Chapter 5: The Political Philosophy of Marx and Orwell

Throughout his life, George Orwell was deeply concerned about the twin problems of economic injustice and political totalitarianism, and his ideas on how to solve these were influenced by those of previous "socialist" philosophers, including Karl Marx. Orwell wrote Animal Farm, in large part, to explore the problems he saw in Stalin's Russia. His relationship with the basic "ideas" of Marxism, however, is considerably more comple**x.** Here, we'll look at the basic ideas of Marxism and how these compare to those of Orwell.

1 MARX ON MORAL PROBLEMS WITH THE MARKET

> *"The less you eat, drink and read books; the less you go to the theatre, the dance hall, the public house; the less you think, love, theorize, sing, paint, fence, etc., the more you save—the greater becomes your treasure which neither moths nor dust will devour—your capital. The less you are, the more you have; the less you express your own life, the greater is your alienated life-the greater is the store of your estranged being…all passions and all activity must therefore be submerged in avarice" (K. Marx, Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts).*

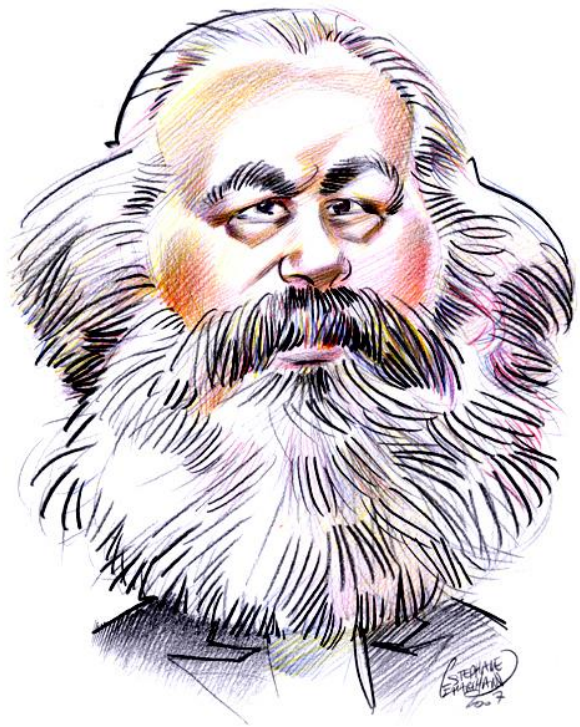


Figure 1 Karl Marx (from Wikimedia Commons).

Karl Marx (1818-1883) was a German-born philosopher and economist who spent much of his life in Britain, where he wrote critiques of capitalist economic systems (or **market economies**), where a relatively small number of "capitalists" owned the means of production (or "capital"), while a larger number of workers by selling their labor to these capitalists for fixed wages. He famously predicted that capitalism would eventually collapse and be replaced by **communism,** in which the means of production would be jointly owned by all members of society (a type of **planned economy**). While Marx had little to say about how society or the economy *ought* to be structured, he is best remembered today as the inspiration for the communist revolutions in 20th-century Russia and China. These communist revolutions notably failed to produce workable alternatives to market economies, however, with the USSR collapsing in 1991 and the PRC moving toward an increasingly market-oriented economy (with a nondemocratic government) since the late 1970s.

Why Care About Marx? Marx's confident predictions about the collapse of highly developed market economies (Britain, the US, etc.) never came to pass, and it's unclear what he might have made of the

rise and fall of Russian and Chinese communism. However, Marx's ideas and arguments are still of interest to philosophers, political scientists, economists, sociologists, historians, and others. In this section, we'll be taking a "big picture" look at the sorts of issues that Marx was worried about (we'll be ignoring the technical details of Marx's ideas about economics, which make up a good chunk of his actual writing).

