

What Would Orwell Say?

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Human rights advocates who see the burning to death of whole families in their homes as an act of liberation? Elderly, children and infants dragged into captivity viewed as a legitimate act of resistance? The victims accused by progressive ideologues of being the victimizers, the kidnapped the oppressors? Feminist organizations ignoring widespread rape, belittling the testimonies of multiple victims? The best and the brightest of our universities siding with an illiberal group that is driven by a religious outlook that is misogynistic, authoritarian, homophobic and violent? What is happening here?

Orwell Against the Intellectual Enablers

Ever since elite college campuses in the United States and around the world were flooded with the outburst of anti-Zionist and anti-Semitic fury, I can't stop thinking about George Orwell. A man of the left, Orwell nevertheless grew increasingly disenchanted with Communists and Communism, the ideology to which much of the intellectual left was drawn in the mid-twentieth century. His best-known works, Animal Farm and 1984 - one an allegory of the totalitarian nature of Communism, and the other a warning of the totalitarian dangers emanating from both right and left -- sought to unmask the true nature of the Communist movement as a totalitarian political ideology. What purported to be a vision for a classless society where full equality reigned, hid a sinister and violent impulse that sought to control people and their most basic freedoms, creating a society controlled by terror, with a ruthless leadership wielding unbridled power.

Orwell, in contrast, adhered to a moral outlook he called "common decency," the decency of the everyman. It wasn't a code learned from books, from abstract theory, but a morality of everyday intuitions. In his early work, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, Orwell lived among the working class in England, and recorded an ethnology of his impressions. His stated goal was to see the world from below, and come to conclusions about right and wrong, truth and falsehood, through witnessing the human condition in all its complexity, without rose-colored glasses. The book was a not-so-subtle attack on the ideologues of his day, who, he felt, formulated theories disconnected from the lived lives of people, lives whose moral character was steadfast, but very different than a principled description of what constitutes morality, written from above.

Orwell's moment of clarity came during the Spanish Civil War, when he, like many, travelled to Spain and volunteered to fight for the Republicans against the growing Fascist menace in Europe. On the front, socialists and communists fought side by side. All was not well, however, on the home front, where open street fighting was taking place in Republican-controlled Barcelona, as Communists sought to eliminate their rivals by force. Empty accusations of being traitors to the cause sought to give legitimacy to the Communists' murderous attacks against their ideological rivals, attacks justified as a price to be paid for the revolution. Years later it was uncovered that Orwell

himself had been marked by Communists for assassination, another casualty necessitated by the march forward of History.

Having witnessed first-hand the deadly hypocrisy of Communism, Orwell was shocked to go back to England several months later, to find British intellectuals and newspapers willfully covering up the Communist atrocities. Upon his return, Orwell wrote *Homage to Catalonia*, his memoir of the war, in order to expose the truth about the Civil War and about the Communists; a truth that was whitewashed or ignored by many in the British press who sang the praises of the new order emerging. But Orwell knew this was a lie, and that Communism, no less than Fascism, was a threat to human freedom and moral decency. Truth was being sacrificed. History was being manipulated to present Communists, a totalitarian threat to humanity, as heroes:

“I saw great battles reported where there had been no fighting, and complete silence where hundreds of men had been killed ... I saw newspapers in London retailing these lies and eager intellectuals building emotional superstructures over events that never happened. I saw, in fact, history being written not in terms of what happened but of what ought to have happened according to various party lines.”

Homage to Catalonia

Communism captured the hearts and minds of many intellectuals, the facts be damned. Its powerful charisma, telling a story of equality and justice, its willingness to use violence if necessary to bring a better world into being, was the bon-ton of armchair activists, particularly those who held a scathing critique of the fascist character of the world order. Their ideology was bolstered by intellectual purities that viewed the world and people's lives from a very safe and comfortable distance. Even when the crimes committed under the banner of the red flag were publicly exposed for all to see, loyalists remained true to the promise of a new dawn to the bitter end, blinded to the unspeakable horrors that this new dawn had perpetrated in the name of its lofty values. And while Communism has lost its shine, the intellectual fascination with ideological purity justifying the most hideous of crimes has not gone away.

Elite Universities as Enablers

In a heart-wrenching video clip that went viral, filmed on the Columbia University campus, Prof. Shai Davidai, an Israeli Professor at the Business School, asked parents to no longer send their children to elite universities, as they have become unsafe for Jewish students. Anti-Zionist, anti-Israel and anti-Semitic rhetoric have been rolled together into a message of hatred and glorification of violence. All of this is true, but Davidai misses the larger point. There is something even more insidious going on, similar to the intellectual infatuation with Communism in a previous generation.

