

UNDER COVER

Orwell in '84

We are now within a year of 1984, so it was appropriate for Norman Podhoretz to ask, in *Harper's* this January, what George Orwell would have thought were he alive today. For all the generations that have come of age since the Spanish Civil War, Orwell has been one of the master teachers, shaping our ways of thinking and speaking about political life. Those Orwell taught, following an ancient fatality, are bound to fight over his legacy: Podhoretz, possibly with an eye to next year's elections, wants to enroll Orwell among the neo-conservatives.

Podhoretz has little difficulty refuting the notion that Orwell would have sided with the dovish Left. Orwell's ruling passion, as Podhoretz observes, was his hatred for totalitarianism. Orwell never doubted that, in a world dominated by the rivalry between America and the Soviet Union, it was morally obligatory to support the United States. Orwell would have savaged the NewSpeak of nuclear strategists and defense planners, but he was contemptuous of pacifists and defended military virtue. I suspect that Orwell's zeal for the West would not always have come up to neo-conservative standards; but Podhoretz is right that Orwell was and would have remained a supporter of the West in the cold war.

Podhoretz recognizes that he is on shakier ground when he contends that Orwell would have abandoned socialism in favor of a new appreciation of capitalist society. The best evidence Podhoretz can muster is a kind of sociological analogy, comparing Orwell to the many socialist intellectuals who came to the conclusion that political freedom cannot be separated from economic "liberty." Moreover, Podhoretz argues, Orwell would have been swayed, as such intellectuals were, by the success of capitalism in providing well-being for the vast majority of ordinary people.

This happy view is jarring, to say the least, with unemployment approaching 12 per cent; and if Orwell wanted to confirm his belief that capitalism leads to "dole queues [and] the scramble for markets," the morning paper would suffice. But for Orwell the economic successes or failures of capitalism were almost beside the point.

Podhoretz is so concerned to identify Orwell's "ideology" that he gives little real consideration to what Orwell thought. The material failures of capitalism worried Orwell a good deal less than the *moral* shortcomings of Western society as a whole, which helps account for the time Orwell devoted to attacking the Left intelligentsia. The "hedonistic attitude to life," Orwell wrote, is essentially false. "Hitler... knows that human beings *don't* only want comfort, safety, short working hours, hygiene, birth control and, in general, common sense; they also, at least intermittently, want struggle and self-sacrifice, not to mention drums, flags, and loyalty parades." Capitalism and Western socialism offer human beings a "good time," and hence are political failures even when they succeed economically.

Capitalism and hedonistic socialism rest on the same

theory of human nature--the doctrine that human beings are free individuals concerned to preserve themselves and to gratify their passions. By contrast, Orwell wrote: "man is not an individual; he is only a cell in an everlasting body, and he is dimly aware of it." Human beings, in the most fundamental sense, are political and communal. All nations and politics are "fragmentary," parts of the real, darkly seen, human community; but patriotism, with all its limitations, is more truly human than individualism. Totalitarianism is dreadful, not because it denies private freedom, but because it rejects the higher community. Totalitarian rule is premised on the rejection of objective truth and of any law beyond human will, and totalitarianism attempts, with frightening success, to identify our humanity with the claims of particular parties and regimes. The West can still do better than that.

Yet Orwell was pessimistic to the core. In the first place, Western individualism is at a disadvantage in any conflict with totalitarianism; it legitimates private interest and abhors sacrifice. The West prevailed over the Nazis, Orwell recognized, only because its material superiority was great enough to outweigh its inferior ability to appeal for common endeavor. In war itself, even hedonistic regimes might turn to leaders like Churchill, who "could grasp that wars are not won without fighting," but such a turning to common purpose takes place only at the moment of crisis. In the peacetime competition that lays the foundation for war, individualistic regimes are less competent. "Only socialist nations can fight effectively," Orwell wrote with some exaggeration, meaning only those socialisms that avoid the hedonism characteristic of Western ideology. International conflict, in other words, means that capitalism is irrelevant or doomed; only some sort of socialism offers the chance of survival for the deepest values of the West. Podhoretz recently wrote of the neo-conservative "anguish" over Reagan's foreign policy; Orwell would not have been deceived in the first place. Orwell rejected capitalism, his other reasons aside, *because* of his hatred for totalitarianism.

Yet Orwell also saw that the logic of international rivalry compels democracy to imitate its totalitarian adversaries or be defeated by them. The horrifying truth behind 1984 is that a secular, technological world leads, sooner or later, to a totalitarian conclusion. The only check on that development, beyond the fragile decencies of ordinary people, is provided by intellectuals who, devoted to the human truth, are more than partisans. That teaching is to be commended to Mr. Podhoretz and his friends, likely though it is to be lost on them.

Wilson Carey McWilliams