It's also worth noting that some of the "old" responses against Marx don't work as well as they used to. For example, from about 1914 to 1980, it seemed like Marx was wrong about how wealth/income would end up being distributed in market economies. Marx predicted that the rich would get richer, the poor would get poorer, and this would cause political problems. The reverse happened, and most developed economies (the US, Western Europe, etc) generally became more equal, even as capitalist economies beat their communist counterparts. (And the citizens seemed to like them more!). This seemed to be a reasonable response to Marx's worries. Recently, though, levels of inequality have slowly been returning to their pre-1914 "norm," and again look more like Marx expected. Workers in many rich countries have seen small gains in "real" income/wealth, while the upper 20% (especially the top 1%) have seen huge increases in wealth/income. Alongside this, citizens of rich countries tend to report a much higher level of dissatisfaction with their government/society than they did 50 years ago.

1.1 WHAT IS HISTORICAL MATERIALISM?

> *"It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but, on the contrary, their social existence that determines their consciousness." (K. Marx, Preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy)*

What is a historical materialist (like Marx)? A **materialist** believes that human beings are, essentially, just one more part of the physical or material world. Rene Descartes (of "I think, therefore I am" fame), for example, was NOT a materialist since he thought that humans were essentially "thinking things," or souls that somehow existed separately from the material world. Thomas Hobbes, by contrast, was an early materialist who identified humans as just one more selfish, pleasure-seeking animal whose behavior could only be controlled given the right social environment. He argued that humans *need to* be ruled by an all-powerful monarch since the only alternative was a harmful "war of all against all." Later socialist materialists like Robert Owen adopted Hobbes' general materialist outlook. However, they offered more "progressive" forms of government or control (Owen favored making people wear colored blocks that showed everyone how well they'd behaved the previous day, because this would incentivize them to behave better). Marx (like many others) finds these sorts of ideas about society a bit off-putting since they seem to suggest that some people ("the elite") are somehow capable of rising above their material circumstances, and are thus justified in ruling over everyone else. He also argues that many materialists ignore the way that humans change over time, which gives rise to his historicism.

Marx's **historicism** arose in response to Kant's idealism and Hegel's historical idealism. Kant argued that humans help create the world we live in, by imposing our *ideas* of space, time, causality, etc. However, these things aren't really part of the external world; for example, an intelligent alien might live within a very different reality than a human, given the aliens' very different ideas. Hegel took Kant's idea one step further and proposed that the ideas humans use to construct reality can change over an individual's life and (more importantly) as human society progresses over time. Marx agrees with Hegel that the reality in which humans live is partially our own creation. However, he gives this idea a materialist spin: the reality in which humans live is *physically* created by us. It's made up of buildings, inventions, languages, roads, etc. Marx argues our interactions with our *created* environment (our technology) shape us much more than we usually recognize. The reality of an early hunter-gatherer, for example, is very different from that a primitive farmer, a medieval knight, a worker in a 19th-century factory, or a 21st-century college student with access to modern technology.

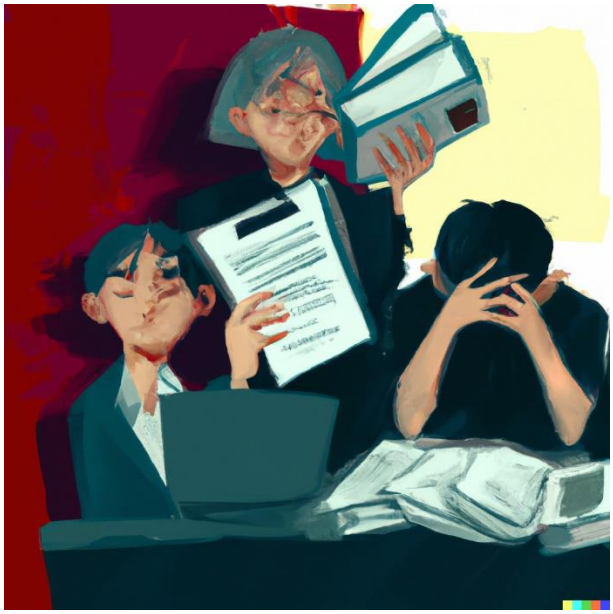
So, What is Historical Materialism? In a nutshell, Marx thinks the best way to understand humanity is to look at the "stuff" we've created and the way we use this to make new "stuff." Everything else—our political/ethical/religious beliefs, our ideas about love/justice/philosophy/art, and so on.—is merely a reflection of this more basic economic relation to the world, and these ideas will change as technology (which is a sort of material stuff) changes.

