

Examining the Applicability of George Orwell's *Animal Farm* as a seminar text for students in International Relations

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Abstract

*This paper looks at the potential of George Orwell's short novel *Animal Farm* as a seminar text for International Relations majors. It points out some of the links between the story and events in twentieth-century history, as well as the broader political message Orwell was trying to impart. One major theme, the (ab)use of language, is analysed as a suggested way of teaching students about the richness and complexity of the text, and the way in which unscrupulous politicians can manipulate a populace.*

Animal Farm (1945) has been used as a set text in American high schools since the 1950s, largely for the easy accessibility and relative concision of its allegorical theme. As this theme is, however, an indirect yet biting exposure of the corruption of Socialist ideals as realised in the Soviet Union, the book's inclusion on school required reading lists inevitably points to Cold War insecurities about the undeniable attraction of such ideals. Orwell himself directly described it as 'an attack on Stalin'⁽¹⁾. It was ironically rejected by four publishers before finally being published in 1945, because 'Stalin was a crucial wartime ally who was helping the way toward victory'⁽²⁾ and no one at the time wanted to risk offending him. Following the end of the Second World War, however, Western/Soviet relations quickly deteriorated, and Orwell's critique was belatedly made welcome. Far from being just another well-written novel for students to study on an academic level, therefore, its importance lies much more in its historical relevance and consequent function as a political tool put to work at the service of Western 'Free-World' ideology.

A brief outline of the plot reveals historical parallels that are easily identifiable. The passing of time and the collapse of the Soviet Empire in 1989 have, however, rendered the traumatic upheavals of the twentieth century distant, and even perhaps, seemingly irrelevant to students in the twenty-first century. The book should therefore be read not only as being relevant to events in the Russian revolution, but as allegorical for any society. The corruption of power, huge inequalities, and the exploitation of people continue at varying levels in different countries around the world, even today.

The novel starts with a speech by the pig Old Major, who gathers the animals together and tells them of his dream of a better future, for which they must strive and hope, a future free of the exploitation of humans such as their brutal overlord Farmer Jones. Old Major is meant to stand as a rough facsimile of Karl Marx, and the ideas he lays out mirror those Marx espoused in *The Communist Manifesto* (1848). Old Major's ideas are 'elaborated [...] into a complete system of thought' (Orwell: 11) called 'Animalism', after his death, by three other pigs Snowball, Napoleon, and Squealer. This marks the beginning of the manipulation of the ideology, giving advantage and privilege to the pigs, and can be read as a parallel for how Marx's ideas were twisted into the Soviet version of Communism. The longed-for revolution occurs sooner than expected, as a result of Jones' drunken neglect of the farm. This mirrors the poverty faced by Russian peasants during the First World War, and their violent rejection of Tsar Nicolas II and the centuries-long tyrannical rule of aristocrats in 1917. At this point the novel remains upbeat, as the hope for a better future seems attainable, now that the brutal Jones is gone, and the animals seem to have control of their fate in their own hands. This hopeful tone does not last long, however, as the pigs begin to consolidate their grasp of power. The two main characters, Snowball and Napoleon, are meant to be representative of

Trotsky and Stalin. They have very different visions for the future of 'Animalism', and soon fall out and begin arguing. Snowball has great plans for a windmill, that will power the farm and allow the animals to live in leisure and comfort. His ideas are inevitably very popular with the animals who '[listen] in astonishment while Snowball [conjures] up pictures of fantastic machines which [will] do their work for them while they [graze] at their ease in the fields or [improve] their minds with reading and conversation'(35-6). He also wants to export 'Animalism' to neighbouring farms by sending out 'more and more pigeons [to] stir up rebellion' (37). Napoleon doesn't like his ideas though, publicly '[urinating] over the plans' (36) of the windmill, insisting that defence should be paramount, and arguing that 'what the animals must do [is] to procure firearms and train themselves in the use of them'(37). Their constant arguing and fierce rivalry parallels that of Stalin, who wanted to consolidate Communism in Russia first, and Trotsky who wanted to export worldwide revolution. This rivalry ends with the dramatic expulsion of Snowball from the farm pursued by 'nine enormous dogs wearing brass-studded collars'(38-9) that try to kill him, and he escapes with only 'a few inches to spare'(39). This event marks the beginning of Napoleon's reign of terror, and all the animals can do is look on '[silent] and terrified.' Stalin expelled Trotsky from the Soviet Union in 1929, in a similarly violent fashion, eventually having him murdered in exile in 1940, and proceeded to seize control of the revolution through the use of force and terror. Thus Napoleon now adopts the windmill as his own idea to keep the animals busy and to try to modernise the farm for the benefit of himself and the other pigs, neglecting the harvest and allowing the animals to go hungry. This exploitation of the animals parallels the huge modernisation projects Stalin embarked on from 1928, his infamous 'five-year plans' which aimed at catching up with other more industrialised nations, plunging the population into a misery of hard work, deprivation, and fear. During the 'Great Famine' of 1932-3, millions of people starved to death. Any opposition was met with violent suppression, and infamous