As it turns out, all too many of our kids are getting an education that doesn't open their minds, but closes them. We send our beautiful, brilliant, sensitive kids, many of them who have devoted the better part of their adolescence to get the grades and build the

resume necessary to get into these uber-competitive institutions, to get a world class education at what are considered the best universities in the world. But like the Communist utopia belying a dark and sinister ideology of terror, so too, all too many of our social science and humanities departments at our best universities have become one-dimensional in their intellectual outlook, teaching a charismatic ideology that describes the world in terms of good and evil, light and darkness, where morality is black and white, the strong are always culpable, and the weak always without moral agency or moral responsibility. Instead of giving their students tools to think critically, including how to critique the critique itself, all too often they are equipped with an ideological cookie-cutter that offers moral clarity almost instantaneously, by assembling the particular actors into the roles preordained by post-colonialist theory.

Like Marxist thought, which underpinned Communism, so too post-colonial thought offers a toolbox that could shed light on historical processes, helping to understand dynamics that had often been ignored. The failure of post-colonialism came when it was applied not as an additional form of analysis, but rather as the all-encompassing one. Like armchair communism, their analyses of complicated realities ignore all the places where reality flies in the face of theoretical constructs. Facts that don't fit into the theory need to be explained away. In extreme cases, as we are seeing, conspiracy theories develop that claim that these facts that might challenge the worldview – for example, that Jews, while having power, can also be victims, are explained away as simply untrue. Women were not raped. 1,200 people were not murdered in Israel. And while the extremes see conspiracy, the mainstream simply assumes that everything Israel reports supporting its claims is a bald-faced lie. Having pre-judged the outcome, they make reality fit their construct rather than the other way around.

Arabs and Jews/Blacks and Whites

It is probably the original intellectual sin of the Israeli-Arab conflict to frame the conflict as one between an indigenous population and its Jewish colonizers from Europe, whites coming to colonize the natives. In fact, the touchstone for understanding the conflict is understanding just how rooted both Jews and Palestinians are in this place. It is a conflict between two people who both experience it as their home in the world. If you don't understand that, you can't understand anything about the conflict, and you can't really understand what is happening right now. This sense of home is not thin; its foundational. For Jews, they have prayed throughout the centuries for a return to that Holy Land, longing for Jerusalem. Their entire ritual life outside of the land is built on the natural cycles of the Land of Israel, not the lands where they sojourn. In modern times, the Jewish people have been able to reconnect with their place in the world, to be homeless no more. The Israeli-Arab conflict is so bitter because it is rooted against rooted.

The post-colonial intellectuals imposing an American frame of Black/ White onto an Israel/Palestine reality only works if one rewrites Jewish history. Within living memory, Jews in Europe were classified as non-Aryan and therefore the ultimate "other" among "white" Europeans, as the Holocaust demonstrated with ghastly consequences. The

Jews who make up the majority of Israel's population today come from North African, largely Muslim countries, should be seen as "people of color." To impose upon them the classification of "white European" is absurd, since they are neither white nor European. For that matter, even Jews immigrating to America in the late 19th century from Europe and Russia did not self-identify as whites in census data, and their journey to becoming "white" in America is a history with its own complicated dynamics.

None of the above is aimed at rejecting post-colonialism, *prima facie*, as a potentially helpful tool for analysis. European Jews did express views of superiority toward the "browns and blacks," both of their fellow Jewish immigrants from North Africa and of their new Arab neighbors, and the treatment of Ethiopian Jews has had an overlay of discrimination also stemming from race. Yet none of that can explain the vastly different origins and context of each of these "Jews of color" within Israeli society. Their arrival in Israel was, and still is today, one of the most heroic chapters in the country's history – arriving through often treacherous conditions celebrated in language of Biblical proportions: Operation Magic Carpet, airlifting the Jews of Yemen to the newfound State, the **The** Ethiopian Jews' exodus from their Egypt, walking thousands of kilometres across desert in order to be then flown to the Jerusalem of their prayers. It is a radically different story to that of the Blacks' arrival in the New World, a frame transposed upon Israel that is fundamentally flawed.

Words Matter: The Jewish Progressive Lexicon

During a sabbatical year at Brown University in 2005-6, I taught a senior seminar in environmental social thought. The seminar texts included *Water Wars*, by Vandana Shiva, a Hindi scientist and activist, that had been published several years before, just after 9/11. The introduction to the book relates to the terrorist attack on the twin towers:

On September 18, 2001, I joined millions of people around the world to observe two minutes of silence in remembrance of the thousands of people who lost their lives in the September 11 assault on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. But I also thought of the millions who are victims of other terrorist actions and other forms of violence...