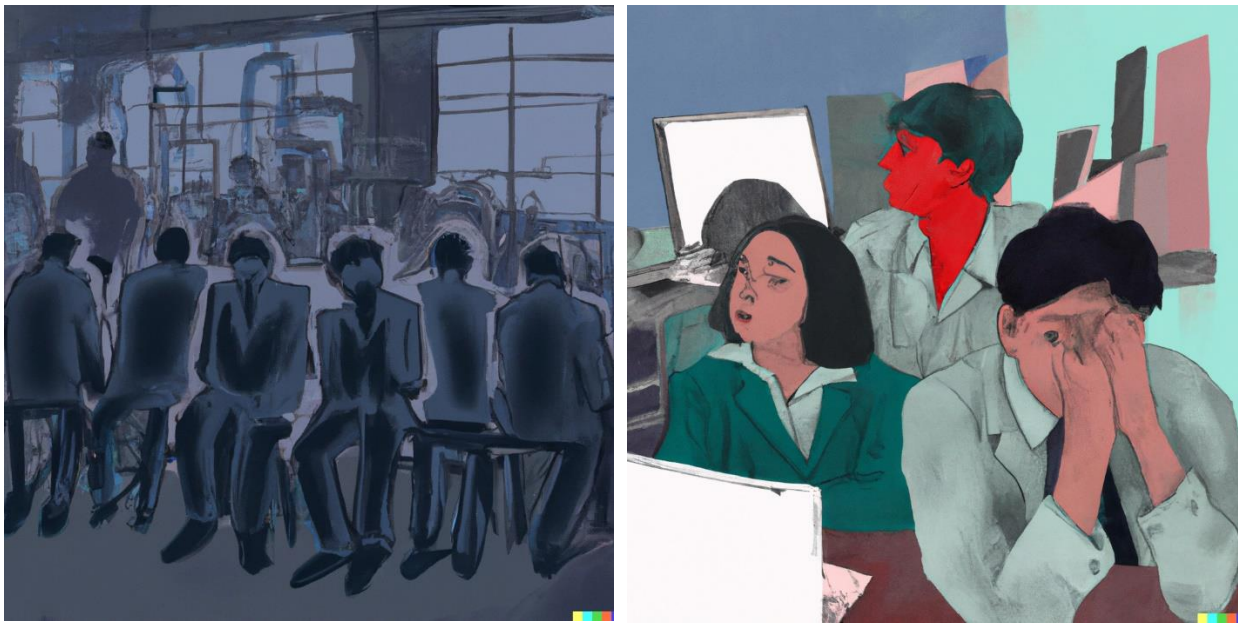
1.2 WHAT IS ALIENATION?

> *"Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people...The call to abandon [the people's] illusions about their condition is the call to abandon a condition which requires illusion" (K. Marx. Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right)*

> *"Money is the universal, self-constituted value of all things. Hence it has robbed the whole world... of its proper value. Money is the alienated essence of man's labor and life, and this alien essence dominates him as he worships it." (K. Marx, "On the Jewish Question")*

Concerns about **alienation** lie at the heart of Marx's critique of capitalism. In particular, Marx argues that specific structural features of market economies alienate workers from the products of their labor, making it impossible for these workers (nearly everyone in a capitalist economy) to lead genuinely good human lives. In the long run, Marx thinks that this will lead to the collapse of capitalism, and its replacement by communism, which will solve this problem. But what exactly does Marx mean by *alienation,* and why does he think communism could fix this problem?





