politicians” are generally completely comfortable with any “statism” that advances their cause. We amble ever closer to an “Imperial Presidency.”

Even without the observations on socialism and industrialism of the last half of the book, I’d recommend the first half of the book for a Dickens level description of northern England’s coal miners.