Destruction of water resources and of forest catchments and aquifers is a form of terrorism. Denying poor people access to water by privatizing water distribution or polluting wells and rivers is also terrorism. In the ecological context of water wars, terrorists are not just those hiding in the caves of Afghanistan. Some are hiding in corporate boardrooms and behind the free trade rules of the WTO, North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). They are hiding behind the privatization conditionalities of the IMF and World Bank. By refusing to sign the Kyoto protocol, President Bush is committing an act of ecological terrorism on numerous communities who may very well be wiped off the earth by global warming. In Seattle, the WTO was dubbed the "World Terrorist Organization" by protestors

because its rules are denying millions the right to a sustainable livelihood.

I asked my students what they thought about Shiva's examples of terrorism. Many supported her argument. I imagine that many more would support it today.

And then one student finally let her voice be heard, and it was something like this: "I hate this shit. I hate the reckless use of words. Words mean something. If all of her examples are terrorism, then you've diluted the meaning of what happened at the World Trade Center. This isn't terrorism. It's capitalist greed. It's being oblivious to the consequences of self-serving policy. It's exploitation. It's refusing to see the moral consequences of one's actions. It's many things. But if we call it terrorism, terrorism as a word loses its meaning."

The terrorist attack that took place on October 7th was a massacre. The speed with which post-colonialist enablers began to equate Israel's response to the attack to the massacre itself was sickening. "What did you think decolonization was going to look like?" was one particularly chilling quote from academia. Almost immediately they leapt to argue that Israel was the perpetrator in its attack on Gaza, and the "so-called massacre" was a legitimate part of the resistance.

The progressives have reduced the political conflict of Jews and Arabs, Israelis and Palestinians, to a post-colonial model of people of color with no agency, victimized by white colonialists. Their intellectual constructs have blinded them, and they have sought refuge in denial of the facts that fly in the face of their theory, much like Orwell's communist intellectuals, who ignored and denied the crimes of their heroes. Among the progressives who are all in on the post-colonialist agenda, there are also self-identified Jews who see Israel as the embodiment of evil. Jewishly-affiliated parents and grandparents hear their progressive children and grandchildren chanting "from the river to the sea" and their hearts break, as the place that gives their lives so much meaning is the object of such anger and hate.

Still, I am more concerned with the Jewish and Israeli pro-Israel, pro-Palestine progressives who have not abandoned Israel, even as they have a devastating critique of its actions in the world. They have been bedfellows already for several decades with the progressives who are leading the charge against the Jewish people's home in the world. Shocked by the venom that was let loose - - easily moving from Israel-hating, to Zionist-hating, to Jew-hating -- pro-Israel, pro-Palestine progressives have put up a firewall between themselves and their former post-colonialist progressive allies, rejecting their demonization of Israel, and by extension, of those that are identified with it. They have correctly separated themselves from the perpetrators of an intellectual pogrom, no less violent than the one perpetrated on the physical bodies of its victims.

But does the firewall actually solve the problem? The ideas that have been cultivated in the post-colonialism intellectuals were absorbed by pro-Israel,

pro-Palestine intellectuals and activists, as well. For many, it is their intellectual frame. Believing that distancing oneself from the anti-Israel progressives is the end of the story allows pro-Israel, pro-Palestine progressives to think that there is ultimately nothing that they share with those who deny the atrocities committed and who justify the violence. But this is not true. Although attitudes to what is a justifiable resistance are very different, their critique of the Jewish state can often sound shockingly the same. When you see Israel as a racist, fascist-leaning, apartheid-like state, it's a slippery slope to glorifying Hamas and chanting "from the river to the sea." Hamas might or might not be freedom fighters, but they are, to use a phrase often heard in academia these days, identified as being on the right side of history.

Is Israel fascist, with men in grey shirts owning the streets? Identifying political trends that are worrisome within the Israeli political structure do not portend a fascist future. Such a notion is wildly overstated. Racism, echoing the post-colonial categories of white supremacy towards people of color and increasingly seen as the deep structure of fascist ideology, is a mistaken frame of analysis for an ethnic, national and religious conflict between Jews and Palestinians, two rival identities in the same land. Calling Israel itself an apartheid state is an absurd framing for a country in which political rights are given to all, even if Israel can do better in its policies towards its Arab-Palestinian citizens. This is all language heard regularly in progressive pro-Israel, pro-Palestinian circles. It is no wonder that many of their children overseas have crossed over from critiquing Israel to delegitimizing it.