The Faces of Alienation (Brendan Shea x Dall-E)

What is Alienation? The Example of Religion. Alienation arises when (a) there is a *best* way for things to be, given human nature; (b) somehow, humans lose contact with part of what they need to achieve this good life; and (c) the thing lost "reappears," but in an alien form that is hostile to our humanity. Marx's example is religion: the Abrahamic idea of God represents what is good about humanity: love, knowledge, the power to control our world, and so on. However, because of the way the world is, humans can't have this: all too often, we are lonely, ignorant, scared/hurt/powerless, etc. Given this situation, we posit these good things must belong someplace *else* (to a God in heaven). However, the good things that were lost now return in a hostile, alien form, as religions that dominate human life in sometimes violent and unpleasant ways (wars, harsh requirements about individual behavior). Marx, unlike many of his contemporaries, didn't blame religion for society's problems—instead, he argued that religion was a natural human response to humans' unmet material needs. He argued that, if humans had better lives, this sort of religion would fade away on its own. (Would some other kind of religion take its place? Marx doesn't say much about these sorts of things since he thinks we cannot imagine what a post-capitalist society would be like).

Alienation and the Market. Marx's real concern is not religion but the market economy. In Marx's view, humans are *productive* beings who meet our needs by *making* things, using both our physical and mental capacities. We plant gardens, write books, raise children, and so on; this is what makes human lives worth living. Capitalism itself arose out of individual humans making stuff just this way, then trading them with one another. However, this has (unintentionally) led to a situation where humans can no longer control the products of their own labor since these now "belong" to the capitalist and not the laborer. People are paid low wages to pick corn, write repetitive emails, work at daycares, and so on, but these activities don't provide meaning to our lives in the way the first sorts of activities do. However, just as the (lost) possibility of a good human life reappears as a vengeful God, the (lost) opportunity for meaningful labor reappears in the "laws" of economics, which come to dominate our lives. To eat, people *have* to work, and (as Marx argues), the greater their need, the worse job they will be forced to work, and the less they will be paid to do it. Even the richest capitalist can't escape this since any attempt toward genuine generosity or escape will lead to their destruction by market forces. Just as with religion, however, this can't be changed unless the underlying economic conditions change.

1.3 SO, WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

Marx himself argues that the only solution to alienation is to do away with private property altogether. However, this solution no longer seems plausible in the light of what we know about the failures of planned economies. Similarly, many contemporary thinkers have argued that Marx's theory of religion is overly simplistic. While he might be right that there is *some* relation between our material wants/needs and our religious beliefs, is it really as simple as he makes it seem? (For example, can we "solve" the problem of religious extremism merely by focusing on issues related to poverty and wealth distribution?). In the end, even many contemporary "Marxists" have conceded that Marx may be better at identifying problems than in proposing. In practice, countries like the U.S. and the U.K. managed to avoid Marx's predicted collapse in part by modifying capitalist economies in pretty substantial ways—e.g., by instituting minimum wage laws, consumer protection laws, government pensions and health care, 40-hour-work weeks, child labor laws, expanded public education, national/state parks, and so on. However, this doesn't mean that Marx's worries have gone away. After all, there are still billions of people in extreme poverty and billions more who are unemployed, underemployed, or just hate their jobs. Marx's arguments force us to think about how (or whether) these problems might be solved.

1.4 REVIEW QUESTION

1. Marx's ideas were hugely influential. Until fairly recently, a substantial portion of the earth's population lived in Marx-inspired "Communist" countries. However, most of these governments failed to meet the needs of their citizens (sometimes horrifically, as Orwell noticed). To what extent was Marx "responsible" for this? Are these things he could have foreseen?
2. Describe the idea of "historical materialism" in your own words. To what extent do you think this is a helpful/useful idea in trying to understand human behavior? (E.g., do new technologies change the way we conceptualize the world? How?)
3. To what extent do you think contemporary society is "alienating" in the way Marx describes? (In particular, think of your own education, employment, religion, etc.). Is it possible/desirable to create a society that is NOT alienating in this way?