show trials of the 'guilty' were held in the 'Great Purge' of 1937-8, which led to mass deportations, imprisonment, and executions. Orwell has Napoleon acting in the same way. He also holds purges to quell any hint of dissension. Animals are 'called upon to [...] confess their crimes'(61), and after 'their confession the dogs promptly [tear] their throats out'(62). This use of violent spectacle to create hysteria and a subsequent terrified obedience is the ultimate corruption and contradiction of the ideals Old Major espoused. The fact that the animals are killed by having their throats torn out, is Orwell's way of symbolising the literal silencing of dissent that went on under Stalin's rule. The brutality of the stark description shows the power of his conviction that the ideals of Socialism had gone dreadfully wrong. It is at this point in the novel that the animals, 'shaken and miserable'(62) creep away to the quarry and begin to sing their anthem 'Beasts of England' 'slowly, and mournfully, in a way they had never sung it before'(64), only to be told that the song has been 'abolished. From now onwards it [is] forbidden to sing it'(65). It is a song of revolution, expressing a longing for a better society, which is why they sing it at this point. They are told, however, that as 'that society has now been established [clearly] this song has no longer any purpose.' Controlled and manipulated, the animals can only meekly obey, just as ordinary Soviet citizens had no way to openly voice any form of opposition to their leaders during Stalin's reign of terror.

Such is a brief summary of some of the main events in the novel, and the parallels which can be drawn in historical terms. These can obviously be pointed out in more detail to the students as the book is read, and provide an interesting framework for appreciating the book. Once this has been done, however, another approach to the novel can prove more rewarding. This can be achieved through the identification of themes and a look at how they are illustrated and developed throughout the text. A good way to make this easier to do is to point out examples of the themes as the book is read, chapter-by-chapter, and then have the students

assemble and assess them as a whole once the book has been read.

An example of one particularly interesting theme in *Animal Farm* is the importance of language, and how it can be used as a powerful tool of manipulation. This theme runs throughout the novel, beginning with the powerful eloquence of Old Major and his speech in the barn. The speech is a perfect example of successful political rhetoric; simple, to the point, and full of easy-to-remember phrases. The animals are given a blunt summary of their situation: 'no animal in England knows the meaning of happiness or leisure after he is a year old. No animal in England is free. The life of an animal is misery and slavery: that is plain truth'(Orwell: 4). The cause of their misery is 'Man' 'the only creature that consumes without producing.' The solution is clear: 'Only get rid of Man, and the produce of our labour would be our own. Almost overnight we could become rich and free'(5). So far it seems that his rhetoric will be a power for good, and the animals enthusiastically take up the anthem that he teaches them, 'Beasts of England'. Soon, however, we can see the limitations of Old Major's dream. The animals are too trusting and unsure of their own ability to understand what they have been told, and so rely on the pigs to interpret his words for them: 'The work of teaching and organising the others fell naturally on the pigs, who were generally recognized as being the cleverest of the animals'(10). Thus it is the pigs who '[elaborate]' the 'teachings into a system of thought, to which they gave the name of Animalism'(11). It is the animals 'stupidity and apathy' which allows this to happen. They consequently accept without question anything that they are told. Their acceptance of the arguments of the main spokesman for the pigs, Squealer, even though he is said to be able to 'turn black into white', is symptomatic of their gullibility. This lack of intelligence and blind trust is epitomised by '[their] most faithful disciples [...] the two cart-horses, Boxer and Clover'(12): 'These two [have] great difficulty in thinking anything out for themselves, but having once accepted the pigs as their teachers they [absorb] everything that they [are]

told, and [pass] it on to the other animals by simple arguments.’ Boxer is particularly dim: ‘His two slogans, “I will work harder” and “Napoleon is always right”, [seem] to him a sufficient answer to all problems’(46). This blind acceptance of what they are told, fuelled by a lack of education and limited understanding of what is happening to them, is what makes them so vulnerable. It is their inability to read which is especially instrumental in their downfall. The pigs condense the principles of Animalism into ‘The Seven Commandments’, but even these are too complex for them to understand as none of them can read:

None of the animals on the farm could get further than the letter A. It was also found that the stupider animals such as the sheep, hens, and ducks, were unable to learn the Seven Commandments by heart. After much thought Snowball declared that the Seven Commandments could in effect be reduced to a single maxim, namely ‘Four legs good, two legs bad’. This, he said, contained the essential principle of Animalism.(24)

This ignorance is eagerly used by the more educated pigs, who even use the sheeps’ ‘great liking for this maxim’ as a way of stifling debate. Their noisy bleating of ‘Four legs good, two legs bad’ is often used as a way of drowning out debate.

The ‘Seven Commandments’ and the way in which they are subtly altered, are the central way in which the pigs manipulate and exploit the animals. These quasi-religious ‘Commandments’ are the results of the pig’s ‘studies’(Orwell: 16) and form an ‘unalterable law by which all the animals on Animal Farm must live for ever after’(17). The irony of these ‘unalterable’ laws, is that they are of course altered to suit the increasing assertiveness and selfish needs of the pigs. The other animals, as they cannot read very well, or in the case of the majority not at all, are unable to see how and when the alterations are made. Three examples are as follows,

with the later alterations in italics:

No animal shall sleep in a bed *with sheets*. (50)

No animal shall drink alcohol *to excess*. (79)

No animal shall kill any other animal *without cause*. (66)

The manipulation of language here is made possible through the laziness of the animals. If they made an effort to learn to read, or even to memorize the commandments, they would not be so easily duped. The pigs cleverly alter them little by little and remain undetected, until one day Squealer is found ‘temporarily stunned’ and ‘sprawling’ next to ‘a ladder broken in two pieces’ with ‘a paint brush and an overturned pot of white paint’(79). Even this, however, is only ‘a strange incident which hardly anyone [is] able to understand.’ The animals’ naive trust leads to their undoing. The pigs exploit it to the full, knowing that even if the animals think the altered commandments are different or unfair, they cannot criticize them, as that would amount to an unthinkable criticism of the sacred tenets of Animalism, as handed down to them by the revered Old Major. The final alteration is, of course, the most well known ‘All animals are equal *but some animals are more equal than others*’(97). At this point all of the other commandments have been erased. The total reversal of the meaning of equality here, is made possible not only through the cleverness of the pigs, but also by the animals’ almost willing complicity in their own deception. Orwell’s message is clear. Without the active participation of ordinary people in the democratic process, abuse is inevitable. Power can be taken and held through the use of violence, but equally, or arguably more effectively by the ability of a cynical educated minority to use and control language to justify the unjustifiable, by manipulating an illiterate and uneducated majority.

The main spokesman for the pigs is Squealer, the pig with the reputation

of being able to ‘turn black into white’(Orwell: 11). His manipulation of Animal Farm’s history is another good example of the (ab)use of language. After the initial rebellion, Jones attempts to return, but is fought off by the animals led by Snowball in what is later immortalized in farm lore as ‘The Battle of the Cowshed’(32). Proud of their defence, the animals ‘create a military decoration, “Animal Hero, First Class”, which [is] conferred there and then on Snowball’. This history is, however, only orally remembered, and is thus easily subject to later alteration. After Snowball’s expulsion, he is made into a scapegoat for all the ills of the farm, and his part in the now legendary battle is reversed. Although he was shot by Jones, Squealer explains that that was ‘part of the arrangement’, and that ‘Jones’s shot only grazed him’(59). He was part of a plot that was ‘at the critical moment, to give the signal for flight and leave the field to the enemy.’ Squealer explains that this plot was foiled by the heroism of their ‘heroic Leader, Comrade Napoleon’ who ‘when panic was spreading and all seemed lost [...] sprang forward with a cry of “Death to Humanity!” and sank his teeth into Jones’s leg’(60). When this version of events is questioned by Boxer, Squealer uses his ultimate argument:

‘Our Leader, Comrade Napoleon,’ announced Squealer, speaking very slowly and firmly, ‘has stated categorically - categorically, comrade - that Snowball was Jones’s agent from the very beginning - yes, and from long before the rebellion was ever thought of.’(60)

The reaction to this statement of ‘fact’ is again indicative of an almost culpable complicity in the deceit: “Ah, that is different!” said Boxer. “If Comrade Napoleon says it, it must be right”(60). The pigs have not only managed to seize control of the farm, but have also taken command of its official history, deliberately controlling the communal memory of the animals. Control of language, in this case in its function as a creator of history and the proudly shared identity this confers, can again

be seen as central to their hold on power.

Squealer's use of language is, of course, an echo of Soviet propaganda. When the animals are going hungry, due to neglect of the harvest because of work on the windmill, it is 'necessary to make a readjustment of rations'(Orwell: 81). The choice of words is all-important: 'Squealer always spoke of it as a "readjustment", never as a "reduction"'. He can, of course, 'turn black into white':

But in comparison with the days of Jones the improvement was enormous. Reading out the figures in a shrill rapid voice, he proved to them in detail that they had more oats, more hay, more turnips than they had had in Jones's day, that they worked shorter hours, that their drinking water was of better quality, that they lived longer, that a larger proportion of their young ones survived infancy, and that they had more straw in their stalls and suffered less from fleas.
(81)

Ironically the animals '[believe] every word of it'. Indeed they want to believe it. With the passage of time, the old days have faded from their memories: 'But doubtless it had been worse in the old days. They were glad to believe so. Besides, in those days they had been slaves and now they were free, and that made all the difference, as Squealer did not fail to point out'(81). As readers, we can of course see the irony of these words, and wonder despairingly at the extent of their blind gullibility. Amusing though it may be to be witness to their willing self-deception, our awareness of the fact that a similar rhetoric was used to justify the starvation of millions in the nineteen thirties in the Soviet Union, as well as of contemporary examples such as the strident rhetoric used in North Korea today, gives this use of language an ultimately chilling effect. Orwell may have simplified it to fit his allegorical world of animals, but this simplification takes away nothing from his

message. He is showing how misuse of language lies at the heart of evil regimes, and that it is our duty, to ourselves as well as to society in general to resist it, before, as is the case on *Animal Farm*, it becomes too late.

To conclude, *Animal Farm* is a novel rich in historical symbolism, yet it remains highly relevant even today. To study, if only briefly, some of the main events that occurred in the Soviet Union, can deepen and enrich our understanding of the novel, but even without this background we can take a lot from it. Even if read at the level of just a simple story, we can see the tragic inevitability of how the animals are exploited, and their own unwitting contribution to this exploitation. From this we can draw parallels with what might happen, or indeed is happening now in human societies today. The book shows us how power can depend not just on the use of physical force, but more frighteningly on the cynical control of language to manipulate an apathetic majority. Without active engagement, democratic ideals can quickly be perverted into the service of totalitarianism. The simplicity of characterization that comes of using animals instead of people for the story, dogs are fierce, sheep are stupid, and so on, allows Orwell to avoid the interference of unnecessary complexities such as character development, for example, and lets him focus our attention on the desperately important social message he wishes to convey. What might at first appear to be a simple story for children is, in fact, a deadly serious book for us all, and one whose implications we would be more than misguided to dismiss. To introduce International Relations students to this seminal text, and guide them through its implications and complexities, is to show them how literature can have an enormous importance in reflecting social conditions around the world, and can dramatically alter the way in which we react to them.

End Notes:

- 1) George Orwell, *Orwell's Proposed Preface to Animal Farm*, Appendix I, *The Complete Works of George Orwell*, Vol.8, (London: Secker & Warburg, 1987), 104. (Quoted from John Brown, 'Animal Farm', in Yasuharu Okuyama, ed., *Orwell: A Centenary Tribute from Japan* (Tokyo: Sairyusha, 2003),23.)
- 2) Malcolm Bradbury, ed., George Orwell, *Animal Farm*. (London: Penguin Books, 2000 [1945]), vi.

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