Using apartheid to describe the situation on the West Bank is to once again take the conflict and shift it to a post-colonialist frame, rather than a context of two rooted peoples in a deadly conflict. The source of apartheid is a colonialist white supremacy that rules over a large Black majority. That is not a helpful description of what is happening here. **I**

Israel controls an entire population against its will with often overwhelming force, causing humiliation, injury and at times death to innocents. That control is deemed necessary out of fear of a terrorist state also emerging on the West Bank, with similar consequences to what has happened in Gaza. Security issues are also not the only factor that leads to the Jewish presence and the inevitable conflict that arises. Interwoven with the security issues is the exercising of a religious claim to the greater Land of Israel, particularly by Israel's religious Zionists. In proper measure, the religious claim to Judea and Samaria - the area at the core of Biblical Israel - is first and foremost an assertion of Jewish history and Jewish belief. It stakes Israel's rootedness in this place; it explains Israel as being contiguous with its Jewish roots. This is not meant as support (or rejection) of the settler movement, nor about what needs to be done at this fraught moment in history- there are many roads not travelled. It is a reminder of the inexorable connection between land and people.

There are multiple ways of going forward once accepting the rootedness of both peoples, but ignoring that rootedness, seeing it as the enemy, turns the source of meaning for being here in this place into the problem. There are Jews that of course do reject Palestinian rootedness, and act upon it. They have outsized power in the body politic. The rejection of Jewish rootedness by Palestinians, on the other hand, is central to Palestinian understanding of Israel, even when there is a willingness among a moderate camp to accept Israel **de facto** as a regrettable fact that is not going anywhere. The post-colonialist explanation informs the moderate position no less than the position of the extremists. What we saw on October 7th was the power of the radical Islamic agenda aided and abetted by a post-colonialist moral justification for their heinous actions.

Israel has much to consider in its sins of commission and omission but comparing it to the apartheid regimes of South Africa and Rhodesia is purposefully misleading. Pro-Israel, pro-Palestine intellectuals and activists, wittingly and unwittingly, often offer ideological and rhetorical support for the delegitimization of Israel, intertwined in post-colonialist assumptions. The moral justifications for “revolutionary violence” emerge from the same family of ideas.

Words matter. There is a good dose of soul-searching needed by the pro-Israel, pro-Palestine camp, far beyond their shock at the venom of their progressive bedfellows. They were ideological brethren, and it takes a lot more than simply distancing oneself from them in order to uproot the ideological assumptions they share. It starts with recognizing that the problem can't be cloistered off on the other side of an imagined border; such assumptions must be exorcised from within, where they have already implanted themselves.

Coda: What Would Orwell Say?

In a new book by Marc Stears, on Orwell and his generation's resistance to the simple ideological dichotomies that Fascism and Communism presented to Europe for much of the 20th century, Stears instead showcases the faith that Orwell placed in ordinary life and ordinary citizens. I have my doubts that Orwell would be supportive of Israel's military response to the atrocities that were committed, but I have no doubt that he would have rejected clearly and unequivocally the barbarian violence that Hamas displayed, and what it reveals about Hamas's violent character. I also hope that he would speak out on the categorical moral difference between the atrocities that Hamas committed on that darkest of days, and the moral complexities that Israel confronts, never knowing what would have happened if it had made different moral choices.

But this I am certain – he would see the parallels between the Communist intellectual ideologues of his day, and the post-colonialist intellectual ideologues of today. Both suffer from a simplified version of moral life, viewed comfortably from above, losing resolution and the context in which real moral

life is lived. Stears makes a powerful case that the Orwell 's intuitions about moral life and its political implications, have strong resonance with the present moment in the world. Israel is being assaulted not only by an enemy that seeks its destruction with unbridled terror, but also by an intellectual movement, residing and nurtured at academic institutions throughout the world, that has educated a generation of students to see Israel as the embodiment of all things evil.

Israel's circumstance is dizzyingly complex and fraught with dangers. In recent months we have seen the horrifying alliance between a pre-modern barbarism and a post-modern ideology, and how lethal it can be. There is so much to be done, so many fronts to the battle. For centuries we have been the People of the Book, at home in the pursuit of God and Truth. Since the Holocaust, we also have learned how to be a people that once again knows how to fight and defend itself. Both of these have now been compromised. The two-headed attack on Israel on one of the blackest days in Jewish history – an attack through the violence of ideas no less than the violence of the sword, is an existential threat. Identifying foe, as well as friend, is surely a necessary element in responding to the moment at hand.