2 ORWELL'S POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY (BY MARK SATTA)[1]

Orwell's claim that "Every line of serious work I have written since 1936 has been, directly or indirectly, against totalitarianism and for democratic Socialism," divides Orwell's work into two parts: pre-1936 and 1936-and-after.

Orwell's second period (1936-and-after) is characterized by his strong views on politics and his focus on the interconnections between language, thought, and power. Orwell's first period (pre-1936) focuses on two sets of interrelated themes: (1) poverty, money, work, and social status, and (2) imperialism and its ethical costs.

2.1 POVERTY, MONEY, AND WORK

Orwell frequently wrote about poverty. It is a central topic in his books *Down and Out* and *Wigan Pier* and many of his essays, including "The Spike" and "How the Poor Die." In writing about poverty, Orwell does not adopt an objective "view from nowhere": rather, he writes as a member of the middle class to readers in the upper and middle classes. In doing so, he seeks to correct common misconceptions about poverty held by those in the upper and middle classes. These correctives deal with both the phenomenology of poverty and its causes.

[1] Mark Satta, "Orwell, George," in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2022, https://iep.utm.edu/george-orwell/.

His overall picture of poverty is less dramatic but more benumbing than his audience might initially imagine: one's spirit is not crushed by poverty but rather withers away underneath it.

Orwell's phenomenology of poverty is exemplified in the following passage from *Down and Out*:

> *It is altogether curious, your first contact with poverty. You have thought so much about poverty it is the thing you have feared all your life, the thing you knew would happen to you sooner or later; and it, is all so utterly and prosaically different. You thought it would be quite simple; it is extraordinarily complicated. You thought it would be terrible; it is merely squalid and boring. It is the peculiar lowness of poverty that you discover first; the shifts that it puts you to, the complicated meanness, the crust-wiping (Down and Out, 16-17).*

This account tracks Orwell's own experiences by assuming the perspective of one who encounters poverty later in life, rather than the perspective of someone born into poverty. At least for those who "come down" into poverty, Orwell identifies a silver lining in poverty: that the *fear* of poverty in a hierarchical capitalist society is perhaps worse than poverty itself. Once you realize that you can survive poverty (which is something Orwell seemed to think most middle-class people in England who later become impoverished could), there is "a feeling of relief, almost of pleasure, at knowing yourself at last genuinely down and out" (*Down and Out*, 20-21). This silver lining, however, seems to be limited to those who enter poverty after having received an education. Orwell concludes that those who have always been down and out are the ones who deserve pity because such a person "faces poverty with a blank, resourceless mind" (*Down and Out*, 180). This latter statement invokes controversial assumptions in the philosophy of mind and is indicative of the ways in which Orwell was never able to overcome certain class biases from his own education. Orwell's views on the working class and the poor have been critiqued by some scholars, including Raymond Williams (1971) and Beatrix Campbell (1984).

Much of Orwell's discussion about poverty is aimed at humanizing poor people and at rooting out misconceptions about poor people. Orwell saw no inherent difference of character between rich and poor. It was their circumstances that differed, not their moral goodness. He identifies the English as having a "a strong sense of the sinfulness of poverty" (*Down and Out*, 202). Through personal narratives, Orwell seeks to undermine this sense, concluding instead that "The mass of the rich and the poor are differentiated by their incomes and nothing else, and the average millionaire is only the average dishwasher dressed in a new suit" (*Down and Out*, 120). Orwell blames poverty instead on systemic factors, which the rich have the ability to change. Thus, if Orwell were to pass blame for the existence of poverty, it is not the poor on whom he would pass blame.

If poverty is erroneously associated with vice, Orwell notes that money is also erroneously associated with virtue. This theme is taken up most directly in his 1936 novel, *Keep the Aspidistra Flying,* which highlights the central role that money plays in English life through the failures of the novel's protagonist to live a fulfilling life that does not revolve around money. Orwell is careful to note that the significance of money is not merely economic, but also social. In *Wigan Pier*, Orwell notes that English class stratification is a "money-stratification" but that it is also a "shadowy caste-system" that "is not entirely explicable in terms of money" (122). Thus, both money and culture seem to play a role in Orwell's account of class stratification in England.

Orwell's view on the social significance of money helped shape his views about socialism. For example, in "The Lion and the Unicorn," Orwell argued in favor of a socialist society in which income disparities were limited on the grounds that a "man with £3 a week and a man with £1500 a year can feel themselves fellow creatures, which the Duke of Westminster and the sleepers on the Embankment benches cannot."

Orwell was attuned to various ways in which money impacts work and vice versa. For example, in *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, the protagonist, Gordon Comstock, leaves his job in order to have time to write, only to discover that the discomforts of living on very little money have drained him of the motivation and ability to

write. This is in keeping with Orwell's view that creative work, such as making art or writing stories, requires a certain level of financial comfort. Orwell expresses this view in *Wigan Pier,* writing that, "You can't command the spirit of hope in which anything has got to be created, with that dull evil cloud of unemployment hanging over you" (82).

Orwell sees this inability to do creative or other meaningful work as itself one of the harmful consequences of poverty. This is because Orwell views engaging in satisfying work as a meaningful part of human experience. He argues that human beings need work and seek it out (*Wigan Pier*, 197) and even goes so far as to claim that being cut off from the chance to work is being cut off from the chance of living (*Wigan Pier*, 198). But this is because Orwell sees work as a way in which we can meaningfully engage both our bodies and our minds. For Orwell, work is valuable when it contributes to human flourishing.

But this does not mean that Orwell thinks all work has such value. Orwell is often critical of various social circumstances that require people to engage in work that they find degrading, menial, or boring. He shows particular distaste for working conditions that combine undesirability with inefficiency or exploitation, such as the conditions of low-level staff in Paris restaurants and coal miners in Northern England. Orwell recognizes that workers tolerate such conditions out of necessity and desperation, even though such working conditions often rob the workers of many aspects of a flourishing human life.

2.2 SOCIALISM

From the mid-1930s until the end of his life, Orwell advocated for socialism. In doing so, he sought to defend socialism against mischaracterization. Thus, to understand Orwell's views on socialism, one must understand both what Orwell thought socialism was and what he thought it was not.

Orwell offers his most succinct definition of socialism in *Wigan Pier* as meaning "justice and liberty." The sense of justice he had in mind included not only economic justice, but also social and political justice. Inclusion of the word "liberty" in his definition of socialism helps explain why elsewhere Orwell specifies that he is a democratic socialist. For Orwell, democratic socialism is a political order that provides social and economic equality while also preserving robust personal freedom. Orwell was particularly concerned to preserve what we might call the intellectual freedoms: freedom of thought, freedom of expression, and freedom of the press.

Orwell's most detailed account of socialism, at least as he envisioned it for Great Britain, is included in his essay "The Lion and the Unicorn." Orwell notes that socialism is usually defined as "common ownership of the means of production" (Part II, Section I), but he takes this definition to be insufficient. For Orwell, socialism also requires political democracy, the removal of hereditary privilege in the United Kingdom's House of Lords, and limits on income inequality (Part II, Section I).

For Orwell, one of the great benefits of socialism seems to be the removal of class-based prejudice. Orwell saw this as necessary for the creation of fellow feeling between people within a society. Given his experiences within socially stratified early twentieth century English culture, Orwell saw the importance of removing both economic and social inequality in achieving a just and free society.

This is reflected in specific proposals that Orwell suggested England adopt going into World War II. (In "The Lion and the Unicorn," Orwell typically refers to England or Britain, rather than the United Kingdom as a whole. This is true of much of Orwell's work.) These proposals included:

I. Nationalization of land, mines, railways, banks and major industries.
II. Limitation of incomes, on such a scale that the highest tax-free income in Britain does not exceed the lowest by more than ten to one.

III. Reform of the educational system along democratic lines.
IV. Immediate Dominion status for India, with power to secede when the war is over.
V. Formation of an Imperial General Council, in which the colored peoples are to be represented.
VI. Declaration of formal alliance with China, Abyssinia and all other victims of the Fascist powers. (Part III, Section II)

Orwell viewed these as steps that would turn England into a "socialist democracy."

In the latter half of *Wigan Pier*, Orwell argues that many people are turned off by socialism because they associate it with things that are not inherent to socialism. Orwell contends that socialism does not require the promotion of mechanical progress, nor does it require a disinterest in parochialism or patriotism. Orwell also views socialism as distinct from both Marxism and Communism, viewing the latter as a form of totalitarianism that at best puts on a socialist façade.

Orwell contrasts socialism with capitalism, which he defines in "The Lion and the Unicorn" as "an economic system in which land, factories, mines and transport are owned privately and operated solely for profit." Orwell's primary reason for opposing capitalism is his contention that capitalism "does not work" (Part II, Section I). Orwell offers some theoretical reasons to think capitalism does not work (for example, "It is a system in which all the forces are pulling in opposite directions and the interests of the individual are as often as not totally opposed to those of the State" (Part II, Section I). But the core of Orwell's argument against capitalism is grounded in claims about experience. In particular, he argues that capitalism left Britain ill-prepared for World War II and led to unjust social inequality.

2.3 TOTALITARIANISM

Orwell conceives of totalitarianism as a political order focused on absolute power and control. The totalitarian attitude is exemplified by the antagonist, O'Brien, in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The fictional O'Brien is a powerful government official who uses torture and manipulation to gain power over the thoughts and actions of the protagonist, Winston Smith, a low-ranking official working in the propaganda-producing "Ministry of Truth." Significantly, O'Brien treats his desire for power as an end in itself. O'Brien represents power for power's sake.

Orwell recognized that because totalitarianism seeks complete power and total control, it is incompatible with the rule of law—that is, that totalitarianism is incompatible with stable laws that apply to everyone, including political leaders themselves. In "The Lion and the Unicorn," Orwell writes of "[t]he totalitarian idea that there is no such thing as law, there is only power." While law limits a ruler's power, totalitarianism seeks to obliterate the limits of law through the uninhibited exercise of power. Thus, the fair and consistent application of law is incompatible with the kind of complete centralized power and control that is the final aim of totalitarianism.

Orwell sees totalitarianism as a distinctly modern phenomenon. For Orwell, Soviet Communism, Italian Fascism, and German Nazism were the first political orders seeking to be truly totalitarian. In "Literature and Totalitarianism," Orwell describes the way in which totalitarianism differs from previous forms of tyranny and orthodoxy as follows:

The peculiarity of the totalitarian state is that though it controls thought, it doesn't fix it. It sets up unquestionable dogmas, and it alters them from day to day. It needs the dogmas, because it needs absolute obedience from its subjects, but it can't avoid the changes, which are dictated by the needs of power politics ("Literature and Totalitarianism").

In pursuing complete power, totalitarianism seeks to bend reality to its will. This requires treating political power as prior to objective truth.

But Orwell denies that truth and reality can bend in the ways that the totalitarian wants them to. Objective truth itself cannot be obliterated by the totalitarian (although perhaps the *belief* in objective truth can be). It is for this reason that Orwell writes in "Looking Back on the Spanish War" that "However much you deny the truth, the truth goes on existing, as it were, behind your back, and you consequently can't violate it in ways that impair military efficiency." Orwell considers this to be one of the two "safeguards" against totalitarianism. The other safeguard is "the liberal tradition," by which Orwell means something like classical liberalism and its protection of individual liberty.

Orwell understood that totalitarianism could be found on the political right and left. For Orwell, both Nazism and Communism were totalitarian (see, for example, "Raffles and Miss Blandish"). What united both the Soviet Communist and the German Nazi under the banner of totalitarianism was a pursuit of complete power and the ideological conformity that such power requires. Orwell recognized that such power required extensive capacity for surveillance, which explains why means of surveillance such as the "telescreen" and the "Thought Police" play a large role in the plot of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.